



SHARON  
PENMAN

THE  
INTERNATIONALLY  
BESTSELLING  
AUTHOR OF  
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AND  
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Sharon Penman

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## PROLOGUE



*H*

HE WOULD BE REMEMBERED long after his death, one of those rare men recognized as great even by those who hated him. He was a king at twenty-one, wed to a woman as legendary as Helen of Troy, ruler of an empire that stretched from the Scots border to the Mediterranean Sea, King of England, Lord of Ireland and Wales, Duke of Normandy and Aquitaine, Count of Anjou, Touraine, and Maine, liege lord of Brittany. But in God's Year 1171, Henry Fitz Empress, second of that name to rule England since the Conquest, was more concerned with the judgement of the Church than History's verdict.

When the Archbishop of Canterbury was slain in his own cathedral by men who believed they were acting on the king's behalf, their bloodied swords might well have dealt Henry a mortal blow, too. All of Christendom was enraged by Thomas Becket's murder and few were willing to heed Henry's impassioned denials of blame. His continental lands were laid under Interdict and his multitude of enemies were emboldened, like wolves on the trail of wounded prey. The beleaguered king chose to make a strategic retreat, and in October, he sailed for Ireland. There he soon established his lordship over the feuding Irish kings and secured oaths of fealty from the Irish

bishops. The winter was so stormy that Ireland truly seemed to be at the western edge of the world, the turbulent Irish Sea insulating Henry from the continuing outcry over the archbishop's death.

But in the spring, the winds abated and contact was established once more with the outside world. Henry learned that papal legates had arrived in Normandy. And he was warned that his restless eldest son was once more chafing at the bit. In accordance with continental custom, he had been crowned in his father's lifetime. But the young king was dissatisfied with his lot in life, having the trappings of shared kingship but none of the power, and Henry's agents were reporting that Hal was brooding about his plight, listening to the wrong men. Henry Fitz Empress decided it was time to go home.

## CHAPTER ONE



*April 1172*

*Dyved, South Wales*

**S**OON AFTER LEAVING HAVERFORD, they were ambushed by the fog. Ranulf had long ago learned that Welsh weather gave no fair warning, honoured no flags of truce, and scorned all rules of warfare. But even he was taken aback by the suddenness of the assault. Rounding a bend in the road, they found themselves riding into oblivion. The sky was blotted out, the earth disappearing under their horses' hooves, all sound muffled in this opaque, smothering mist, as blinding as wood-smoke and pungent with the raw salt-tang of the sea.

Drawing rein, Ranulf's brother Rainald hastily called for a halt. 'Mother of God, it is the Devil's doing!'

Ranulf had a healthy respect for Lucifer's malevolence, but he was far more familiar than Rainald with the vagaries of the Welsh climate. 'It is just an early-morning fog, Rainald,' he said soothingly.

'I can smell the brimstone on his breath,' Rainald insisted, 'can hear his cackling on the wind. Listen and you'll hear it, too.'

Ranulf cocked his head, hearing only the slapping of waves against the rocks below them. Rainald was already shifting in the saddle, telling their men that they were



turning back. Before Ranulf could protest, he discovered he had an ally in Gerald de Barri, the young clerk and scholar who'd joined their party after a stopover at Llawhaden Castle. Kicking his mule forward, Gerald assured Rainald that such sudden patches of fog were quite common along the coast. They'd soon be out of it, he promised, and offered to lead them, for this was a road he well knew.

Pressed, too, by Ranulf, Rainald reluctantly agreed and they ventured on, slowly and very warily. 'Now I know what it's like for your wife,' Rainald grumbled, glancing over his shoulder at his brother. 'Poor lass, cursed to live all her days bat-blind and helpless as a newborn babe.'

Ranulf's wife, Rhiannon, was indeed blind, but far from helpless. Ranulf took no offence, though; Rainald's tactlessness was legendary in their family. Slowing his mount, he dropped back to ride beside Rainald's young son. The boy's dark colouring had earned him his nickname, Rico, for upon viewing him for the first time, Rainald had joked that he was more an Enrico than a Henry, swarthy as a Sicilian. Rico's olive skin was now a ghostly shade of grey, and Ranulf reached over to pat him reassuringly upon the arm. 'Horses do not fancy going over cliffs any more than men do, and Welsh ponies are as sure-footed as mountain goats.'

Rico did not seem comforted. 'Yes, but Whirlwind is Cornish, not Welsh!'

Ranulf camouflaged a smile, for the placid hackney hardly merited such a spirited name. 'They breed sure-footed horses in Cornwall, too, lad.' To take his nephew's mind off their precarious path, he began to tell Rico of some mischief-making by his youngest son, Morgan, and soon had Rico laughing.

He missed Morgan, missed his elder son, Bleddyn, and daughter, Mallt, above all missed Rhiannon. But he'd agreed to accompany Rainald to the holy well of St Non, even knowing that he'd be away for weeks, for he knew the real reason for Rainald's pilgrimage. Rainald had claimed he wanted to pray for his wife's soul. But Beatrice had been ailing for many years, hers a malady of the mind that only death had healed. Rainald's true concern was for his other son, Nicholas, who had not been blessed with Rico's robust good health. Frail and sickly, Nicholas was not likely to live long enough to succeed to his father's earldom, as evidenced by Rainald's desperate decision to seek aid from saints, not doctors.

Rainald's pain was all the greater because Nicholas was his only male heir. Rico was born out of wedlock, and thus barred by Church law from inheriting any of his father's estates – even though Rainald himself was bastard-born. The irony of that was lost upon Rainald, who was the least introspective of men. It was not lost upon Ranulf, who shared Rainald's tainted birth, both of them natural sons of the old King Henry. Neither of them had suffered from the stigma of illegitimacy, though. As a king's son, Rainald had been judged worthy to wed the heiress of the earldom of Corn-

wall, and Ranulf had long been the favourite uncle of the current king, Henry Fitz Empress. Henry would gladly have bestowed an earldom upon him, too, but Ranulf, who was half Welsh, had chosen to settle in Wales where he'd wed his Welsh cousin and raised his family – until forced into English exile by a Welsh prince's enmity.

His Welsh lands were forfeit and his English manors were meagre in comparison to Rainald's vast holdings in Cornwall, but Ranulf had no regrets about turning down a title. He was at peace with his yesterdays, and he'd lived long enough to understand how few men could say that. For certes, Rainald could not. Nor could the king, his nephew, absent these many months in Ireland, where he'd gone to evade Holy Church's fury over the slaying of Thomas Becket.

Gerald de Barri's voice floated back upon the damp morning air. A natural-born talker, he was not going to let a bit of fog muzzle him, and he continued to engage Rainald in conversation, not at all discouraged by the earl's taciturn, distracted responses. Ranulf listened, amused, for Gerald was an entertaining travelling companion, if somewhat self-serving. The nephew of the Bishop of St David's, he was returning to England after years of study in Paris, and he reminded Ranulf of Thomas Becket, another worldly clerk blessed with great talents and even greater ambitions.

Becket had been a superb chancellor, wielding enormous influence because of his close friendship with the king. What a pity it was, Ranulf thought, that Harry had taken it into his head to elevate Becket to the archbishopric. But who could ever have expected the man to undergo such a dramatic transformation? He wasn't even a priest, had hastily to take holy vows just days before his investiture. But once he was Canterbury's archbishop, he'd devoted himself to God with all of the zeal he'd once shown on behalf of England's king. Henry hadn't been the only one discomfited by Becket's newfound fervour. His fellow bishops had often been exasperated by his provocations, his refusal to compromise, his self-righteous piety. Even His Holiness the Pope had been confounded at times by Becket's intransigence.

All that had changed, of course, as he bled to death on the floor of his own cathedral, and when the monks had discovered their slain archbishop's vermin-infested hair-shirt under his blood-soaked garments, none had doubted they were in the presence of sainthood. Acclaimed as a holy martyr in death, even by those who'd considered him to be a vexation and an enigma in life, Thomas Becket was sure to be anointed as the Church's next saint. Already people flocked to his tomb at Canterbury, seeking healing cures and buying little vials of his blood as precious relics. More than fifteen months after Becket's death, Ranulf still marvelled at it all. Was Becket truly a saint?

He smiled wryly, then, remembering his last meeting with his nephew the king, just before Henry's departure for Ireland. Over a late-night flagon of wine, Henry had



challenged him, wanting to know if he believed Becket was a saint. He still recalled his reply. 'I cannot answer your question, Harry, doubt that anyone can. I do know, though, that saints are not judged like ordinary men. That is, after all, what makes them saints.' Henry had reflected upon that in silence, then said, sounding both sceptical and regretful, 'Saint or not, Thomas got the last word for certes.'

MENEVIA WAS THE NAME GIVEN to the small settlement that had sprung up around the cathedral of St David. Its houses were outnumbered by shabby inns, stables, taverns, and a few cook-shops, for the shrine of the Welsh saint was a popular choice for pilgrimages. Because of its remoteness and the difficulty of travel in Wales, the Holy See had decreed that two pilgrimages to St David's were the equivalent of one to St Peter's in Rome. The cathedral itself was situated just west of the village in a secluded hollow, out of sight of the sea raiders and Norsemen who had pillaged the coast in bygone times.

The men expected to be accosted by villagers proclaiming the comforts of their inns, the superiority of their wines and mead, the bargain prices of their pilgrim badges. To their surprise, the streets appeared deserted. Advancing uneasily, they finally encountered an elderly man in a doorway, leaning heavily upon a wooden crutch.

'Where have all the folk gone?' Rainald called out, and when he got only a blank stare in response, Ranulf repeated the question in Welsh, to better effect.

'To the harbour,' the ancient replied, hobbling forward a few steps. 'Sails were spied and when word spread, people went to see. Most pilgrims come on foot, but we do get some who sail from Normandy and Flanders, even a few Frenchmen who lack the ballocks to brave Welsh roads.' He grinned, showing a surprising mouthful of teeth for one so old, but Ranulf knew the Welsh were particular about tooth care, cleaning them with green hazel shoots and polishing them with woollen cloth.

Flipping him a coin for his trouble, Ranulf interpreted for the others, translating the old man's 'Frenchmen' into 'English' to avoid confusion. It was not always easy to live in lands with so many spoken tongues. To many of the Welsh, the invaders from England were French, for that was the language they spoke. To the French, those who dwelled on the rain-swept island were English. But those descendants of the men who'd followed William the Bastard to victory in God's Year 1066 thought of themselves as Norman, and his nephew Henry was Angevin to the core.

Having no interest in incoming ships, they continued on towards the cathedral, where they received the welcome worthy of an earl, although Gerald de Barri was disappointed to learn that the bishop, his uncle, was away. They were escorted to the

guest hall and were washing off the grime of the road when they heard shouting out in the close. Ranulf and Rainald hastened to the window, looking down at a man sprinting towards the bishop's palace. As several canons hurried to meet him, he sank to his knees, chest heaving.

'The king . . .' He gasped, struggling for breath. 'The king is coming! His ships have dropped anchor in the harbour!'

BY THE TIME their party reached the beach, Henry and his companions had come ashore and were surrounded by a large crowd: villagers, pilgrims, and the local Welsh. It always amazed Ranulf to watch his nephew with his subjects, for he had not enough patience to fill a thimble and yet he showed remarkable forbearance when mobbed by supplicants, even those of low birth. Ranulf had seen many people undone by the lure of power, so many that he'd long ago concluded it was a sickness in and of itself, one as dangerous in its way as the spotted pox or consumption. Harry, he thought, had come the closest to the mastery of it . . . so far.

'Your Grace!' Rainald bellowed, loudly enough to hurt nearby eardrums. Henry turned towards the sound, for at thirty-nine, he still had the keen hearing of a fox. He beckoned them forward and they made the public obeisance due his rank and then were enfolded into welcoming embraces, for Henry had never been one for ceremony.

Henry showed no surprise at their appearance upon this remote, rocky shore. 'My fleet anchored safely at Pembroke,' he said with satisfaction. 'But how did you guess that I'd be landing at St David's?'

Rainald looked puzzled, but Ranulf joked, 'All know I have second sight,' before admitting that they'd not passed through Pembroke, knew nothing of the landing of the king's fleet, and their meeting upon this westernmost tip of Wales was pure happenchance.

'Well, it is an auspicious omen, nonetheless,' Henry declared, 'getting my homecoming off to a good start.' Several canons from the cathedral had arrived by now and Henry allowed them to lead the way from the beach, explaining piously that he'd sent his fleet on ahead yesterday, but had refrained from travelling himself on the holy day of the Lord Christ's Resurrection. The canons murmured approvingly at such proof of their sovereign's reverence. Ranulf and Rainald, who knew their nephew far better than these credulous clerics, exchanged amused grins. Henry's campaign to placate the Church had already begun.

St David's was only a mile distant, but their progress was slow because of the crowds pressing in upon them. Henry did not seem to mind; leaning upon a pilgrim's staff, he turned their trek into a procession, good-naturedly acknowledging the greetings of the



villagers, even bantering with a few of the bolder ones. But the friendly, relaxed atmosphere changed abruptly when they reached the cathedral close.

More of the canons were clustered at the gate, making ready to welcome the king. A muddy stream grandiosely known as the River Alun bordered the northern side of the churchyard, bridged by a large marble stone, its surface polished and worn by the tread of countless pilgrim feet. As Henry approached, an elderly woman stepped forward and cried out in a hoarse, strident voice.

Henry had a good ear for languages, but Welsh had always eluded him, and he turned to the canons for enlightenment. Obviously flustered, they sought to ignore the woman's ranting, insisting she was babbling nonsense and not to be heeded. Henry knew better; one glance at the spectators told him that. Some looked horrified, others embarrassed, and a few – those with the dark colouring of the Welsh – eagerly expectant.

'What did she say, Ranulf?' he demanded of the one man he could trust to give him an honest answer.

Ranulf answered reluctantly, yet truthfully. 'She called upon Lechlaver to revenge the Welsh upon you.'

Henry scowled. 'Who the Devil is Lechlaver? Some heathen Welsh god?'

'No . . . it is the name of yonder rock.' Realizing how bizarre that sounded, Ranulf had no choice but to tell Henry the rest. 'Local legend has it that Merlin made a prophecy about Lechlaver. He foretold that a ruddy-faced English king, the conqueror of Ireland, would die upon that rock.'

It was suddenly very still. The crowd scarcely seemed to be breathing, and more than a few surreptitiously made the sign of the cross. Some of Henry's own companions cautiously edged away, in case Merlin's prophecy involved a celestial thunderbolt. Rainald reached out as if to keep Henry from advancing any farther. Ranulf did not consider himself to be particularly superstitious, but even he did not want his nephew to set foot on that slick marble stone.

Henry looked from one tense face to another and then, slowly and very deliberately, strode forward. Leaping nimbly on to the rock, he crossed without a misstep. Turning back to face the spectators, he said in a voice pitched loudly for all to hear, 'Who will believe that liar Merlin now?'

There was a collective sigh as breathing resumed and the world of shadows receded before Henry's scorn and certainty. Beaming, Rainald made haste to follow, as did the others. People trooped over Lechlaver, the depths of their unease revealed now by the intensity of their relief. Only the Welsh bystanders stayed on the other side of the shallow river, their disappointment etched in the down-turned mouths, the

averted eyes. One youth could not endure to see Merlin shamed before these arrogant foreigners and called out in heavily accented French:

'You are not the king in Merlin's prophecy, for you are not the conqueror of Ireland!'

Henry swung around to confront the young Welshman, and for a suspenseful moment, his audience wondered if they were to see his notorious Angevin temper take fire. But then Henry laughed. 'If your Merlin thought anyone could truly conquer Ireland, lad, he was a poor prophet, indeed!' Adding under his breath to Ranulf as they resumed their progress towards the cathedral, 'How do you defeat a people who lack the common sense to know when they're beaten?'

Ranulf smiled, knowing that Henry was speaking, too, of the Welsh and his disastrous campaign of six years past. His ambitious plans to bring the rebellious Welsh lords to heel had come to naught, thwarted by the erratic weather, the rugged mountainous terrain, and phantom foes who refused to take the field, preferring hit-and-run raids, evasive manoeuvres, and nightfall forays that recognized their weaknesses and played to their strengths. Faced with a rare military defeat, Henry had withdrawn his army back across the border and changed his tactics, forging an alliance with Rhys ap Gruffydd, the most powerful of the Welsh princes. So far this stratagem had proven successful; Wales was more peaceful than it had been in years.

Glancing over at Henry, Ranulf hoped that his nephew would apply the lessons he'd learned from the Welsh in his current battle with His Holiness the Pope and the mighty Roman Church. But it was just that – a hope – for he of all men knew how dangerously stubborn Henry Fitz Empress could be. There were faint bloodstains upon the tiles in Canterbury Cathedral testifying to that.

## CHAPTER TWO



*May 1172*

*Savigny Abbey, Normandy*

**J**T WAS DUSK WHEN the Bishop of Worcester rode through the gatehouse of the Cistercian abbey of Our Lady. Although a prince of the Church, Roger travelled without an entourage – only a servant, his clerk, and four men-at-arms, their presence required on the outlaw-infested roads. He did not think an ostentatious display was appropriate, for he was living in exile, having left England in protest over the English king's contest of wills with Thomas Becket. Few had emerged unscathed from that cataclysmic conflict between Church and Crown, but Roger's loyalties had been shredded to the bone. Becket was more than a fellow prelate and the head of the English Church; he was also a close friend. And Henry Fitz Empress was more than Roger's sovereign; the two men were first cousins and companions since childhood.

Roger had been one of the few men who'd dared to tell the king the truth in the turbulent aftermath of Becket's murder: that Henry might not be guilty of the actual deed, but neither was he innocent. But he had also been one of the bishops sent to Rome to plead Henry's case before the Pope, denying that the archbishop had died at his order. Now he was once more thrust into the role of peacemaker, riding to Savi-

gny's great abbey to bear witness to this meeting between two papal legates and his cousin the king, knowing full well how high the stakes were for all concerned.

In addition to the two cardinals, a number of Norman and Breton bishops would also be present. By Roger's reckoning, at least eight were men who could be expected to support the king. In truth, many of Becket's fellow bishops had been less than enthusiastic soldiers in the Archbishop of Canterbury's crusade to vanquish the English king, feeling that he'd been needlessly provocative and acrimonious, always scorning compromise in favour of confrontation. Until his ungodly murder had transformed him from often-irksome zealot to blessed holy martyr, Becket had found his strongest advocates among the bishops of France, his warmest welcome at the court of Louis Capet, the French king. Two of his most steadfast allies had been the Bishop of Rheims, Louis's brother, and the Archbishop of Sens, who'd laid Henry's continental lands under Interdict, and whose sister was Louis's queen.

It did not surprise Roger that neither of these prelates would be present at the Savigny council, for he knew Pope Alexander wanted – nay, needed – to mend this dangerous rift with the most powerful monarch in Christendom, just as Henry needed to make peace with the Holy See. It would be a great pity, he thought, if Harry's foolhardy pride thwarted that rapprochement.

Roger *was* surprised, though, by the absence of John aux Bellesmains, the Bishop of Poitiers. He would have expected John to be there, come what may, for his friendship with Thomas Becket had gone back many years, begun in their youth as clerks in the household of the Archbishop Theobald. But Poitiers was the capital of Poitou, the domains of the Lady Eleanor, Henry's controversial queen and Duchess of Aquitaine in her own right. Roger wondered now if Eleanor had deliberately kept Bishop John away from Savigny, knowing his sympathies lay firmly with the slain archbishop. If she had, then mayhap the rumours of her estrangement from Harry were not true.

But with Eleanor, there could be other reasons, other motives as yet undiscovered. Even though his sister Maud, the Countess of Chester, was one of Eleanor's intimates, Roger had always been rather wary of his cousin's queen, a woman who dared to meddle in those matters of state best left to men. And if Harry spun webs to make a spider proud, Eleanor could entangle archangels in her snares. Roger suspected that she intrigued even in her sleep.

The hosteller was waiting to welcome Roger, and grooms had materialized to lead their horses to the stables. After an exchange of courtesies, Roger was turning to follow the monk towards the abbey guest hall when his attention was drawn by a flash of colour. Unlike the unbleached white habits worn by the Cistercian monks moving about the abbey garth, this man was garbed in a cope of bright blue silk, decorated



with wide embroidered borders, and a matching blue mitre, the points ornamented with scarlet thread. The processional cope and mitre proclaimed him to be a prelate of Holy Church, and the fleshy, ruddy face was vaguely familiar to Roger, but to his embarrassment, the name eluded him.

Fortunately, his gaze then fell upon the bishop's companion, a slightly built man, no longer young, starkly clad in the black cowl and habit of the Benedictines, abbot of one of Christendom's great jewels, the island monastery of Mont St Michel, and a friend of long standing, both to Roger and his cousin the king. And as he warmly returned Abbot Robert de Torigny's greeting, Roger recalled the identity of the mystery bishop: the abbot's neighbour, prelate of the city across the bay, Richard of Avranches.

Bishop Richard wasted no time in breaking the bad news. 'I fear your journey has been for naught, my lord bishop,' he declared dolefully, his sorrowful visage almost but not quite disguising the relish that people invariably take in being the bearer of evil tidings. 'The king met this afternoon with the Holy Father's legates, but it did not go well. King Henry balked at renouncing his Constitutions of Clarendon, and when no progress could be made on this contentious issue, he stalked out in a rage, saying he had matters to attend to back in Ireland.'

By now others had gathered around them. Roger recognized the abbot of Savigny, utterly dismayed that this disaster should occur on his watch. He was flanked by the equally flustered Bishops of Bayeux, Sées, and Le Mans, theirs the doomed expressions of men trapped between Scylla and Charybdis, owing their allegiance to Henry, and their obedience to Pope Alexander. Bishop William of Le Mans felt a flicker of hope, though, with Roger's arrival, and at once entreated him to seek out his cousin the king.

'His Grace will heed you, my lord, for he has great respect for your good judgement. Surely you can convince him of the folly of abandoning the talks with the Holy Father's legates?'

Roger was past the first flush of youth, and a day in the saddle had taken its toll; his back ached and his muscles were sore and cramped. He'd been looking forward to a bath and a nap before he changed his travel-stained clothing and presented himself to the cardinals and the king. Suppressing a sigh, he looked at the circle of expectant faces and agreed to do all in his power to keep his cousin from returning to Ireland.

Savigny's abbot had turned his own quarters over to his royal guest, and Abbot Robert offered to show Roger the way. Observing the older man's sedate pace and calm demeanour, Roger realized that he did not seem nearly as disquieted as the bishops. 'I'd almost forgotten,' he said, 'how well you know the king,' and Abbot Robert's mouth hinted at a smile.

'I know this much,' he said amiably. 'The king does not like to make war. But when he does, he does it very well, and sometimes the wisest tactic is a strategic withdrawal.'

'Indeed,' Roger agreed, and they entered the abbot's great hall, overflowing with the king's servants, household knights, barons, and clerics. Roger was running the gauntlet of greetings, had just reached the Bishop of Evreux, when the bedchamber door opened and Henry strode into the hall.

As usual, he did nothing to call attention to himself and his clothing would have been remarkably plain and unadorned for a minor border lord, much less the man who ruled the greatest empire since Charlemagne. But Henry had no interest in the trappings of power, only in the exercise of it. Nor did he need to strut and preen as Roger had seen other men of rank do, as Thomas Becket had done during his years as the king's elegant, worldly chancellor. Yet Henry was always the focus of all eyes, even upon those rare occasions when his identity was not known. Even as a youth, he'd had it, the force that gave him the mastery of other men. It was as if he were a lodestone, a magnet that attracted light and luck, not metal.

That was so fanciful a thought that Roger laughed softly to himself as he moved towards his cousin the king. Henry was delighted to see him, reaching out to clasp Roger's hand in both of his, forestalling a formal obeisance. 'At last! I'd begun to fear you'd been waylaid by bandits or Breton demons!' Adding with a gleam of mischief, 'Not that one so virtuous and worthy would have anything to fear from the forces of darkness. What evil spirit would dare to defy a bishop?'

'Your Grace's faith in my sanctity is most heartening,' Roger said dryly, 'given that some claim your lineage can be traced to the Devil.'

Henry's grey eyes flashed, but with amusement, not anger. 'Ah, yes, the righteous Abbot Bernard once declared that my lord father was the Devil's spawn, or words to that effect. As I recall, my father laughed at him, much to the sainted Bernard's indignation.'

Roger knew that story well; it was legendary in their family. The man Henry sardonically called 'the sainted Bernard' was likely to become a genuine saint, as the Holy See had begun the canonization process. But impending sainthood had not tempered Henry's disdain, for Abbot Bernard had been a bitter enemy of the counts of Anjou, claiming that the Angevins sprang from a depraved stock, doomed and damned. Roger did not doubt that Abbot Bernard was a holy man, blessed by the Hand of the Almighty, but neither did he deny that Bernard's earthly behaviour had not always been saintly. God's Lambs were not always meek, mild, and forgiving, and for a moment, he thought sadly of his friend and martyr, Thomas Becket.



Shaking off the memory, he reminded himself that today's needs must take precedence over yesterday's regrets. Meeting Henry's gaze evenly, he said, 'I hear, my lord king, that you've a sudden yearning to see the Irish isle again.'

Henry's expression was not easy to read, for he had the irritating ability to appear utterly inscrutable when it served his purposes. 'Yes,' he said, 'you've heard right. Come on in,' jerking his head towards the open bedchamber door, 'and I'll tell you of my travel plans.'

SEVERAL MEN WERE GATHERED in the bedchamber, only one of whom Roger was pleased to see, his uncle Rainald, Earl of Cornwall. The others – Arnulf, Bishop of Lisieux, Geoffrey Ridel, Henry's acting chancellor, and Richard of Ilchester, Archdeacon of Poitiers – were trusted royal councillors, but they had also been avowed enemies of Thomas Becket. Fending off his uncle's bearhug of a greeting, Roger acknowledged the bishop and archdeacons with cool civility, and then turned to face Henry.

'You are not truly ending the talks ere they begin, Harry?'

'Of course not.' Henry accepted a wine cup from Rainald, gesturing for Roger to help himself. 'On the morrow, Arnulf will seek out the legates and offer to mediate our differences.'

'And what are those differences?'

'They demanded that I repudiate the Constitutions of Clarendon.' Henry's smile was without humour. 'And you know how likely I am to agree to that, Cousin.'

Roger did. Henry had attempted to define and clarify the ancient customs of the realm by putting them down in writing, a radical proposal to his conservative bishops, who had been accustomed to vague, ambiguous terms that could be accepted or repudiated as circumstances warranted. But they were practical men for the most part, well aware that there must be accommodation between Church and Crown; if the king refused to unsheathe his secular sword to enforce spiritual penalties, how effective would those penalties be?

Compromise was anathema, though, to the Archbishop of Canterbury. Thomas Becket had refused to accept the Constitutions in any form whatsoever, arguing that the Church, not the king, was the giver of laws. But Henry had forced the issue, for accommodation was possible only if there was trust on both sides, and Henry no longer believed he could trust his former friend and chancellor. Becket had eventually given in and ordered the bishops to accept the Constitutions, only then to repent and recant his sworn oath. Within less than a year, Becket had fled into French exile, and the Pope, reluctantly dragged into this dangerous dispute, had backed Becket's position

and came out in opposition to the Constitutions of Clarendon. The stalemate had endured for the remainder of Becket's life, looming ahead of them now like an uncharted rock, threatening to sink all hopes of a peaceful settlement.

That would not happen, though, as long as Roger drew breath. He was going to steer this ship into a safe harbour if it was the last thing he ever did. 'When I was in Rome last year to plead your case at the Holy See, I spoke at some length with several of the cardinals. I gathered that the Church's objections to the Constitutions were not so much based upon the contents; they accepted your argument that the customs set down were indeed the traditional practices of the realm, more or less. Their concerns were with the oaths that you demanded of all the bishops. Never had such oaths been required by any of your predecessors. We balked at taking vows that might conflict with canon law, as you well remember, Harry. It was only when Thomas's resolve briefly weakened, that we had to agree –'

'His resolve "briefly weakened", did it?' Henry echoed sarcastically. 'That is a very kind way to phrase it, Cousin. I believe his exact words to you and the other bishops were, "If the king would have me perjure myself, so be it. I will take the oath he demands and hope to purge the sin by future penance."'

Roger winced, sorry but not surprised that someone had broken the confidentiality of the bishops' conclave; informants clustered around kings like bees at a hive. 'I admit that was not Thomas's finest hour and his behaviour at Clarendon is not easily defended. But I need not remind you, Cousin, that your behaviour has not always been defensible either. What matters is how we settle this issue now. Would you be willing to agree not to demand such an oath of your prelates in the future?'

When Henry nodded, Roger glanced towards the Bishop of Lisieux. He had no liking for the other man, but he did not deny that Arnulf was highly intelligent, well educated, and an accomplished diplomat. 'That would be a beginning, my lord bishop.'

Arnulf's smile was both confident and complacent. 'Indeed, it would,' he said and gestured towards a parchment sheet filled with scribbles, scratched-out words, and ink splatters. 'My lord king and I were discussing this very matter ere you arrived. There must be a way to satisfy the cardinals without making an explicit renunciation of the Constitutions. How does this sound? "The King of the English vows to abolish any new customs which have been introduced into his realm to the prejudice of the Church."'

Roger considered the wording. 'Yes, that might do it.' Shooting his cousin a sharp look, he said, 'This vow is acceptable to you, Harry?'

'Of course. I do not see this as a controversial issue, for I am confident I have not introduced customs detrimental to the Church, for certes not knowingly,' Henry said blandly, and Roger sighed, for he'd expected as much. Fortunately, the papal legates



would expect as much, too. They'd not be going into this blind. Remembering that he held a cup of claret, he took a swallow, warmed as much by a surge of optimism as by the wine. It was beginning to look as if both sides might win this war.

Setting his cup down on the table next to Arnulf's draft, he asked to be excused so that he could wash away the dust of the road. Henry let him reach the door before he asked the question Roger had hoped to avoid.

'Do you not want to know what the cardinals told me about Becket's killers?'

Roger already knew the answer to that deceptively innocuous query. 'It is my understanding that the killers are on their way to Rome to do penance for Thomas's murder.'

'Yes,' Henry said, 'and what penance do you expect the Pope to impose?'

'I would not know,' Roger said untruthfully, a lie that Henry pounced upon with zest.

'What penance *can* he impose, Roger? To take the cross and journey to the Holy Land. Does that seem sufficient punishment to you for the murder of an archbishop?'

Roger frowned, for Henry had just demonstrated the logical absurdity of the Church's insistence upon disciplining their own. The Constitutions of Clarendon had been the result, not the cause, of the conflict between Henry and Becket. It had begun with Henry's desire to make clerics subject to secular law. The Church had long claimed sole authority to judge the offences of men in holy orders or the crimes committed against them. Even men who'd merely taken religious vows must be tried in ecclesiastical court, not the king's court. No matter how heinous his transgression, a clerk was beyond the reach of royal justice, and the harshest penalty the Church could impose was degrading, depriving him of his orders.

Henry had been outraged by these mild punishments, and he demanded that clerks convicted of serious crimes in an ecclesiastical court should then be stripped of the Church's protection and handed over to his courts for sentencing. Roger still remembered the litany of horrific crimes Henry had assembled to bolster his argument: more than one hundred murders committed by clerics in the eight years since he'd become king, including the scandalous case in which an archdeacon poisoned the Archbishop of York and, as punishment, was deprived of his archdeaconry.

Roger remembered, too, the case that sometimes troubled his dreams even now. A clerk in Worcestershire had raped a young girl and slain her father. When Henry insisted that the man be turned over to a royal court, Becket had ordered Roger, as Bishop-elect of Worcester, to imprison the man so he could not be seized by the king's justices. Roger believed in the principle defended so passionately by Thomas Becket, that the clergy had Christ alone as their king and were not subject to royal jurisdiction. It was easier to argue, though, when the consequences of that principle – the abused

daughter and widow of the murder victim – were not kneeling at his feet pleading for justice.

'A pity,' Henry said coolly, 'that Thomas was so adamant, so scornful of compromise on the issue of jurisdiction. Had he been more reasonable, his murderers would not have gone free. Ironic, is it not, Cousin?'

Roger could have pointed out that Becket would not have been murdered if Henry had not lost his temper and spoke those fatal words that sent four men to Canterbury Cathedral, thinking they were fulfilling the king's wishes: *What miserable drones and traitors I have nourished and promoted in my household, who let their lord be mocked so shamefully by a lowborn clerk!* But he did not, for what purpose would it serve? It would change nothing. He looked at Henry, hearing an echo of his cousin's hoarse, desperate denial. *As God is my witness, those men did not murder him at my bidding.* The real pity, he thought, was that Harry's remorse had faded so fast.

WITH THE MEDIATION of Archbishop Rotrou of Rouen, Bishop Arnulf of Lisieux, and the Archdeacon of Poitiers, peace was made between the English king and the Roman Church. It was agreed that Henry and the papal legates and bishops would ride south to Avranches and Henry would there do public penance for his part in the murder of the Archbishop of Canterbury and receive absolution of his sins.

FROM THE CASTLE BATTLEMENTS, Henry had a superb view of the bay and, in the distance, the celebrated abbey of Mont St Michel. It was one of the marvels of Christendom, built upon a small, rocky island that was entirely cut off from the mainland at high tide. It had a dreamlike appearance, seeming to rise out of the sand and sea foam like a lost vision of God's Kingdom, its high, precarious perch above the waves so spectacular and dramatic that, at first glimpse, pilgrims did not see how it could have been the work of mortal men.

It was low tide now and the dangerous, shifting sands had been laid bare. Henry could see a few tiny figures trudging across those sands towards the abbey, but not as many as would be expected. He knew why, of course. Many of the pilgrims had delayed their crossing upon hearing that the King of England would be doing penance upon the morrow at Avranches's cathedral of St Andrew the Apostle. That would be a sight to behold, a rare tale to bring back to their towns and villages upon completion of their pilgrimages.



Henry narrowed his eyes, as much at that unwelcome thought as at the unrelenting gusts of sea-borne wind, belying spring's calendar with its chill. Glancing at his closest companion, he said, 'It has been far too long since I visited your abbey. Mayhap we can make time ere I must depart for Caen. When was I there last – when I came with Louis?'

Abbot Robert pretended to ponder the question; as if he did not have every one of the king's stays seared into his memory like a brand! A royal visit was the greatest honour imaginable, but it was also a great expense and a great strain, for the striving after perfection on such an occasion was both exhausting and utterly elusive. Thinking of Henry's sojourn with the French king, he smiled at the memory, for it had always amazed him that Henry should have been able to win over the man who'd been Eleanor's first husband. Of course that unlikely peace had not lasted, but it had endured long enough for Henry to arrange an even more unlikely marriage between his eldest son, Hal, and Louis's daughter, Marguerite, child of the woman he'd wed after divorcing Eleanor.

'I believe that was indeed your last visit, my liege,' he confirmed, all the while marvelling at the vagaries of fate. He had devoted much of his life to a history of his abbey and his times, and he wondered what future historians would make of the improbable story of Henry Fitz Empress and Eleanor of Aquitaine.

A great heiress and a great beauty, she'd wed the young French king at thirteen, easily winning his heart, for he'd been pledged to the Church at an early age, would have happily served the Almighty if his elder brother had not died in a fall from his horse, and he retained a guileless innocence, a monkish simplicity that was ill suited to the worldly sophistry of the royal court. Their marriage had been neither happy nor fruitful, for they were as unlike as fire and milk. In fourteen years of wedlock, Eleanor had given birth to only two children, both daughters, and when their union was finally dissolved on the grounds of consanguinity, the true reason was her inability to give him a male heir.

Barely three months later, she had shocked their world by wedding Henry, then Duke of Normandy, who was nine years her junior. Louis the king was horrified that so dangerous an adversary as Henry should have access to the riches of Eleanor's Aquitaine, and Louis the man was mortified and hurt that Eleanor should have defied him by choosing such an unsuitable husband, one ambitious, bold, clever, and lusty. Their swift, secret marriage had led to war with France, and Louis's humiliation was complete when Henry needed but six short weeks to send his army reeling back across the border, and but two years to claim the English crown. Eleanor then proceeded to salt Louis's wounds by giving Henry five sons and three daughters, losing only William to the deadly perils of childhood.

At least Louis had the consolation of envisioning his daughter as Queen of England. But even that had not gone as planned. Two years ago, Henry had mortally insulted Thomas Becket by allowing the Archbishop of York to crown his fifteen-year-old son, a coronation that Becket had futilely forbidden. But in the chaos and confusion, Marguerite had not been crowned with her young husband, giving Louis yet another grievance against his Angevin rival.

A sudden clamour turned Henry's attention from the abbey to the town below them. The streets were winding and narrow, accommodating the hilly terrain, and he could only catch glimpses of riders and horses. But then the wind found a fluttering banner of red and gold and he smiled. 'My son is riding into Avranches,' he announced. 'I should have known from the cheers.' He glanced towards the abbot, wanting to share his pride and pleasure with his friend. 'You've not seen the lad for years, have you, Rob? Wait till you see how he's grown – already taller than me and he's just three months past his seventeenth birthday!'

Others had followed Henry on to the battlements: his uncle Rainald, his cousin Roger, his justiciar, Richard de Lucy, and Hamelin de Warenne, his half brother. Hamelin was the illegitimate son of Henry's father, Geoffrey, Count of Anjou, taken under Henry's wing after Geoffrey's untimely death. Hamelin had flaming red hair, an open, freckled face that made him seem much younger than his thirty years, an impulsive nature and, thanks to Henry, a very wealthy wife who'd brought him the earldom of Surrey. His affection for Henry was equalled only by his awe, and he beamed now to see his elder brother in such good spirits.

'Does Hal know why you summoned him to Avranches?'

Henry shook his head. 'He thinks he is here just to swear to those agreements I am making with the Church.' Seeing Abbot Robert's puzzled look, he explained, 'I have a surprise in store for the lad.'

Below them, men were riding into the castle's inner bailey. There was no need to point out the young king. Everything about him – the spirited grey stallion and ornamented saddle, the costly mantle of fine scarlet wool, the white calfskin gloves studded with pearls, the stylish pointed cap with a turned-up brim embroidered in gold thread, the gilded spurs attached to his boots with red leather straps – proclaimed him to be of high birth and one of God's favourites. He'd been blessed, too, with uncommonly good looks, tall and well formed, with vivid blue eyes and gleaming golden hair, cut short around his ears, one lock allowed to curl fashionably on to his forehead. Catching sight of his father up on the battlements, he doffed his cap in a gesture both graceful and dramatic, and Henry grinned.

Staring down at this handsome youth, Abbot Robert blurted out, 'If he is not the very image of Count Geoffrey!'



‘He has my father’s colouring for certes,’ Henry agreed, ‘and his sense of style. He has my father’s ready wit, too. Did you hear, Rob, what he said at his coronation feast? To honour him, I myself carried the great boar’s head dish to his table. The Archbishop of York commented that it was not every prince who was served by a king. And Hal said, quick as a flash, “Yes, but it can be no condescension for the son of a count to serve the son of a king.”’

Abbot Robert did not see the humour in that flippant remark, but he laughed dutifully because Henry was laughing. As he had been no admirer of Count Geoffrey of Anjou, though, he hoped that Hal had inherited nothing from his grandsire but his striking good looks.

SWINGING EASILY FROM THE SADDLE, Hal soon joined his father up on the battlements, choosing to climb a wooden ladder rather than gaining access to the ramparts by entering the keep. Spotting William Marshal, the head of Hal’s household knights, Henry beckoned for him to come up, too, and then gathered his son into a welcoming embrace. After exchanging hugs with his kinsmen, Hal courteously greeted the justiciar and Abbot Robert, who gave him credit for having much better manners than Count Geoffrey.

‘Tell him, Brother,’ Hamelin prompted, nudging Henry in the ribs, and Hal was instantly alert.

‘Tell me what?’

Henry feigned a scowl at Hamelin’s impatience, but he was not one for waiting, either. ‘I have a surprise for you, lad.’

Hal had retained a child’s love of surprises, but some of his father’s surprises had seemed more like ambushes. Moreover, he did not like to be called ‘lad’ now that he was a man grown and an anointed king. ‘What?’ he asked, with more wariness than anticipation.

‘Marguerite is here.’

Hal blinked in disappointment. He’d known Marguerite for most of his life; they’d been wed when he was five and she was two and a half. He tended to think of her as a little sister, when he thought of her at all. ‘Oh?’ he said politely, wondering what he was supposed to say.

‘Well, her presence is but half of the surprise. It is my intention to have her crowned this summer at Winchester. Archbishop Rotrou will preside and your cousin Roger has agreed to take part, too,’ Henry said, with a playful smile at Roger. ‘And because of the furore that Becket caused about your coronation, I have decided that you will be crowned again – a gesture of good will towards the Church.’

Hal's interest was now fully engaged; he loved pageantry and rituals and revelries. His first thought was that they could hold a tournament afterwards, but he decided not to share that idea with his father, knowing that Henry disapproved of tourneys as frivolous, wasteful, and a threat to the public order. His next thought was even better: the realization that his coronation would be the ideal opportunity to achieve a long-delayed desire.

'And I could be knighted, too!'

Henry was already shaking his head. 'No, lad, not yet. You know I think Louis ought to be the one to knight you. That would mean a great deal to him and go far towards mending the breach between us.'

'But I do not care who knights me! All that truly matters is that it is done. I am already seventeen; how much longer must I wait?'

'Some events are worth waiting for,' Henry said, giving his son a reassuring pat on the arm. 'You are still young for such an accolade. How old were you, Will, when you were knighted?'

Caught off balance, William Marshal stiffened; the last thing he wanted was to be pulled into this ongoing squabble between father and son. 'Twenty and one,' he said reluctantly, feeling that he'd somehow let Hal down by speaking the truth.

Hal was not easily discouraged, though. 'And how old were you?' he demanded of Henry, providing the answer himself, a triumphant 'Sixteen!'

Not for the first time, Henry wondered how he could have sired such obstinate offspring, for Hal's brother Richard was even more headstrong and mulish, and thirteen-year-old Geoffrey was already showing signs of the same willfulness. Only little John and his Joanna were biddable and easily pleased. But a man wanted his sons to show pluck and spirit, and so he did not deny Hal outright, promising vaguely to give his request serious consideration.

Hal had heard this before, for they'd been having this same argument since Henry's return from Ireland last month. He was coming to the conclusion that his father's promises were counterfeit coin; they looked genuine, but they could not be spent. He was opening his mouth to protest further when Roger intervened.

'Hal,' he said quietly, 'I believe that is Marguerite coming out of the hall. You'd best go down and greet her, lad, ere she feels slighted. You know how sensitive lasses can be.'

Hal almost asked Roger how he knew that, what with him becoming a priest at such a young age. But he was angry with his father, not his cousin, and his sense of fairness stifled the gibe. Nor did he want to hurt Marguerite, and he nodded grudgingly. Turning towards the ladder, his gaze came to rest upon the girl below in the bailey and he came to an abrupt halt.



‘That cannot be Marguerite!’

At the sound of her name, she glanced upwards. Hal had not seen her in more than a year; she’d left England in April of 1171 and had spent most of her time since then at her father’s court. He’d remembered to send her gifts for New Year’s and her saint’s day, but she’d always been on the periphery of his life, the child-wife who’d eventually share his throne and bear his children – one day far in the future. Until then, he would not lack for female company; girls had been chasing after him since he was thirteen and he usually let them catch him. Now he gazed down at the heart-shaped face framed in a linen barrette, the chin-strap made newly fashionable by his mother, her fair hair covered by a gauzy veil of saffron silk, and he was stunned by the changes in her. She was so stylish of a sudden, slim and curvy where she’d been skinny and flat, so . . . so womanly.

He sketched a bow, she responded with a graceful curtsy, and he pantomimed that he’d be down straightaway. When he looked back at the men, they were all grinning. He was too amazed to take offence. ‘She is lovely,’ he marvelled, counting surreptitiously on his fingers.

Henry spared him the trouble. ‘She is fourteen now, lad, and as you say, very lovely, indeed.’

Hal hesitated. ‘Um . . . is she old enough to—?’ He flushed slightly, but grinned, too, and his father laughed.

‘Um . . . I would say so. But if you have doubts, you can always ask her.’

Hal usually did not mind being teased, could give as good as he got. ‘I will,’ he said, winked, and headed for the ladder, descending to the bailey so rapidly that they half-expected him to land in a heap at Marguerite’s feet. Instead, he sprang lightly to the ground and was soon gallantly kissing his wife’s hand as she blushed prettily and cast him adoring looks through fluttering lashes.

‘Well,’ Henry said, ‘I do believe the lass is answering him without even being asked,’ and they shared smiles, remembering what it was like to be young and bedazzled by a come-hither look, a neatly turned ankle. For Henry, memory took him back to a rain-spangled garden in Paris, an afternoon encounter with Louis’s queen that would change lives and history. He could still remember how breathtakingly beautiful Eleanor was that day. He’d have been content to gaze into her eyes for hours, trying to decide if they were green with gold flecks or gold with green flecks. She had high, finely sculpted cheekbones, soft, flawless skin he’d burned to touch, and lustrous dark braids entwined with gold-thread ribbons he yearned to unfasten; he’d have bartered his chances of salvation to bury his face in that glossy, perfumed hair, to wind it around his throat and see it spread out on his pillow. He’d watched, mesmerized, as a

crystal raindrop trickled towards the sultry curve of her mouth and wanted nothing in his life so much, before or since, as he wanted her.

She'd known that Louis was heeding his council's advice, planning to divorce her, and then compel her to wed a man of their choosing, a pliable puppet who'd keep her domains under the control of the French Crown. In that soaked summer garden she'd taken her destiny into her own hands, offering him Aquitaine and herself, and he was so besotted that he could not say which mattered more to him, the richest duchy in Europe or the woman in his arms.

They'd agreed to wait, though, for she shared his pragmatism as well as his passion, and they both knew even a glimmer of suspicion and Louis would never set her free. Nine months later, they were wed in her capital city of Poitiers. Never had he been happier, not even on the day he became England's king. Lying entangled in the sheets on their wedding night, she'd confided that their lovemaking had been like falling into a fire and somehow emerging unscathed, laughing huskily when he showed he was not yet sated and murmuring, 'My lord duke, tonight all of Aquitaine is yours for the taking.'

Henry returned to reality with a start, staring blankly at Roger as he realized he'd not heard a word of his cousin's question. Eleanor's alluring ghost receded into the past, leaving him with a sense of wonder that twenty years could have passed since that torrid May night. He also felt an odd sense of loss, although he wasn't sure why.

'I want to talk with you, Will,' he said abruptly, and the young knight, who'd been sidling towards the ladder, straightened his shoulders and braced himself for what he knew was coming. 'I've been warned,' Henry continued, 'that my son has been consorting with the wrong company. I cannot do much about his association with Raoul de Faye as he is the queen's uncle. But Hal has gathered around him a band of youths who are rakehells and idlers, light-minded, callow malcontents. Several of them accompanied him to Avranches: Juhel de Mayenne, Simon de Marisco, Adam d'Yquebeuf, and Hasculf de St Hilaire. You know them for what they are, Will, know that barnacles clinging to a ship's hull can slow it down, even render it unseaworthy. Why did you not alert me that he was being led astray?'

'My lord king . . .' Will was miserable, knowing that whatever he said, he was sure to be in the wrong, either with his young lord or his sovereign.

'Why do you think I chose you to tutor my son in the arts of war and chivalry? Because you sit a horse well and can wield a sword? There is no shortage of knights with those skills. I chose you because you are steadfast and honest, because you have more mother-wit than most men, because I thought I could rely upon you to watch over my son, to keep him safe.'



'I would give my life for the young king,' Will said simply, with such sincerity that none of those listening could doubt him. 'I do watch over him, my liege. I've done my best to teach him what he must know, and I am proud of his prowess, for he is an expert rider and has mastered both sword and lance with admirable ease. But I cannot spy on him, not even for you, my lord king. I am his sworn man, and my first loyalty must be to him. To do less would be a betrayal he would not forgive. Nor could I forgive myself.'

The silence that followed was stifling. Girding himself to bear the king's wrath, Will raised his head and met Henry's gaze. The king's eyes were the colour of smoke, his mouth tightly drawn, as if to stop angry words from escaping. 'Keep him from harm, Will,' he said at last. 'Do not let me down.'

Will swallowed, knelt hastily, and then retreated just as hastily, vastly relieved by his reprieve but not fully understanding it. Rainald did not understand, either. 'The impudence of the man! Why were you so forbearing with him? Had he dared talk to me like that, I'd have dismissed him straightaway.'

'If I did that,' Henry said, 'Hal would lose the one trustworthy and honourable man in his service, the one man who'd be loyal to his last breath. How would that benefit my son, Rainald? Do you not know how rare such men are? Men who put loyalty above ambition and greed and royal favour?' And even Rainald realized that Henry was speaking not only of William Marshal, but of Thomas Becket, the false friend who'd betrayed him for reasons he could never comprehend.

PEOPLE HAD BEGUN TO GATHER at dawn before the Cathedral church of St Andrew the Apostle, not wanting to miss the spectacle of a king brought low, forced to do penance like all mortal men. They were to be disappointed. Henry arrived with the papal legates and barons and bishops beyond counting. They'd all gone into the cathedral, where Henry swore upon the Holy Gospels that he'd neither commanded nor desired that the Archbishop of Canterbury be slain, and that when he was told of the crime, he was horrified and truly grieved for the death of Thomas of blessed memory. He admitted, though, that the killing was the result of his heedless, angry words, and he pledged to honour the commitments made to the Holy Church on this, the last Sunday before Ascension in God's Year 1172, the eighteenth year of his reign. His son the young king then took an oath to honour all those commitments that did not relate only to Henry. But all of this was done out of sight and sound of the waiting crowds.

When Henry finally emerged from the church, the spectators were disappointed anew, for he was not bareheaded and barefoot and clad only in his shirt. A few men ex-

plained knowingly that he was spared the usual mortification because he'd not been excommunicated, but most of the bystanders took a more cynical view, that kings were always accorded special treatment, even by the Almighty. Henry knelt upon the paving stones, only then removing his cap, and received public absolution by the Cardinals Albert and Theodwin. When he rose, the cardinals and the Bishop of Avranches led him back into the cathedral, a symbolic act of reconciliation with the Church and the Almighty.

The dissatisfied onlookers dispersed when they realized the show was over. Roger, Bishop of Worcester, stood alone for a moment before slowly re-entering the church, for he had been close enough to Henry to hear him say softly after the absolution: 'Check, Thomas, and mate.'