

PROLOGUE: TOM STONER

1

Tom Stoner looked across the valley. The sun was low: the shadow of the opposite hill had crept down the shallow slope, almost to the village. The clear autumn day was fading. The women sewing winter corn in the Long Field walked in shade. Over to Tom's right, the swineherd - an idle lad - was already driving the pigs in from the wood. As he watched, three women carrying baskets of crab apples passed the lad, and Tom heard a shouted jibe followed by distant laughter. In the village, smoke was rising from one of the crock-built houses that straggled either side of the stream: that would be Jack atte Neven, making bread. Tom thought of buying a loaf, and decided not to. His family had had new bread once this year, and there was a saying: Michaelmas feasting, Christmas fasting. On the nearer side of the village, the Broad Field was being ploughed. The damp breath of the eight oxen made clouds in the slanting rays of the sun. The beasts were fat and healthy, for it had been a good, long summer. They would finish the field today, if they hurried.

The red rim of the sun touched the top of the hill. The day would last long enough for one more stone. Tom turned and looked at the house.

It had risen fast through the summer. The shell of the lower storey was complete. It would have a vaulted ceiling to support the floor of the main room upstairs. The master mason had made templates for the vaulting stones, and Tom expected to begin cutting them this week. It would be a comtly house, for it was all of dressed stone, like a church. Most lords were content with stone facing, or even rough-coursed rubble, which was why Tom preferred to build churches. But it was said that the Lord Paul would give this house to his firstborn son, for whom nothing was too much. All I would give him is a beating, Tom thought: the boy was a wastrel.

His own sons stood looking at him expectantly. Will, the elder, was almost

a man. There was a shadow on his lip and an impatient new strength in his broadening shoulders. He had the long face and sand-coloured hair of his father, and his hands were cunning and quick. Tom thought he would become a good mason, perhaps better than himself. Peter was dark, like his mother, and still a pretty-faced boy. He was tired now: he would be glad of the short days, despite the cold.

Tom nodded at them, and said: "Last one."

They ran across to the pile of rough stones by the oak tree, where the carter's wheels had ploughed the turf into mud. The boys laid a pair of five-foot carrying poles on the ground and rolled a stone over until it rested across the poles. Then, one at each end, the boys lifted. The poles bowed with the weight of the stone. They walked back and lowered their burden on to Tom's bench. Expertly, they rolled the poles sideways from under the stone, first one and then the other. Tom said: "Rest, Peter. Will can sweep."

The younger boy slumped on the ground beside the bench. Will picked up a broom of twigs and began to gather into a pile the stone chippings around Tom. Tomorrow the chips would be mixed with mortar and poured into the gap between the inner and outer walls of the house. Anything else swept up with the stone would go into the mix too: wood shavings, grass, bits of rag, mud.

Tom looked at the stone in front of him for a moment, then turned it over. God had lain it the right way up in the quarry, the master mason would make sure it lay the same way in the wall, and Tom liked it to ~~lay~~ lie that way on his bench. It was sandstone, brought from the west by two brothers, Sam and Edgar Carter; a lovely greyish-pink in colour, like a sunset, and easy to work. It would be no good for a church: too pretty, and too soft to last until the Day of Judgement.

Because the quarry was so far away the master mason was unable to supervise the roughmasons, and they skimped the part-finishing they were supposed to do. This stone was a span longer at the back than it should be. Tom sighed. The freemasons had quarrelled with the roughmasons over standards of part-finishing

since he had been a labourer like Peter: no doubt they would still be bickering when Peter's sons were old men.

He hefted his axe, holding it with both hands about half way up the long oak handle. Then, with short, powerful, accurate strokes, he trimmed the stone until it was the right shape. As he worked he closed his mouth and took shallow breaths, but twice the stone-dust got to his throat and he had to stop to cough. Each time he spat into his hand, and thanked God there was no blood. Most of the masons had moved back into the lodge for the winter, but so far Tom had resisted it, for the dust was perpetually thick in the close wooden hut. Soon the cold would defeat him, and he would drag his bench inside where there was a fire, and work with a coarse linen rag tied over his nose and mouth until Easter.

When he finished with the axe the stone was a true oblong, but the surface was rough. He picked up his claw - an iron chisel with a toothed blade - and his wooden mallet, and began to smooth out the stone. The face mattered most. The top, bottom and sides did not have to be perfectly even, for they would be embedded in mortar; and the back hardly counted at all, for it merely projected into the wall cavity. His hammer rose and fell with a steady rhythm, like a ball bounced by a child, for he knew the stone, and the tools were as familiar as his hands; and he was as careful, as accurate and as relaxed as a fine lady paring her fingernails with a jewelled Saracen knife.

The last part was the most delicate. He changed the claw for the bolster, which was another chisel but had a straight edge, and pulled the stone forward until its face projected over the rough wooden edge of the bench. Then he peered closely at the face, studying the flow of the grain in the dulling light, touching it with his long, strong hands, pressing his fingers against the surface as if he wished he could feel inside the stone. He did this with every stone, and Will - who had a little too much curiosity and not enough respect for his elders - had once asked why he did it. "I feel the stone," Tom told him. The boy had not been satisfied, and he was not old enough to know that when a man gives that kind of answer it is because he will not or cannot give a better.

He remarked that his father sometimes had that look about him in the church. Tom smacked his head for insolence, but not too hard, for in truth he was a little intrigued. The boy was right, although he had to learn that there were things grown men did not talk about, unless they were idiots or priests. The feeling Tom got when touching the stone was the same as that which possessed him in churches, when he stared about him and wondered where God was.

Now he was ready to dress the face of the stone. He held the belster lightly against the surface and drove it across the rectangle in long, straight cuts, with a series of carefully-judged blows of the mallet. He carried the finish around the corners so that the face had good sharp edges. Unevenness disappeared in small clouds of grey-pink dust, and the grain of the stone seemed to stand proud and clear and polished. He touched the corners with his square: a formality, for his hands and eyes were finer templates. He wiped the stone with a rag, the better to display his craftsmanship. Finally, with two swift strokes, he cut his mark - a "T" for Tom, the only letter he knew apart from the cross - into the top. All apprentices were told that this was the most important cut they would learn. The joke had a point, for it was by that mark that the lord's bailiff knew how many stones the mason had cut, and if the number was too low the mason would be sent away. When Will cut a stone he marked it "T-" to show it was done by Tom's apprentice; and when Will became a mason and Peter became the apprentice, Will would have his own mark. Tom wondered what the letter for Will was. He would have to ask the priest.

The stone was finished, and the sun had disappeared behind the far hill. Peter gathered the tools and took them into the lodge. Will was shovelling the chippings into a barrow. Tom walked toward the lodge, intending to wash the dust off his face and exchange a few words with the other craftsmen. He was stopped at the doorway by the master mason.

"Tom."

"Aye." Tom looked at him. Eric Longham was a small man with sharp eyes and a sharper tongue. He spoke strangely, for he came from another of Lord Paul's

villages, many days away. He wore his tunic below the knee, like a scholar, to indicate his status: a sign of pride, Tom thought. But he was a skilled man, and fair, and with those qualities he could wear a wimple for all Tom cared.

"Tom Stoner."

"Aye." Tom frowned. Eric rarely repeated himself. He was a man of few words and little patience.

"Your work here is finished."

At first Tom did not understand. "Aye," he said again. "I am going." He waited for Eric to get out of the doorway.

Eric shook his head. "I have too many masons for the winter," he said.

Tom stared at him. He felt suddenly cold. "You would send me away?"

"Aye."

Tom shook his head uncomprehendingly.

Eric began: "In the winter, the cementarius cannot work, and the carters will be slower, and - "

"I know," Tom said angrily. "But you knew this when you asked me to work here. Did you think the winter would not come this year?" He was angry because Eric had promised work until Spring ploughing at least. The winter lay-off was the mason's curse, but Tom had thought he had avoided it this year. Moreover, he knew he had done good work for Eric, and he had been confident that the master mason would take him along to his next job.

Eric said: "The Lord Paul is angry, for his son gambled the house in a wager, and lost."

"He lost the house before it was built?" For a moment, Tom was more stunned by the young lord's folly than by its effect on himself. Then his own problems gained ascendancy once more. "Most masters would choose to send away the least skilled of the wrights, not the most."

"You knew the reason. These others are serfs."

Tom nodded. The other masons on the site were the lord's property, and owed him so many days' work per year, for which they were not paid. Tom was a freeman, able to go where he wanted and work for whom he chose, and he had to be paid for

each day. Now he was paying the price of freedom, and not for the first time. In desperation he argued, knowing it was pointless. "Who will make the vaulting, and the windows, and the stairs?"

"You know I would rather have you than two of these," Eric said. "But the bailiff sees the pennies, not the cunning, in your hands." His reedy voice was flat and emotionless, for he would not do Tom the insult of showing pity. Nevertheless he was careful to be friendly, and Tom was grateful for that. Few men could exercise power with compassion.

"I must work out the week."

"Aye." Eric smiled thinly. "Even the bailiff knows that." He showed Tom a template he was carrying. "Begin the vaulting tomorrow. I shall use yours to show the others how it should be done."

Tom took the wooden frame from him and examined it. It was for an irregular voussoir, and all the angles were odd. Tom could make the stone, but he could never have made the template: he could not hold in his head a picture of how each stone fitted into its neighbours in a roof. It was that imaginative talent which separated master masons from mere craftsmen. The template was made with care, out of seasoned wood, its edges polished with a stone for accuracy. Eric was a conscientious man. Tom liked working for him.

"Very well," Tom said.

Eric looked at him a moment longer, as if he wanted to say more, but could not think of the words. Then he touched Tom's shoulder quickly, and said: "Remember, I am a serf." And he walked away.

Tom nodded at his back. A serf's promise was worthless, for he was not free to fulfil it. For that reason he should not give his word - but then, how would he be a master mason? The Lord Paul should give Eric his freedom.

Still, everyone could blame his troubles on lords. A short summer would be long enough for the peasant, were it not that he had to gather his lord's sheaves as well as his own; a bad harvest would be good enough were it not for the customals; there would be venison on every table but for the Forest Laws.

Now it was likely that there would be nothing but peasebread on Tom's table

this winter. He wond<sup>e</sup>red who would die. One of the family had died in every bad winter that he could remember; his father, and his mother, and three of his children. His wife Nell was strong, and the boys; but Peggy was nine years old. Suddenly Tom felt sad, weary, and terribly bitter.

He went into the lodge. From the way the others looked at him, he realised that they knew. They must have been listening to his conversation with Eric. Who would be the first to speak? He went to the corner and dipped his hands in the ewer, then wiped his face on the tail of his tunic.

Finally he looked at them, meeting the eyes of each in turn. There were four benches in the lodge now, and four faces stared at him through the gloom: John Littlejohn, John Atwood, Stephen Welsh and ~~Arnold North~~ Welf Palmer. They wore the look of horrid fascination that men had at a bear-baiting. Tom knew the feeling: there was something irresistible about the sight of a great beast being tormented and humiliated. These serfs would have no compassion, unlike Eric Longham, for the only emotion they had room for was relief that they were not in Tom's place.

It seemed none had the courage to fling the first taunt. Concealing his relief, Tom muttered "Good night," and stepped to the door.

It was his own son who broke the spell. Will rushed through the doorway, shovel in his hand, and blurted: "Father! The carpenter says we are dismissed!"

Tom hit him backhanded, his horny knuckles rapping the boy's cheekbone. Will fell backward, gasping. Tom said: "Go to your mother."

Will scrambled to his feet, tears glistening, and ran away. The masons laughed, as they always did at someone else's pain.

"Where now your pride, free man?" The speaker was Wolf Palmer. He had one eye and a pilgrim's beard: he had been to Hereford, and lost the other eye to an outlaw on the way back, although from the way he told the story you would think he had been to Jerusalem and fought dragons.

"Pride is a sin," Tom said. "If I have lost it, I may find salvation."

"Only if you confess it."

"Then I shall. But will you confess envy?"

They laughed at Wolf, then, and Tom went out before the one-eyed man could think of a reply.

The laughter faded behind him as he crossed the muddy building site. Peter tagged along a few yards behind, out of reach of his father's hands, as they walked down the slope and made their way across the Broad Field, their clogs sinking into the newly-ploughed earth. The ploughman and his team had gone: they had not managed to finish before dark, after all.

Tom normally felt good at this end of the day. Walking home, he would recall the stones he had handled during the day, and what he had done with them, and he would consider whether he had done his work well, and decide that he had. Will had once asked him: "Don't you get bored, just cutting stones all day, every day but Sunday?" Tom had told him that every stone was different. It was true. Even two stones that had lain side by side in the quarry would be dissimilar: the grain would flow differently, so that one might be tougher, or more regular, or prettier, or better-finished, or flawed. So, he would bring to mind each individual stone, and remember how he had dealt with its idiosyncrasies. But there was now no pleasure in that exercise, for how could a man get satisfaction from a job well done, when the job failed in its ultimate purpose of keeping him and his family alive?

Also, he regretted striking Will. The blow would do the boy no harm - everyone knew it was good for children to be beaten - but it made Tom feel bad. He had been angry with the masons, and the bailiff, and the lord; and in his anger he had struck his son, who was not responsible for anything. That, he felt, was shameful.

They crossed the stream by the old wooden bridge. The structure was now too weak and rotten for carts to use, and the oxen had to cross in pairs. Would the Lord Paul be persuaded to build a stone bridge? The toll would pay the cost -

No. There was a ford a little farther upstream, less than an hour's walk. If the Lord put a toll on the bridge, no carts would use it.

This bridge would stay until it collapsed. Then the Lord's woodcutter would go into the forest and fell six good trees; and the Lord's wright would shape the timbers; and then, one day, every serf in the village would be called on to abandon his strips and they would rebuild the bridge under the direction of the bailiff.

They passed the church, which was old and rubble-coursed. The tower had been strengthened during the last few years, and eventually the west end would need buttressing; but, like the bridge, it would not be done before it became dangerous, and then it would be done by one of the Lord's masons.

That was the trouble: no lord would employ a free man if ~~you~~ he could use his serfs to do the job, for the serfs always owed more work-days than the lord could possibly use them for. No matter that they were idle, and surly, and slipshod; they were cheap. A free mason must look for work with a merchant, who had no serfs; or with a minor lord whose vill was so small it had no craftsmen; or on a big project - like a new church - for which no lord would have enough serfs.

A free man was doomed to wander.

It was a mild evening, and most of the houses had their doors and window-shutters open. Through the openings came the smoke and the flickering red light of cooking fires. There was raucous laughter in Dan Atkinson's; he had more strips than anyone else in the village, for he had inherited from three childless brothers; and, since the good harvest, he had drunk strong ale every day and his children had eaten eggs. No lights showed in the home of the poorest serf, Waleran Bigod, and his sister, who did not waste firewood in autumn. The priest frowned on their living together, but Waleran argued that if he threw his sister out, she would starve and require alms, and the priest liked that idea even less than he liked the ~~temptation~~ opportunity for incest which the arrangement created. Tom smelled rabbit cooking as he passed the home of Old Godfrey, who had reached the amazing age of approximately sixty. He wondered if Godfrey was

planning to say the rabbit had wandered out of the wood into the field: if so, he had better have witnesses, or he would pay the price of six rabbits in the Manor Court. Still, with five grown sons a man was never short of witnesses. A bawdy song came through the doorway of Widew Brewster's, who could not resist sampling her own produce, ale. She sang like a cat in heat.

Tom's house, being the most recently built, was the last in the village, farthest from the church. He pushed the goat out of the way and stepped inside. The single room was heavy with a familiar smell, a mixture of people, animals, smoke and foed. The animals were in a corner: the cow tethered, the dog snuffling in the floor straw for rats, the hens squatting ready for the night. A small fire burned in an iron stand in the middle of the house. Nell sat close to it, her fingers busy weaving a basket of reeds. Peggy was beside her, leaning over the fire to stir a pot. <sup>Will</sup> ~~The boys~~ lay on the straw, where the roof met the floor, playing a game with stones: Peter went to join him.

Nell looked up and smiled. She was a large-boned woman, and strong, with wide hips for childbearing and shoulders that would carry a cask of ale. Her face was bread and red-cheeked, and her hair gleamed black when she washed it for feast days. She was a hard-working woman, and a good mother; frugal in bad times and sensible in good; and she loved the touch of Tom's hands in the night when the children were asleep; and Tom was glad, glad, that she was his wife.

He stepped out of his clogs and crossed the room in his leather socks to sit on the bench at the trestle table. Peggy jumped up instantly, fetched a wooden bowl from a board nailed to the wall, filled it with soup from the pot, and placed it in front of her father. He did not thank her, but he smiled and touched her cheek. She brought him a lump of rye bread, and he said: "No cheese." He dipped a corner of the bread into the thick bean soup and began to eat. The goat came up behind him, looking enviously at his dinner, so he punched its nose. It squawked and trotted away.

The house was still while he ate. Some men could eat while children yelled and women chattered and animals walked on the table, but Tom had always

insisted on peace while he took his food. He soaked up all the juice with the stale bread, then scooped the mush of beans into his mouth with his fingers. Finally he used the crust of the bread to wipe the bowl. The broth filled his belly now, but he knew he would wake up in the night feeling hungry. Still, the cheese must be used sparingly until he found work again.

He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and dragged the bench over to the fire. Peggy went to the ale-barrel in the corner and brought him a wooden cup of the weak brew. He drained it and gave it back to her. "No more."

Nell leaned forward and looked into the pot. "Will and Peter, come and eat." The two boys took the pot to the table and sat down.

Tom picked up a piece of leather he was making into a purse for Will. Last night he had cut it into shape. Now he took out his knife and, using the point, he began to make holes in the edges, ready for sewing.

"Have you eaten?" he asked Nell.

"Aye, and Peggy."

He hesitated, then said: "We are dismissed."

"Aye, Will said so," she said calmly.

"The Lord Paul is angry with his son, who lost the house in a wager."

She nodded. "The Lord's servants suffer for his son's transgression."

"Don't be bitter." He smiled at her. "We are too old to expect life to be fair."

They worked in silence for a while, he at his leather, she at her reeds. The boys began to fight over the remains of the food in the pot, and Tom silenced them with a word and a threatening look.

Nell said: "I could wish your father had not bought his freedom, and that you were a serf, like Dan Atkinson."

"Or like Waleran Bigod." He held the leather up to the firelight to check his handiwork. "Serfs, too, have lean years and fat. But they cannot move to a new place to find a richer pasture. Nor can they earn two pence a day, and save one."

"And how many pence have we saved this summer?"

Tom looked embarrassed, for Nell could count better than he. "A score or more," he said.

"I have a shilling, that Peggy and I earned in the harvest," she said. "And we have almost half a pig and some herrings, in salt. We shall live through the winter."

Tom was not sure: half a pig seemed a lot, but they were five people; and there was rent to pay, and bread to buy; and there would be little to be had from the small plot of land behind the house between now and Easter. He said: "I must go looking for work."

Nell sighed. "Aye."

In the animals' corner, the cow lay down. The fire was dying. The three children were <sup>already</sup> curled up in blankets close to the hearth. Tom took off his tunic, his hood and his leather socks, and plumped up the straw-filled pallet. He lay down, pulled a blanket around him, and watched Nell as she removed the wimple from her head and took off her dress.

As she settled beside him she said: "The Lord may give <sup>Peggy and me</sup> ~~me~~ work at the Manor House. Tomorrow we can go and ask."

Tom stroked her hip through the coarse material of her under-dress. "Aye." He pulled her closer to him, for warmth.

The dog stirred once, perhaps hearing a badger outside. After that the only noise was the settling embers of the fire. Soon the woman, the three children, the cow, the goat, the dog and the chickens were asleep. Only Tom lay awake, thinking of rough stones, and Lords' sons, and starving children.

2

A clatter of hooves on the cobbled yard woke Baron David. He stirred on his feather bed, and looked about him sleepily. A single candle threw an unsteady light in the small room at the top of the house. The young girl beside him looked up, wide-eyed, not knowing whether to expect an irritable blow or a passionate kiss.

David yawned, and lay still for a moment, thinking. His servants would not open the door to men on horseback at this time of night - they were not that stupid. They would probably hesitate to wake their master. And he would not get out of bed for anyone less than the King, who was in France anyway.

There was a loud banging on the door, and someone blew a trumpet. David cursed and got up: he would have to get rid of them. The floor was cold to his bare feet. He pulled his nightshirt more tightly around him and opened the shutters to the single window.

Leaning out, he saw five men: all big, all armoured, riding powerful horses. David shouted: "Go away. Come back at dawn."

The biggest man looked up. "Come down, David, and let us in." The voice was rough, like the sea on a pebble beach. It was familiar, but David could not place it.

"Who is that?" he called.

"Henry."

"Henry who, oaf?"

"Henry Plantaganet, oaf!"

"Oh my God, my Lord - " David tried to incline his head respectfully and apologise at the same time.

"Don't bow, you fool, you'll fall out of the window!" the King called. His knights roared with laughter.

"My Lord, your pardon - "

"Open the door, David, open the door."

"At once." David pulled his head in and slammed the shutters. He threw a tunic over his shirt, and picked up a tooled leather belt.

The maidservant made to get up, but David waved her back. "Keep my bed warm tonight, and you may fuck the King," he said. He went out.

He ran down the spiral staircase, buckling his belt, and entered the hall which occupied the whole of the first floor of the house. A fire still burned in the vast hearth. Some thirty people had been sleeping on the floor; many of them were struggling out of their blankets and into their tunics. David crossed the

hall, shaking or kicking any still asleep, shouting orders to the others. "Build the fire! Light candles! Butler, some wine. And bread, eggs, salt pork and some chickens to roast. It is the King, cretins, who else would I get up for? And I called him an oaf - "

He was at the door. He paused a moment longer, to smooth his hair with a hand. Then he opened up.

The King was at the head of the flight of stone steps which led up from the ground. Somehow, his size was always surprising: he was more than a head taller than David, with a chest like a barrel of ale. David was no respecter of kings - they were, ideally, figureheads to be manipulated by the barons - but Henry's presence was somewhat awesome. David bowed.

The King walked in. "Give me your shoulder, David." He leaned on the Baron, and together they entered the hall.

Henry's weight was crushing. "Are you well, your Grace?" David said politely.

"No," Henry said. "My heart is sore from making war with my sons, and my arse is sore from riding. Yesterday I was in Rouen - how's that for travelling?"

David was genuinely astonished. "Have you slept?"

"On the ship." He eased himself into the great chair by the fire. David's servants scurried around, bringing candles and firewood, clearing mattresses and blankets away, dragging chairs and benches forward. The knights began to remove their mail, and David beckoned two women forward to help the King with his, and sent a boy out to stable the horses. Two of the knights retreated from the fire and sat down on the floor. David deduced that the other two were nobles, and he ordered chairs for them.

Henry said: "Je presente Gilles de Poitiers et Luc d'Angers."

David bowed again, and said formally: "Mon chateau est le votre."

They nodded and sat down: they looked ready to fall asleep. David sympathised with them, for the King drove himself mercilessly, and expected his companions to do the same.

David's butler brought a dish of bread and salted meat and a goblet of blackberry wine for the King, then served the Frenchmen with the same. Henry sipped the wine and spat it out.

"Blood!" he swore. "I forget I am in England, where they make wine of berries." He threw the goblet at the butler. "Bring ale."

Gilles sipped his and made a face. "On fait du vin des fruits?" he said incredulously.

"Pour les femmes, les femmes," Henry told him. "Les Anglais boivent de la biere." He took out his knife and began to eat.

David said boldly: "What is the news from France?"

"My sons are beaten, but they will not lie down," Henry said. He paused and chewed. David waited patiently, knowing that the answer, when it came, would be comprehensive and succinct: it was one of Henry's talents to sum up a whole war in a few words. "My son Henry and the count of Flanders attacked Normandy from Amiens. The count's brother, Matthew of Boulogne, was killed at Arques and they lost heart and retreated. Then Louis himself beseiged Verneuil until I chased him out - the King of France ran from the King of England like a coney from a dog. Hugh Chester and Ralph Fougères started a rising in Brittany, but my Brabançons mowed them like corn and I took the leaders in the castle of Dol. God's truth, my bum is sore." He shifted in his seat and continued eating.

"And still they won't make peace?" David said.

"They listen to Louis, who tells them they shall have the biggest kingdom in Europe. All my sons are fools, but John, and he has ~~XXXXXXXXXXXX~~ yet time to show the same colours."

David stared at the powerful, fleshy, freckled face of the King, with his great head of close-cropped red hair, squat neck, and massive shoulders, bent over his food like a grazing bull; and wondered how three sons could be such fools. Between them they stood to inherit a kingdom that now stretched from John O'Groats to Lourdes, yet they had chosen to throw in their lot with the inept King Louis of France.

Henry threw his scraps to the dogs, put down his plate, and took a deep draught of ale.

The butler stepped forward. "More, my Lord?"

Henry waved him aside. "I'll take one of your chickens later." He wiped his mouth on his sleeve and turned to David. "Well, am I still King of England?"

"Aye, and Scotland now."

Henry beamed. "Tell me."

"King William crossed the border with Norman knights and Flemish mercenaries," David began. "Richard de Lucy and Humphrey de Bohun led the English, with the help of your loyal barons. William besieged Alnwick, and we crept up on him from Newcastle in the mist. The Scots King's horse fell and pinned him, whereupon Rannulf Glanvill took him prisoner, in which state he now lies at Northampton."

Henry thumped the arm of his chair in his enthusiasm. "Good, good! The price of his release shall be no less than his kingdom. And what of my Lord of Leicester?"

"A tale even sorrier than the last," David grinned. "He landed at Walton with an army of weavers. Humphrey de Bohun met them at Fornhum St Genevieve and set the villeins upon them with pitchforks."

"Weavers?"

"Flems. Many deserted as soon as they got out of the boat. It is said they only wanted English wool. Anyway, Leicester and his wife are captive too."

Henry shook his head sadly. "Another fool. I loved his father, who served me well. If only men could produce sons without the aid of women!"

"Speaking of women . . ." David ventured.

"The Queen? Holding a fool's court at Poitiers, where effeminate knights compose love poems and joust with lances of green wood. In God's eyes I am a widower, David." He ~~shook his head sadly~~ <sup>nodded mournfully.</sup> David thought him insincere.

The butler stuck a knife into one of the chickens on the spit over the fire, and pronounced them cooked. Henry and his knights had one each. Someone

opened the shutters on a window, and David was surprised to see a grey dawn in the sky. He wondered what the King's plans were. He called for more ale to wash the chicken down.

Henry said: "You mind, David, I want all the rebels." He threw the cleaned carcase to the dogs. "Their punishments may not be severe, but I must know who they are. You shall be my oracle: I rely upon you."

David acknowledged the order with a polite nod.

"Winter truces, now, but there'll be more bloodshed by Easter," Henry continued.

"Are you returning to France?"

"Aye - today."

The King's ability to move from place to place five times faster than most men was legendary. David said: "You will sleep, first?"

"Aye." He pointed at Gilles and Luc. "They are asleep already." The two Frenchmen were dozing in their chairs. "Let no one know of my visit, David. I like to be secretive - it confuses my enemies."

David nodded again. The King was searching odd corners of his mind, bringing out instructions he might have forgotten, looking for loose ends to tie up.

"My loyal barons shall have their reward, too." He looked directly at David as he said this.

"Quite so, my Lord."

The King stood up, stretching. "You have a solar?"

"Aye." David led the way to the spiral staircase. Both of them assumed Henry would have David's bedroom, the only private place in the house.

Henry mounted the stairs. "Good night, David."

"Good night, my Lord." He watched the King enter the solar and close the door before turning back to the hall. About half the serfs were awake. He raised his voice. "This hall will be silent while the King sleeps," he said.

He was tired himself. He went over to the fire, kicked a stable-lad off his straw mattress, and lay down. They would wake him when the King arose.

There was a mighty roar from the solar. David sat up and looked toward the

staircase nervously. Two minutes ago the King had been in a happy, if subdued, mood: what the Devil had gone wrong?

Henry's voice came: "What would you, give the King the pox?"

He sounded more amused than angry, but you never could tell with him: he often gave the most devastating news with a wry grin. David got up and called: "My Lord?"

The roar came again: "I don't sleep much, but sleep I must!"

Then David remembered, and understood. He smiled. He knew what would happen next,

The figure that came stumbling down the stairs was not Henry, but the wench David had left in his bed; naked, sleepy and frightened, her white breasts bouncing as she half-ran, half-fell into the hall. A shout of laughter went up from those of the men who were awake. A fat butcher with a bald head called: "Come to me, my pretty, and I'll cover your nakedness!" The girl snatched up a blanket, and one of the men grabbed it from her. Someone else tripped her, sending her sprawling.

It was the kind of thing that could get out of hand. David shouted: "Enough!"

The girl found another blanket, and wrapped it around herself. She looked questioningly toward David, and he motioned her to a corner. There were a few grumbles, then the hall settled down once more.

David returned to his mattress. He lay down, feeling the pricking of the straw through the coarse cloth, and thought wistfully of his feather bed until he fell asleep.

3

It was a grey autumn day, with a chill wind and a steady, monotonous drizzle that soaked through your tunic and into your shirt. They had told Philip Fitzjohn that England was like this, and he had laughed and said: "When I am a Bishop, the whole diocese will pray for sunshine!" But the reality was depressing.

He turned to the Archbishop riding beside him and said: "I know I have your smallest diocese, but is it also the wettest?"

"On the contrary." The Archbishop smiled. "I have parishes on the Welsh Marches which I have never seen in sunshine. Be patient: in the summer Shiring is beautiful."

It was difficult to imagine. The track along which they rode ran between two large ploughed fields, whose far borders were lost in mist. The raw, black earth gleamed wetly in the rain. There were no serfs in sight: the landscape was relieved only by a great oak in the middle distance, shedding brown leaves in showers.

"These lands are yours," the Archbishop said. "That field will give you a good crop of barley, to make ale."

"I was hoping to start a vineyard."

The older man shrugged, making his cloak flutter behind him. "Choose your site well, and you may get a crop one summer in ten."

"They told me." The rain in his eyes irritated Philip. He wiped his face with his hand. It did not seem to bother the Archbishop, who jogged along calmly, gazing ~~asking~~ about him with the ghost of a smile and a look of imperviousness. "What does grow, other than barley?" Philip asked him.

"Wheat, oats, rye. This is good cattle country, too. The diocese owns about four thousand acres, of which a third is under the Bishop's personal control. The rest is held by the Chapter, of course: you will find the Dean jealous of his rights. Be firm with him from the start."

"Not a wealthy diocese, then."

"I don't know what you're used to in France," the Archbishop said evasively.

"Nothing. In France I wasn't a Bishop."

"Quite. Well, there are about five hundred serfs and some free tenants; fourteen parish churches, most having one priest; seven mills and two toll bridges; some good forest - do you hunt? I thought you would - plenty of game; a tannery which produces a good income; and so on. The Dean will go through the books with

you."

"And the annual income?"

"Varies, of course. Eight hundred pounds in a good year."

Philip frowned. "It's less than I expected."

"Then you must increase it," the Archbishop said. "Such is our holy duty."

"Touche." Philip smiled.

They cantered through a hamlet, six or seven peasant's huts straggling down a hillside. An old man, sitting in a doorway carving a spoon, recognised the ecclesiastical robes under the Archbishop's cloak and called out for a blessing. The Archbishop made the sign without slowing down. The old man beamed, and stood in the rain to watch the riders out of sight.

When their pace eased again, Philip said: "No church in a place like that."

"Certainly not. The tithes would hardly support a priest, let alone maintain the building. The serfs are quite capable of walking a few miles on Sundays, and they pay the same amounts ... besides, the fewer parish priests we have, the better."

Philip thought about that for a moment, then said: "Why so?"

"Priests are an endless source of trouble. You'll find you get continual complaints: they overcharge for baptism, they go poaching in the lord's forest, they fornicate with the flock, they get drunk ... What can we expect? They come from the peasantry, so they behave like the peasantry. Any high-born youngster entering the church wants a Bishopric."

"Like me."

"And me."

"I realise there are bad priests, of course," Philip said. "But are there not good ones, too - humble, dedicated men, performing the rites conscientiously, living temperate lives, collecting their tithes and faithfully passing on the diocesan subvention?"

"I suppose there are," the Archbishop acknowledged. "But they are too few." He peered ahead, into the rain. "We're almost there."

"Tell me about the Chapter."

"It's like any other Chapter. Manage the diocese well, and you can do what

you like; let the place run to seed and they'll start asserting their rights, calling for votes, looking up old contracts, sending delegations to Rome." He paused. "The Dean is the son of a merchant in Bristol. I met him once. I found him mean, conservative and shrill. But I also believe him to be weak: he'll do what he's told if he's bullied. His name is Alan."

They topped a rise, and the Archbishop reined-in his horse. "Here we are: Shiring."

Through the pall of drizzle Philip saw a large village of forty or fifty houses in a cluster, on the near side of a broad plain, with blue hills in the distance. A river ran across the plain and curved around the village, as if avoiding it. Downstream from the houses it was joined by a tributary, and there was a water-mill and a stone bridge. The fields all around were dotted with stooping, hooded figures in drab country clothes, moving with agricultural slowness. As he looked, the rain stopped, and a shaft of sunlight broke through the cloud layer to illuminate the village. Suddenly Philip saw the cathedral, and his heart sank.

It was awful.

It was built of a light grey stone which looked, even at this distance, mottled and worn with age. The round-headed windows were high and narrow, their arches faced with sand-coloured bricks which had probably been salvaged from a Roman church on the same site. Philip counted five bays in the nave, four in the choir. The north transept had fallen down at some time and been rebuilt in a darker stone. A Lady chapel, and some oddly-placed buttressing, had been added to the original building in the same ~~xxx~~ incongruous material. At the west end were one tower and the remains of another which had crumbled.

"A most venerable church," the Archbishop said thoughtfully. "Some work to be done, though." He urged his horse forward.

Philip followed down the muddy track. He felt numb. He had left his father's home - a sunny villa near Bordeaux with smiling wenches, purple grapes and fat heifers - in high spirits, to take up a position of power in a new country

and carve himself a niche in the English ruling class. He had travelled by horse and ship for a month - a hazardous business in itself, especially with a war on. He had been eager, curious, hopeful and ambitious. But now, looking at the grey village of Shiring with its tumbledown cathedral in a diocese that earned only eight hundred pounds in a good year, he felt like turning back at once. ~~But~~ He went on, because he was Philip Fitzjohn des Fitzjohns de Bordeaux, and that was reason enough.

The sun struggled to brighten as they reached the village, and the place began to look a little less depressing. Most of the houses were built on crucks, just like peasant homes in Bordeaux, but some were timbered and Philip noticed one with stone walls. There did not seem to be an inn: no doubt the village brewster's home served as an alehouse. Chickens, dogs and the occasional goat moved indolently out of their way.

By the time they were half way to the cathedral, the news of their arrival had spread, as if whispered about by angels, and those of the serfs who were not in the fields appeared in doorways and on the small plots between houses, staring at the visiting dignitaries. The bolder ones tried to touch the Archbishop's robe for luck, or held up a child for his casual blessing. Small boys ran behind the horses.

A small delegation was waiting at the west front of the cathedral. Two priests came forward to help them from their horses, then the third man knelt to kiss the Archbishop's hand. He did the same to Philip, then said formally: "My Lord Bishop, I am Alan, your Dean. Welcome to Shiring."

Philip studied him. He was a tall, thin man, with a narrow face and a pointed nose. His eyes were green and very striking. Red-gold curls protruded from under his skull-cap, and he wore rings. Philip guessed that his obsequiousness was insincere.

The Archbishop said: "I am hungry, Alan." Philip had never known him not to be hungry.

"There is a meal ready in the precinct house," the Dean said. "Shall we

go through the church?"

Looking at the building from close up, Philip could see that his distant impression had been right: the stone had weathered badly. Rain had obliterated the features of the carved figures around the west entrance, as time had surely erased the memory of whom they represented. All the gargoyles but one had fallen off the gutters.

Alan opened the creaking oak door, and a dog ran out and darted between the Archbishop's legs. The party stepped inside.

To look at, it was attractive. The carved timber roof was painted in bold colours, and pulled the eye upward immediately. The aisles were barrel-vaulted. Most of the round arches were decorated with angular designs: chevrons, crosses, lozenges. The massive piers of the nave were similarly carved. The overall effect was of a squat strength and power which Philip immediately thought of as Saxon.

The cathedral was also cold, dark, damp, dismal and smelly.

The small, glassless windows admitted little light, but plenty of wind and rain. The water collected in ~~many~~ little pools on the more worn parts of the pavement, and moss grew in the blind arcades of the walls. The sputtering candles were too few to make any difference. A sparrow flew out from a nest in the clerestory, ~~xxxxxxxx~~ and Philip saw from the evidence of droppings that the bird was one of many.

Alan led the way up the nave and through the crossing to the choir. A service was in progress, spoken in a mumble by a lugubrious old priest with thin grey hair and bushy eyebrows. Philip stopped to listen, forcing the others to wait for him. The Dean looked nervous and impatient: Philip understood why as soon as the old priest's indistinct Latin became comprehensible.

He listened on, becoming more angry with every gabbled phrase. Finally he took a deep breath and shouted: "Stop!"

The priest looked at him open-mouthed.

"Your name?" Philip asked.

The man stepped forward, fear creasing his lined face. "John, my Lord, they call me Grey John." His speech was thick with German consonants, unlike the Gallic accents of noble Englishmen, and Philip had to strain to understand.

This foolish old man was not the proper object of a Bishop's wrath, and Philip rounded on Alan Dean. "This man does not know the service - he misses out whole sentences!" he said coldly.

The Dean's green eyes widened. "He is old, and forgetful - "

Philip interrupted. "Furthermore, he inserts whole phrases which have no part in any service, and sound to me suspiciously heathen."

"It is a problem." He smiled condescendingly.

The smile infuriated Philip. "The responsibility for ensuring that the Chapter performs the rites correctly is yours," he said. "That is why you are called the Dean."

"Yes, but you don't appreciate - "

"And remember to address me as 'My Lord Bishop'."

"You haven't been invested yet - "

"I think I've heard enough of this," the Archbishop interrupted. "His Holiness the Pope has confirmed the appointment, and that is sufficient for you, Dean." He looked at the man expectantly.

The struggle showed on Alan's pinched face: he did not want to lose this first battle of wills, yet he was heavily outranked. Finally he bowed to Philip. "My Lord Bishop," he said.

Philip turned back to Grey John, who - together with the rest of the priests - had been watching, faintly awestruck, while their Dean was put in his place. "Go to the Chapter House and learn the service," Philip said gently. He dismissed John and looked at the other priests in the choir stalls. He identified the Sacrist by his robe, and pointed at him. "You - continue."

The Archbishop said: "And now perhaps we can eat?"

Philip glanced at him, expecting to read disapproval in the chubby old face, and seeing instead the ghost of a smile. "I'm sorry, My Lord," he said as

they walked on, letting the Dean trail behind. "But I really felt it necessary to - "

"Of course," the Archbishop murmured. "An excellent beginning. I think you're going to do very well indeed."

But Philip imagined he could feel, in the small of his back, the green-eyed glare of Alan Dean.

The Bishop's 'palace' was the grandest house in the village, but only just. It did at least have two storeys, with a cellar and storeroom at ground level, ~~and~~ a hall upstairs which featured a screened-off sluice, and a bedroom in the roof space for the Bishop himself. It was a small version of the standard aristocratic home. It had been built at the same time as the cathedral, and suffered the same discomforts of cold and damp. It had not been used for three years, since the death of the last Bishop - the King had kept the diocese vacant and retained the income for himself. There were bats in the storeroom, the sluice was blocked, and rats had nested in the feather bed.

"I shan't live here," Philip said flatly. "I'll lodge in the town." He shot a defensive look at the Archbishop.

"You must do as you think best," the older man replied.

The tour of the house was short, for in the hall they had passed a large trestle table spread with food, and the Archbishop was obviously anxious to get at it. When they sat down, in high-backed wooden chairs of old but solid craftsmanship, Philip realised that Alan could prepare a good meal, if nothing else. There was new bread, fresh fish, a huge baron of beef, half a dozen pigeons, and creamy cheese. At the Dean's signal a servant girl poured ale into silver cups.

The Archbishop ate noisily, the Dean fastidiously. Philip had no appetite. It was like dining in a tomb: the footsteps of the servants echoed on the stone floor, there were no dogs or children to make noise, the fire in the great hearth seemed very distant, and the atmosphere between the three men was strained.

When he had eaten enough to keep a peasant family alive for a fortnight the

Archbishop farted, sighed, and said: "What do you hear about my Lord Lewest?"

"A mystery," Alan replied. "He sent his son to the war with twelve knights."

"To fight on which side?"

"There is the mystery."

"Ah." The Archbishop nodded sagely. "A sly one, Lewest." For Philip's benefit he added: "He is Lord of all the land in these parts which the church does not own."

"A devout man?" Philip asked.

"Come, Philip, don't pretend to be a saint, even for Alan's benefit." His eyes twinkled over the top of his tankard.

Philip grinned. He could not help liking this greedy, cynical cleric. He said: "I'm well aware that the Church makes more money out of repentance than it does out of chastity. I just wonder how Lord Lewest feels about the state of repair of the Cathedral in his vill."

"I don't know," Alan said.

"Have you asked?"

There was resentment in the Dean's eyes. "The last Bishop was content with the Cathedral," he said pointedly.

"Then he was a sluggard," the Archbishop said lightly. "It is our duty to enrich the church."

Alan seemed to realise he was getting nowhere by being surly. "Lord Lewest could be of great help here," he said. "He has a quarry which has not been worked for years."

"The dark stone of the Lady Chapel?" Philip asked.

"Just so."

"Well. Next time he so much as looks lustfully after a maiden, he shall do penance in rough stones."

The Archbishop laughed. "I like that."

Philip looked at Alan: the Dean was smiling a weary, sceptical smile, the smile of one who has seen Bishops come and seen Bishops go. Well, Philip thought, I can live with his apathy, while it does not turn to positive hostility.

The Archbishop said: "An excellent meal, Alan. Thankyou."

"My Lord," the Dean acknowledged, and he belched.

"Don't let us keep you here," the Archbishop continued. "You have your Chapter to look after, and the Bishop and I have a lot to discuss."

It took the Dean a moment to realise he was being dismissed. He stood up reluctantly. "Of course," he said. "Shall I leave the wench to serve you?"

"Thankyou," the Archbishop agreed, waving him away.

When he had gone there was quiet for a while. Logs shifted in the hearth with a soft rustle, and there was the occasional gurgle of running water from behind the screen. The dull light from outside dimmed further as the afternoon faded, and the maid lit a taper from the fire and went around lighting candles. The great spaces of the hall seemed to swallow their light and turn it into shadows, so that they appeared as glaring spots of flame, shining brightly and illuminating nothing.

The Archbishop selected a sharp fishbone and began to pick his teeth. He paused to say: "You seem discontented." He did not look at Philip.

Philip had known this question was coming, and he had been thinking about exactly how he would answer it. Now he decided to be candid. "More than discontented," he said. "I'm appalled." He hesitated, gathering his thoughts, and plunged on. "My father is lord of half Guienne, He is one of the richest of Henry's French subjects. He sent one thousand knights to the war, and Rome consulted him before the election of the current Pope. I am very high-born." He looked at the Archbishop for a reaction, but the older man merely nodded unconcernedly. Philip began to grow angry, and fought to keep his temper. He continued: "I have always lived in palaces. I eat only the best food, drink only the finest wine. I am accustomed to feather beds and silk shirts. At home - " The word caught in his throat, and he stammered. "At home I have four personal servants, and the power of life and death over thousands of serfs."

When he stopped the Archbishop looked at him. "Therefore ... ?"

Philip's face reddened and his voice rose in pitch and volume. "You bring me to a ruined cathedral in a penurious diocese, with an unschooled chapter,

an apathetic Dean and a precinct house my father would give to the second-best stallion - and you say I seem discontented! What puzzles me is that you do not seem discontented."

Again the Archbishop did not reply immediately. Finally he looked up and said: "Are you done?"

"Indeed. I seem to be wasting words."

"Then I shall waste a few on you. First, I am to you what you are to Alan Dean, and you will not speak to me like that again, ever."

Philip was speechless, but the Archbishop did not seem to require any gesture of assent. He went on in the same low, calm tone of voice. "But more importantly, I know all about your father. He is a great man, and a loyal servant of his God and his King - and he has seven sons, of whom you are the fourth. You may have silk shirts and fine wine, but you do not have a single virgate of land