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July 22, 1986

Mr. Ken Follett  
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Dear Ken,

First, how about SPIRES as a collective title for the series instead of VAULTING? Vaulting, I fear, makes me and most people in this country think of pole vaulting, which is pretty much the only way that word gets to be used. Spires, on the other hand, evokes the kind of lofty, soaring structures which I think you want people to envision.

As to the synopsis itself, I have now read it through several times; and I have some thoughts which may please you or may upset you -- since these are going to involve some major changes, both in the characters and in the story line. But, for better or for worse, here we go.

To begin with, I see the commercial aim of this book as acquiring a whole new set of readers, i.e. all those people who buy books by James Michener and Susan Howatch and maybe even James Clavell. But in the process, I think we have to be very careful that we do not alienate the vast readership we already have. And all these good people have come to expect from you novels of suspense and intrigue; and if we are going to satisfy them, I think that this synopsis needs some massive doses of both these elements. I think that these can without great difficulty be worked into the background and setting and framework you already have; but accomplishing this will involve, of course, some changes.

It seems to me too that we should concentrate for now on Book One alone. If we can develop it solidly, and then you move ahead and write it, I think you will have a really strong foundation for the books which follow; and I think it would be a waste of energy at this time to spend more of your creative juices on those two synopses. After you finish writing Book One, you will have a much richer sense of your characters, the world in which they move; and I think that the subsequent synopses will come together much more easily and more quickly than this first one -- simply as the result of the first book having been written.

To set up the kind of thriller-like intrigue which I think we need, I suggest that the civil war which takes place only marginally in your synopsis and also off stage be brought vigorously alive into the main action of the novel.

In broad strokes, I suggest that William, the Bishop of Kingsbridge, and Robert of Gloucester are all allies, as it were, in the rebellion against King Stephen. Our heroes and heroines, for reasons which I shall outline later in this letter, are all on the side of King Stephen and against this rebellion.

Roger of Shiring would be on the side of the good guys and be defeated by the rebels.

But in the end, Stephen, with the help of our main characters, would prevail. Roger would be released from the dungeon in which he had been kept by the rebels. The evil Bishop would be destroyed; and William would at the last moment -- along with Robert -- have switched to the winning side and get themselves pardoned, so that we can use them both, especially William, in future books.

The above, I guess, will make absolutely no sense to you until you read the rest of this letter.

First, I am going to suggest that you limit yourself to six point-of-view characters for this novel, four of whom will be sympathetic, and two of whom will be villainous -- but at least somewhat sympathetic. The sympathetic point-of-view characters would be Ellen, Jack, Philip, and Ann; and the antagonists would be William and the Bishop of Kingsbridge.

The only major change from what you have now is the elimination of Tom as a point-of-view character. As you present him so far, he appears to be a man of some strength and solidity. He is loyal to his family, hard-working, somewhat courageous; but to me, not interesting. He appears to have no dream, either for himself or for anyone around him. His sole concern seems to be survival; and there really is nothing wrong with him, except that he is maybe a little boring.

The rest of this letter will be a rundown of the point-of-view characters, person by person, with some suggestions about how each of them could be further built up. And from these, I would hope that you in another draft, hopefully the final one, will be able to come up with the additional elements of suspense and intrigue.

We do not have a fascinating arch-villain, and I nominate the Bishop for that coveted position. I suggest that he is a factor in the rebellion, because he himself would like to be the Archbishop; and he has been promised that post in return for his help. I see him as the antithesis of Philip. Whereas Philip truly wants to work for the glory of God, Kingsbridge, a much older man, is interested only in his own self-importance, physical pleasure, and self-aggrandizement. I would suggest too that he could be kinky sexually. He might, for example,

enjoy sex with young boys. Or young girls. But in either case, he would be someone who would be feared by the peasantry because of strange and terrible rumours about what happens to young children who enter his nunneries or monasteries. I am not suggesting that he be Gilles de Rais, but he certainly could have some of those predilections. He also could be a tough and cruel landlord, an exacting master as far as the rules of the Church are concerned, etc. It could be too that because of his illegal activities, he feels somewhat insecure, threatened perhaps; but if he were to become Archbishop, then he would feel safe -- and he desperately needs to feel safe.

Philip, as the most successful young churchman in the area, represents a threat to him, and he would be looking for any pretext at all for stripping Philip of his power and putting some weakling into Philip's office. William, on the other hand, would have a special place in his affections. Perhaps they could be relations. William might be a nephew or a great-nephew. And it could be too that William's family was in some way instrumental in the Bishop's getting elevated to this high office, and he therefore feels gratitude and special kinship to that family.

I see Kingsbridge as the big loser in this story. William would have been quick enough on his feet to switch sides at the last moment and save his skin; but the Bishop, for one reason or another, could not. And thus, he should lose not only having the cathedral within his territory, but probably also be the object of revenge by the peasantry who he has persecuted, whose children he has seduced, and perhaps by forces of King Stephen as well.

As to William, our other villain, I suggest first of all that you make him a little older and that you eliminate his father, Percy, who seems to me to serve no useful purpose. I see William as ambitious and hardhearted, but totally bewitched by Ann. I think that he should love her in spite of himself. This doesn't mean of course that he could not also be screwing every other girl in sight; but I think we would "redeem" him just a little as a human being by virtue of his love for Ann. If you want to give him some other human dimensions, you could, for example, make him a great lover of horses. It might be interesting for him to be one of those men who loves animals more than human beings. In his human relations, he would be amoral, switching over to Stephen's side as soon as he senses that Stephen is going to win. He would have no scruples whatever about abandoning Kingsbridge to save his own neck and save whatever he can of his own resources. Behind him, as a sort of a Rasputin figure, you could of course continue to use his mother who would be quite interesting; but the father strikes me as a duplication,

and as I said above, I think he could be easily eliminated.

The kind of "plotting" that William could do might be some of the following: Instead of simply raping Ann, he might first plan to seduce her. I could envision the scene, or maybe more than one, where he and a confidante (maybe even his mother) try to set this up; and then we have the actual scene in which Ann brutally rejects him and then he rapes her, and then of course he might regret this, which would make him more interesting, I think, than if he couldn't care less. On the political front, both he and Kingsbridge need to set up plots against King Stephen, which secondarily, could involve unseating Roger and Philip. Again, we need a lot of preparation, obstacles to the preparation, and then actual attacks -- so that when these parties confront each other, we would be having some real climaxes.

Ellen, I suggest, should be the illegitimate daughter of Kingsbridge. I suggest too that Jack be the illegitimate son of King Stephen. It could well be that when Ellen met Stephen, she didn't even know who he was -- and of course he was not king at that point; and then in the course of the book, she ought to see him and realize that the father of her son is none other than the King himself. This may seem to be out of a King Arthur fantasy, but then again, are we not in medieval times? And wouldn't a bit of plotting like this really be appropriate?

As I see it, Ellen would hate her father for the man that she knows he is and also, for the way he has treated her; and she would be eager to do anything she could to participate in his downfall. Some of that participation ought perhaps to include witchcraft.

Then there is the whole problem of her love story or non-love story. As you have it now, she seduces Tom, but then doesn't appear to be all that attracted to him -- especially when he so easily capitulates to Philip. I wonder whether we ought not, in the interest of giving this story some romantic spice, make her really attracted to Philip. I wonder too if she might not even at some point actually succeed in seducing him too. But then he would push her away, resume his vows, and then on the rebound, she might marry Tom. As you have it now, she marries Tom for what seems to be purely practical and materialistic reasons, which probably are quite realistic for the time; but I wonder if these would really satisfy your readers. And even in the twelfth-century, I would assume that physical attraction had to play something of a role in how men and women coupled with each other.

Another thrust which Ellen could have in the book -- which would make her an exciting point-of-view character -- is to get her son Jack acknowledged as even an illegitimate descendant of the King. This could give both her and Jack all sorts of interesting things that they could try to do vis-a-vis the various noblemen, prelates and even the Royal Court.

Ann is another of the characters who I think can be built up specifically by giving her two strong thrusts. One could be that she wants to rescue her father. If we keep him alive in a dungeon instead of letting him die, she could have this quite interesting goal to pursue. The second, it seems to me, is that she wants revenge for having been raped -- and this, I think, should take place somewhat earlier in the story than you now have it. To establish her relationships with some of the other sympathetic characters, she might, for example, have sheltered Ellen and Jack in her lands or forests. It could be that they were discovered poaching at some point, and she arranged for their protection. That way, she could enlist their services in the pursuit of her plots against William; and they also might go after her help in their own schemes against Kingsbridge.

Philip, at the moment, appears to have purely materialistic goals. True, these have a spiritual underlining, in that he wants to build up the power of the Church for the good of God; but he lacks a human goal; and I think he very much needs that, if we are going to have some real thrust in this book. I suggest that Philip may have a younger brother who is in some way in service to Kingsbridge. The boy or youth may be suffering from Kingsbridge's excesses; and word of this gets back to Philip who could be horrified. In other words, we have to have something personal going on between Philip and Kingsbridge -- and not just business. At a secondary level, Philip could feel shame and remorse that a leader of the Church could be a man such as Kingsbridge; and he may then desperately want to oust Kingsbridge because he feels so strongly that respect and love for the Church and all it stands for needs to regain its ascendancy in the Kingdom. And finally, he must desperately want to prevent Kingsbridge from becoming Archbishop, which to Philip would be tantamount to a major heresy.

Philip's opposition to William (and possibly to Robert of Gloucester) would stem from their being allies of Kingsbridge. Philip could then think of using Jack as a spy, sending him into the Kingsbridge household as a young monk, but going there really to report back to him. Jack might then suffer some of the difficulties, privations and other horrors which boys in the service of Kingsbridge are made to endure -- but somehow Jack, because of his training in the woods and his knowledge of witchcraft learned by his mother, could escape, report back to Philip, etc.

Jack, our final point-of-view character, wants desperately for his mother to be well-treated. He has seen her looked down upon, abused, kicked around; and he fancies himself as her saviour and protector. He also is avidly in pursuit of power so that he can accomplish this. On another level, I think he needs to feel a sort of godliness in himself. And he feels this with things like music, beautiful scenery, and of course in the sacraments as they are performed in church. He would adore Philip, just as his mother does, and would do anything for him -- so that Philip could use him in his attempting to plot against Kingsbridge and William. I would suggest too that Jack meet Ann earlier in the novel and that his love for her also be woven through the novel somewhat more than it now is.

To sum up, the plot then would be set up in such a way that if the rebellion, i.e. William and Kingsbridge (and maybe Robert of Gloucester) succeed, then it's total disaster for our four point-of-view characters, Ellen, Jack, Philip and Ann. But the way things work out, Stephen triumphs, Kingsbridge is crushed; but William survives -- and thus we set up the tension for the sequel. The potential disaster for our sympathetic point-of-view characters would have to be nearly total. By that I mean, that they would not only lose their property and positions, but probably their lives as well. Or at the very least, they would be reduced to the most menial of serfs under Kingsbridge, a fate too horrible to contemplate.

Ken, I hope all this doesn't strike you as manipulating too much what you have created or rendering it too melodramatic -- but I feel strongly that this is the kind of restructuring that is necessary. It could well be that you might want to add one or two more point-of-view characters, or take out a few. And you might choose to organize the rebellion differently. But however you do it, we definitely must have some strong physical action, some suspenseful plotting and counter-plotting, a ferocious chase or two -- and most important, the setting up of confrontations and climaxes through quite a few scenes to create suspense.

I hope you, Barbara and the kids had a terrific time in Corsica; and I shall look forward to hearing what you think of all this.

Also, I spoke with Anthony Rubinstein who tells me that the movie deal has now been concluded; and I am waiting for a final set of papers. The proposed television series is back in a sort of negotiating limbo. It may come alive or may not; but I asked them for some very stiff numbers as well as putting everything in writing, and that may just frighten them away. I expect confirmation within a few days that our deal for THE MAN FROM ST. PETERSBURG is going through, and we may have the money for that one very quickly.

Talk to you soon.

Love  


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