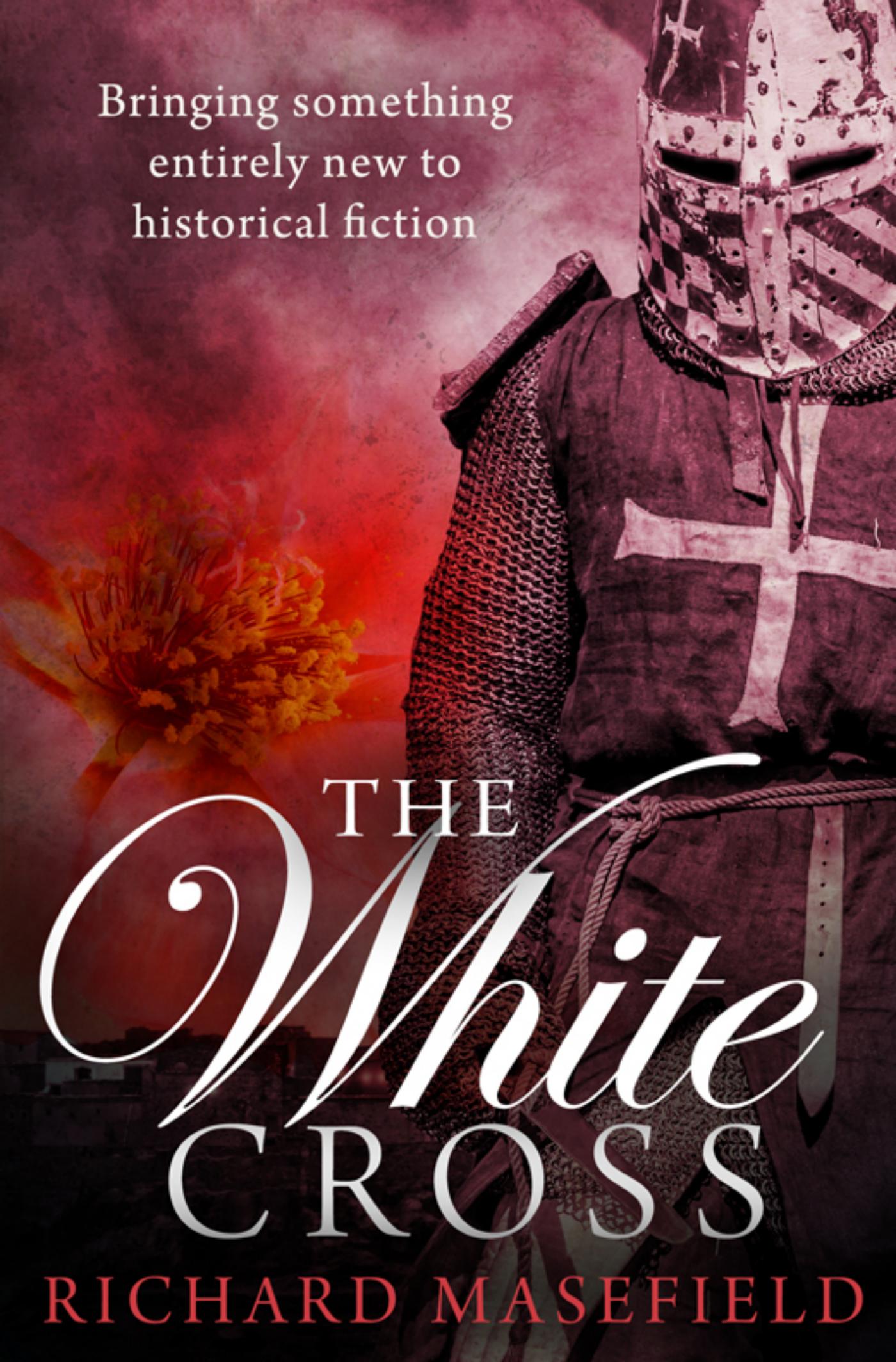


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THE
White
CROSS

RICHARD MASEFIELD

THE WHITE CROSS

Richard Masefield



RedDoor

For all the young people of Chailey Heritage School,
their families and teachers, who have taught me so
much during the years it's taken to write this novel

PROLOGUS

Fontevraud, Anjou: July 1189

ATONEMENT

'Christ's Holy Shit!'

Six startled nuns, their Abbess and the Primate of all England cast up their eyes to cross themselves as the obscenity rings through the Abbey Church.

'God's bollocks!' Duke Richard adds profanely, as stooping to enter the low crypt he clamps his mouth to breathe as little as he can of its polluted air.

Tall candles cast giant shadows across the walls and ceiling of the chamber; five candles to represent the wounds of Christ, with between them on a pinewood trestle his father's naked corpse. Henry, the second king of England of that name, has always seemed the kind of man who never would grow old and die. But having done so anyway is not a pretty sight. From its breastbone to its genitals the old king's body has been opened like an oyster. Where a proud paunch once rose, a stinking cavity now gapes; and from the buckets on the floor containing his internal organs the stench of putrefaction rises.

For a long moment Duke Richard stares down on his father's ruin.

Henry gutted on a slab, he thinks disgustedly, then turns on the three men whose task he's interrupted. 'Cover it,' he barks at the lay brothers who've been charged to purify the royal remains for burial. 'Cover it and then get out!' And fumbling with the foetid buckets, hurrying to drape the corpse in the plain cloak it's worn

for its last journey down from Chinon, the embalmers tread on each other's heels to scramble up the narrow stairs.

To leave the live king with the dead one.

'Stinking vultures! Cringing, shitting little jackals!' Duke Richard saves the main force of his anger for the old man waiting for him in the abbey nave; a thin, round-shouldered figure in the black and white pied robe of a Cistercian abbot. 'God's teeth, those creatures stink of Henry's entrails!' The Duke's metalled boots ring on the flags as he strides forward. 'They claim the Body Royal is indestructible, yet stink to heaven of his guts!'

'The bodies of all men from the lowest peasant to the greatest emperor are subject to corruption of the flesh, my son; death comes to all of us in time.' Archbishop Baldwin of Canterbury turns back his cowl to show the kindly, undernourished face of a committed Christian, its tonsured cranium already freckled with the spots of age. 'I'm sure the Abbess would have spared you this, if you'd but thought to...'

'I tried to fold his arms onto his chest, what's left of it,' the Duke interrupts him. 'But they were set. Dear God, I had to break them, man; and when I looked into his face, his eyeballs moved! I tell you that my father's eyes moved in his skull and black blood trickled from his nose!'

'You broke his joints?' A second shock. But Baldwin hurries on to tell the Duke that, distressing as they are, such things have no significance. 'No, none at all.' He pats the royal sleeve placatingly. 'Involuntary emissions are by no means unusual I believe in the embalming process.'

'My father cursed me on his deathbed. You heard him, Baldwin; the old fox blames me for his fall.' The Duke spits violently and with a hand that trembles, wipes the spittle from his tawny beard. 'God's teeth, if I know aught of Henry he's cursing me from the road down to hell!'

Which maybe isn't so far from the mark, the old archbishop thinks, remembering how desperately the son and father fought

each other for control of Aquitaine; how Richard leagued with France and his own brother, John to wrestle from King Henry an empire great as Charlemagne's – to leave the poor man in the end with only England and six foot soil at Fontevraud in which to lay his bones.

No, when it comes to treachery there isn't anyone more dangerous to kings than their own relatives, Baldwin tells himself; and how could anyone, and least of all the man before him, forget King Henry's frightful deathbed malediction:

'I curse the day that I was born! I curse my devil's brood of sons! I call on Heaven to curse Richard's soul! May God and all His saints deny it its eternal rest until I am avenged!'

'My son, it is from recognition of our sins and our imperfect nature that we achieve enlightenment,' he says aloud with a deliberately disarming smile.

Which rather brings us to the point, he dares to think; a princely penitent, a priest and a religious house – the three conspire. Now is the time and place for Richard to repent his sins, recant his shocking oaths on God's private anatomies, and kneel before me in a state of true contrition.

The old archbishop tucks his hands into his sleeves, considers the stone pavement, and waits. But when it comes, Duke Richard's next assault upon the silence of the abbey is scarcely in the form of a confession.

'If I've deserved my father's curse, then I'll atone for it in battle,' he states baldly. 'Correct me if I'm wrong, Archbishop; but are we not promised a remission of all penances for riding on crusade? And haven't I agreed to undertake the quest myself when you have crowned me at Westminster – and won't God's blessing follow, as night follows day when we have freed the Holy City from the Turk?'

A full head shorter, more than twice his age, and of less than half Duke Richard's splendid bulk, Baldwin acknowledges his duty, nonetheless. As Primate of England, he is the Church personified

for Richard as Thomas Becket was for Henry; and even if the Duke should work himself into a purple fit and pull the abbey down about their ears, he will stand firm – he's almost sure he will.

'No please...' Archbishop Baldwin has a habit of apologising for authority before asserting it. 'No please.' He holds up a deprecating hand. 'Please understand that God's forgiveness must depend on whether you undertake the task for His greater glory, or for your own, my son.' He pauses for effect. 'Can you be sure that coin and territory, that your own reputation, are to play no part in this great undertaking? Can you say honestly that temporal gain...'

'Is not my business as the King? By heaven, that is something you will never hear from *this* king, Baldwin,' Richard bellows inches from his face. 'Fine words from a Church that seeks to govern every step we take, with a snub-devil of a Pope set over it who's living like an Emperor in Rome! It seems to me Pope Clement needs reminding who *I AM* before his bishops dare to tell me what I can and cannot gain from a crusade.'

Not yet thirty-two, the Duke has reached the very peak of manly strength and vigour. His hair is damp with sweat and sticks to the muscles of his neck in auburn spikes. Sandy lashes intensify the greenish colour of his eyes. There is a moment's silence while he fills his lungs.

'I am by right of birth Duke of Aquitaine, of Normandy and the Guienne, Count of Anjou, Poitou, Maine, Touraine, La Marche and the Auvergne,' Richard declaims as if the Pontiff and all his cardinals are in attendance, rather than an audience of one 'I am the Lord of Brittany, of Gascony and of the Vexin, heir to Toulouse, Abbé of Saint Hilaire – and in case Clement has forgotten, very soon to be crowned King of England by yourself, Archbishop, and overlord of Wales and Scotland in the bargain.'

'Which proves exactly what, my son?'

'Which proves I'M NOT EXACTLY UNIMPORTANT! Wouldn't you agree?'

'Undoubtedly it does.'

Baldwin, who cares nothing for appearance, makes a pretence of smoothing down the loose folds of his robe. 'But where is God in all this worldliness, my son? Where is true repentance?'

'Christ's blood and wounds, is not Jerusalem God's city? Was not my own great-grandfather crowned king there? If I owe Henry anything I'll settle it in Outremer,' Duke Richard shouts, 'and lift his curse by winning back the Kingdom of Jerusalem for Christendom!'

'The Good Lord grant it so.'

But Richard hasn't finished. 'You'll see, I'll get a son there on the Latin princess, fuck her senseless...'

Baldwin winces.

'Fuck her senseless in the Holy City to spawn a prince there who'll be holier by birth than Clement and his cardinals and all the Church's bishops set together! Then by the Virgin's tits, I'll make a better and more valiant Christian king than Henry is or was or ever could be!'

The Duke's eyes glitter in the torchlight. A rampant lion on his red tunic claws the air. Archbishop Baldwin sighs. He knows the man before him can read Latin and compose a ballad in Occitan or French, has had the benefit of learned tutors in his mother's courts, is well grounded in the scriptures on the one hand and in the strategies of warfare on the other. His valour renders him a hero in the eyes of every man alive; and yet like every other pampered prince he has been spoiled. Accustomed all his life to praise for anything he turns a hand to, Duke Richard's used to grabbing all he wants, in bedchambers and at the chase and on the battlefield.

Just like his father after all, thinks Baldwin glumly. And God help us if like Henry he's defeated.

But Richard can't envisage anything but total victory. His arrogance is unassailable. 'I'll make my mother Regent while I'm away abroad. I'll mount the noblest crusade that the world has seen, sell homages and land, whole towns to finance it. I've sworn to take Jerusalem, and by heaven that is what I will do! I'll found

an eastern empire great as Alexander's. I'll slay with my own hand the devil Saladin; and you'll be there Archbishop to bless me in the undertaking!

'My Liege I will. No please, decrepit as I am you know that I've already sworn to share with you the perils of croisade.'

'So you have, man. So you have!' The Duke claps a hand on his archbishop's shoulder with so hearty a benevolence he all but brings the old man to his knees.

'By heaven though we'll make a thing of it! Your Church may judge that I'm in need of spiritual improvement. But have you heard the character the people give me in the common taverns from Winchester to Rouen?'

Embarked now on his favourite topic, which is to say *himself*, Duke Richard laughs exposing large horse teeth. 'They claim that I've the muscles of an ox, the balls of a ram and the courage of a Barbary lion!'

Ignoring Baldwin's pained expression he gives his narrow shoulder-blade a bracing little shake. 'So what d'ye think, Your Grace? Am I more likely to sung of in their ballads at the end of the croisade as *Dickard Ramsbollocks*, or *Richard the Confessor*?

Or will it be *King Richard Lionhearted*?' he offers as an afterthought.

BOOK ONE

CHAPTER ONE

'Elise, you're slumping, dear. Do try to sit up properly.' Maman's voice, as ever at my elbow with some fresh idea of how I might improve.

And do they all, all mothers, have to go on treating daughters as incapable until their teeth rot and their hair turns grey? As if we could forget the proper way to dress or talk, or walk or sit or ride or stand, or when to raise our eyes or lower them – as if they'd ever let us!

'But if you must ride out without a veil you might at least set your cap straight, my love?' Her fourth appeal on that worn topic from where she sits behind me pulling down her own straw hat to shade her eyes. 'It's, well it's slovenly, Elise, as if you doubt your own importance.' Beneath the brim her own pink face looks worried and exhausted.

'My sister Garda says it's quite the thing these days to wear the fillet tilted, Maman.' (She doesn't actually. But I'm sure the Blessed Virgin will forgive the little fib. I mean she'd have to be a little lively, wouldn't she, to cope first with the Angel Gabriel then with a jealous Joseph?) I'm smiling helpfully at Maman on her palfrey, with one hand on the reins and the other feeling for my little pie-dish cap to make sure of its jaunty angle.

Behind the anxious parent, Hodierna on her mule has disapproval writ all over her grim face.

'Making an object of yesself as usual.' That's how she'll put it afterwards, I'd stake an oath. She can be very tiresome when she puts her mind to it, can Hod – although I'm glad that the old fusspot is to stay with me when I am married, because I've never known a time without my nurse in train, and wouldn't want to try it.

But best for now to leave the crabstick to her scowls and keep my eyes on Countess Isabel's closed litter five horses and two bearers up the line. Movement. Clomping hooves and tramping feet, the chinking sound of metal harness, wheels turning, timber creaking, hunched shoulders (and not just

mine by any means); the sights and sounds of a great household on the move – ahead of us the winding road which in the end will bring us into Lewes. And Jésus, what a journey!

Did I say that out aloud?

We've been eleven hours now on the road from Reigate Castle, if you include the halts. Nesta, my little jennet mare, is pretty near as weary as I am myself, and is it any wonder if we slump? They say that life's a journey of a kind, and if it is I'd say I am a fair bit down that road as well. Because at nineteen, as Maman never ceases to remind me, I'm older by five summers than she was when she married Father. (Not that even she could claim the thing to be my fault, with two sisters to be settled first.)

Oh God, I'm SO uncomfortable! My back aches like the plague. The insides of both my legs are raw, and if we don't arrive at Lewes or some other stopping place in the next quarter-hour, there'll be no help for it whatever Hoddie has to say. I'll simply have to leave the line and hoist my skirts, up there somewhere behind the elder bushes.

Mon Dieu, just think of Maman's face!

Below the track we have to follow, the River Ouse keeps company with us on our left hand – a breeze, the smell of mud, the sharp cry of a seagull. The moon looks like a threadbare linen patch on the pale fabric of the sky. Across the valley a huddle of daub cottages – stone church, a herringbone of fields, cattle in the meadows, geese on the shore... Are they a sign we're nearly there? Will there be feather beds in Lewes, and hot bricks for our feet? Heavens, even thinking of them is a comfort!

Of all the castles in the barony, they say that Lewes is the one most favoured by the Earl and Countess de Warenne.

'The place is on a hill with sewers which remarkably perform the function they're designed for,' the Countess Isabel is meant to have said of Lewes castle after she'd named the drains of Reigate the most abominably foul in England. Which I suppose means that we have to thank My Lady's faith in sanitation for bringing us a full week earlier than planned to Sussex – and to my wedding vows.

We have the gift of a fine saddle in the cart that holds my wardrobe, to be given to my bridegroom when we meet. Blood marries land they say. I have the blood, he has the land – although in truth we haven't all that much of either. On Maman's side I am related to the Countess as a minor cousin several times removed. And if through Father I can claim descent from Aquitaine, it has to be confessed that he first came to England in the Old Queen's train – not as her kinsman but her page!

As for Sir Garon de Stanville of Haddertun, the young man they are to glue me to, we're told his property includes two Sussex manors held in his mother's right, a stretch of marsh, some managed assarts, upland grazing for five hundred sheep and hunting rights in woodlands bordering the Wealden Forest. He has two small estates in other words. I have my blood-tie to the Warenes, and that's all there is to it!

Matrimony is contractual, Maman says, a trade like any other. The base love of the flesh disorders sense, she says, and has no part in marriage. Women as a rule should save affection for their children, Maman says, and treat their husbands with respect. 'We wives just have to make the best of what we find, or else we're bound to be unhappy.'

Which might be good enough for Maman. But not for me, because I plan to be as fond a wife as any man has yet to wed – and make Sir Garon love me whether he intends to or no!

Holy Saint Mary, can you see how earnestly I mean that?

But are we here at last, and is this Lewes Fortress, looming like a crag above the trees? Thanks be to God, I think it is! Yes, there's the blue and yellow chequer of Warenne flying bravely from the keep. I feel as if I'm flying with it, I am so excited!

The watch has spotted us and sounds his horn – a stir, a movement rippling along the line, a horseman stooping to My Lady's litter... The curtains part – a gold-embroidered sleeve, and now the head of an indignant lapdog, yapping fit to shatter steel.

That was all four days ago, and I have to say I've never understood why people who're incapable of affection even for their children can lavish it on frightful little dogs. The Countess sits at ease in her solarium, surrounded

by her women and her pages. (I say at ease. But she's bolt upright in her chair dressed gorgeously in gold brocade, with on her lap in pride of place a Maltese cur that looks like a dishevelled rat!)

Whenever people speak of Countess Isabel they mostly use respectful words like 'dignified' or 'illustrious', but never call her handsome. Her mouth is like a trap – pouched yellow eyes as hard as pebbles, big chin protruding from her wimple, big nose stuck in the air. That's how she normally appears, yet here's my plain and haughty lady playing with her lapdog, feeding the pampered creature sugar from a bowl, crooning at it in the way that mothers croon at babies – and looking, well very nearly human!

A woman with, as Hod would say less teeth than summers in her past, with royal blood in her veins from both sides of the Narrow Sea, My Lady Isabel was a princess by the age of twelve as wife to the son of King Stephen. Then married after he was dead to King Henry's natural brother, Hamelin, she's now the new King Richard's aunt. As grand a dame as it is possible to be without a gold crown on your head!

When we reached Lewes Fortress My Lady barely had to nod to have her Flemish tapestries hung on the walls, her coffers and her presses stored, her costume changed, her every wish obeyed – whilst we poor lesser mortals stood for hours to wait for stabling, for porters and for quarters to be found; travel-stained and travel-weary, longing for our beds.

Now four days on, I'm washed and brushed and combed and drenched in rosewater, laced breathlessly into my best blue gown. And waiting still.

I wonder if I'm brave enough to catch My Lady's eye and step out from the window? Ten measured steps, soft-footed with the maidenly decorum I've rehearsed – a flutter of surprise amongst the demoiselles, Maman's bleat of protest. But I'm unannounced, the courtesies are unobserved. My Lady's hand's stops in mid-fondle, distainful eyes consider me from crown to toe, the rat-dog on her lap begins to tremble, crouches, springs dementedly to her defence!

Oh I don't know, on second thoughts I'm probably best where I am.

I dreamt last night that I was still a child, curled up cosily between my sisters, Cecily and Garda. I even snuggled into Maman's back, thinking it was Cessie's – until I felt how soft and fat she'd suddenly become. And that

was when I woke to voices in the castle ward, and rubbed my eyes and saw the lime-washed ceiling of the women's dormitory – and then, mon Dieu, I knew the County Palatine of Lancaster, my father and my sisters were behind me never to be seen again this side of Paradise!

'Be good, mon enfant. Be a credit to your line.' That's all my father had to say when I was parted from him.

That's when my childhood ended.

My Lady's solar is a pleasant sort of chamber with a good view of the inner ward. From where I'm sitting in the window I can watch them getting ready for the tournament tomorrow; a thing that no one's seen in England since I was in my cradle. Smiths, fletchers, armourers spill from their workshops on the cobbles to watch the knights at exercise. (I'm sure their language must be shocking. But the wind's against me, I can't hear a word.) A ginger cat up on the roof above the forge is stalking a fat pigeon it's no holy hope of catching...

'My Lady Blanchefleur.'

Holy Saint Mary, no one's called Maman anything but 'Lady Blanche' for years! The bird bobs twice – explosions of grey feathers as it flies. The cat's pretending that it never wanted pigeon dinner in the first place, stays on the roof to wash its bottom, one leg in the air. But inside, Maman is already half way to My Lady's chair – dumpy, pink about the gills despite the powder, rustling and bustling in her stiff bokeram, collecting rushes in the hem of her long skirts. So eager to oblige she practically scuttles to the curtsey and wobbles coming up.

'I take it that your daughter is prepared and ripe for marriage, Lady Blanchefleur?' the Countess wants to know. She doesn't mention age and nor will Maman. But 'ripe' she says, as if I were some kind of fruit!

'Indeed she is, My Lady, as she'll be pleased to tell you for herself.' It sounds like something she's rehearsed.

An inclination of the noble chin and Maman dimples, looks straight at me; my signal to approach. The walk as I imagined it was quicker and more graceful. It seems to take an age! The Maltese dog's asleep. My Lady waits with one hand on its neck, her gaze as yellow as a hawk's. (You feel its power and her awareness of it, both.) I'll swear she misses nothing as I curtsey, including what's inside my head!

‘Yes, charming’ (‘passable’ is how she makes it sound), ‘and not too narrow in the girth for one of her low stature.’

The corners of My Lady’s mouth lift visibly within the white frame of her wimple – a measure of the smile she saves for dogs. ‘She should fare well in Sussex, with our favour and a groom who knows what he’s about.’

It’s true that I am far from tall, and Garda claims that no one could be beautiful with a short neck like mine (hers naturally is like a swan’s!). But what’s beauty when it comes to it? Pale skin, good eyes, fair hair, straight teeth and plenty of soft curves? Maman says men like as much soft flesh as they can get, in sucking pigs, in poultry and in wives. And although I’ve often asked the Everlasting God to make me better looking, it’s surprising what you can achieve with beanflour and boiled chamomile and veiling from the sun. And clothes of course. The dress I’ve chosen for today is pale sky-blue, the colour they call celestyne, twist-wrung to fall in fluted pleats from hip to toe; too elegant for words!

I wonder what the Countess meant by calling him a groom who knows what he’s about?

‘I mention him because Sir Garon is expected.’ My Lady’s eyes are on my face. ‘I’m told he’s on his way up from the camp to be presented.’

Which leaves me where? To thank her dutifully for her attention? To go? Or stand and wait? I’m opening my mouth – have been called a chatterbox for years, but just now can’t think what to say...

Thank heavens! Maman’s hand is on my arm to pull me down into a second curtsy. ‘My Lady, we are grateful for your favour.’ (Maman’s voice, not mine) ‘And with your leave will watch for the young man’s arrival from the window.’

And what a perfect prune I feel to be led there in silence like a filly on a halter!

The stone mullion of the window’s cold against my cheek. The ward below is crowded with horseflesh and men; the best they say, bred on the Earl’s estates in Normandie and Conisborough or else shipped in from Friesland (the horses, not the men) – great slug-haunched destriers without an ounce of grace between them.

A hit! The quintain must be made of iron from the loud noise it made. But see how quick the fellow was to duck the sandbag on its pole. And here's another lancing for the painted Saracen – just like a boys' game, taking turns.

But when will HE ride in? Oh WHEN?

I must have sat here for two third parts of an hour with my thoughts upon a treadmill turning round and round inside my head. Why when you want a thing to happen does it have to take so LONG?!

COME ON! COME ON!

Please Lord, I know I don't pray near as often as I should. But if you can't make him come soon, could you do something with my patience?

But wait! More riders; someone trotting through the inner gateway, now in shadow, now in light...

It might be. Could it?

Wait, oh wait, I think it must be – two, three, four horsemen in the group. No, more than four, and only one of them impeccably well dressed.

It HAS to be him, HAS TO!

He rides so well, as upright in the saddle as even Mother would advise; a slim young man and dark – I hardly guessed he would be dark – hair black without a trace of curl and a black beard to match the ravens on the keep. Dark men have so much more to them I've always thought, and this one's all in red, a gallant hue; frieze tunic, cloak, gloves, beret – all in Irish red. He surely must know that it suits him?

But now closer, close enough to see his face...

Heaven-sent, he has to be! Oh thank you Lord!

His face is long and narrow – straight Norman nose, the nostrils sharply angled – and singular, no other word for it, as handsome as a herring.

(I wonder what it would feel like to be kissed by someone with a beard?)

But sweet Jésus, he is looking up to see me looking down!

Now just take care, Elise... Hold still, you're not at fault. It's good that he should see you're not afraid. (Eyes dark as well and narrowed in the sunlight.)

'Lady, I am here, the man you've dreamt of all your life' (my words, not his). But on my soul it is the first, the very time I have felt like this. That glance when he looked up stabbed into me, RIGHT INTO ME!

And I thought all that talk of Cupid's arrows was a nonsense. Or am I being silly? (The things that flash into your mind. How can you tell what's false or real?)

But God, oh God – a gift from heaven! I am in love, I know I am. I feel it in my bones!

Which only goes to show how wrong one's bones can be. It's too absurd, no other way to see it! The man's not nearly young enough. Surely I could tell that even from a distance? (And a good thing anyway he isn't my intended. Because a man like that is bound to be unfaithful.)

That's what I thought when they announced him to My Lady, blushing madly as I realised my ridiculous mistake.

'My son-in-law, Sir Garon, has ridden in but recently from Haddertun and is employed in raising tents and paying fees. He begs you will accept me as his envoy,' was how this fellow, Hugh de Bernay, put it to the Countess. 'But if the ladies will entrust themselves to my protection, I'll gladly be their escort to the camp.'

His voice was light and self-assured, and when he smiled he smiled not at My Lady, whose expression gave back nothing, but at me! Which made me wonder how he could have picked me out from all the other damsels in the window.

His hair was oiled and silky, combed behind his ears and parted at the crown, his dark brows constantly in movement like birds in flight – mouth dark inside the neat-trimmed beard – unsettling red lips. And even when he smiled his eyes were restless.

DANGEROUS? Is that too strong a word?

In any case the black beard and dangerous smile are all just now invisible as we clop out across the wooden bridge that spans the castle ditch. All I can see just now of Sir Hugh de Bernay are his cloak and cap above the swaying rump of his bay horse. He rides ahead like Orpheus in the legend, leading me and Maman with Hoddie on her mule, two mounted men-at-arms before us and another two behind. Down from the outer gate, across the moat and into Lewes Borough.

It rained last night and everything in sight is sparkling clean. Every stone

and cobble, every sprouting weed stand out with perfect clarity as if someone has drawn around them with a quill. It's cool enough to ride unveiled. The air smells wonderfully fresh with puddles in the roadway, sky shingled with a mass of little clouds like dapples on a pony – a splendid, helpful kind of day for our first meeting.

The cottages which crowd about the castle ditch are like a group of gossips leaning in at confidential angles. A woman in the roadway has baskets swinging from a yolk; a bundle on her head and half a dozen sharp-faced children turning back to stare – a donkey cart, a boy with a hand-barrow, two ragged beggars both with sticks, a young man and a girl caressing one another in a doorway. So much to life on every side you can't feel anything but hopeful!

Today and very soon I am to see Sir Garon, and from the moment that we meet my life will change completely! However fair or ill he looks, he is to be my husband and the first man out of water I'm to see entirely naked.

Is it wicked to look forward to a thing like that and still feel hopeful?

'Be sure, chérie, to keep your feet well covered.' (I wondered how long it would take Maman to notice how I'm riding.)

ELISE AND GARON, GARON AND ELISE sound like the names of lovers in a chanson. Like Abelard and Héloïse. 'Brave Sir Garon, storming Lewes Fortress to rescue fair Elise!'

Maman says that marriage is the only means outside a cloister by which a breeding female can avoid a mortal sin. She says that women have to take men in and push their babies out to win respect, and thinks we have to show our worth the hard way with our legs apart and on our backs. But Mother doesn't know it all. Because if knights and ladies can be courteous and loving to one another in ballads and in chansons, why not in life? Why not, if they're well-matched? Why not see marriage to a man as something positive and thrilling?

The way is steeply downhill to the Saxon Gate. My little mare needs a firm hand to keep her footing on the cobbles – as much attention as I have to spare. Which isn't much at all with all there is to see. Beyond the Priory towers the meads are blossoming; a field of moving colour! I've never seen so many tents and banners in so many hues – white, hempen, scarlet,

saffron-yellow, emerald and blue, parti-coloured, striped and quartered. Aquitaine, the fairest land in Christendom, has come to England with Duke Richard who was raised there. They say that men in Aquitaine are valued quite as much for penning ballads as for wielding swords, and I can well believe it. Pastimes in Aquitaine include great tournaments like this, and banquets, courts of love and gardens of delight. With Richard come to rule in England, everything will change!

But now we're down the hill and through the gateway to the river wharf – a powerful smell of fish and tar, the masts of ships above the roofs. And what a beastly clamour – all gabbling in Engleis (ugly, guttural language I'll never understand it). A man in leather breeches, hairy top-half bare, is calling out some impudence. I have my nose stuck in the air in the best manner of the Countess, but inside have to smile at Hoddie's answer in the same coarse tongue, and at the laugh that follows.

We've so much more of everything than they have, that it's mean to envy common folk their laughter. But I do.

'Well really!' Maman's observation to no one in particular, but doubtless aimed at me. 'It's well I had the forethought to leave our purses with My Lady's steward. For I swear I've never seen so many rogues and vagabonds at liberty together.'

'Nor I, Maman.' (Which isn't strictly true because they're worse in London.) *In fact this crowd at Lewes Port seems wonderfully lively – fishwives in clogs with herring baskets, naughty women with their hair all anyhow and breasts exposed. Hucksters selling everything from tripe to Holy Virgins carved in chalk... and see over there a mummers' show with a fantastically plumed Saint George and baggy-trousered Turk, whacking at each other with their wooden swords. The Christian and the Moslem.*

'And I wonder, can we guess which one of them will win?' Sir Hugh says drily as we pass.

The tents look older from this distance, patched and seamed from years of lying folded I suppose, the ways between them mired and stinking of horse piss...

But we've arrived and I am unprepared!

A freckled boy with a snub nose and bright red hair has Nesta's head. Sir

Hugh's already off his horse and at my stirrup offering to lift me down. (Don't look at him, Elise!)

'May I assist you to descend, My Lady, as Hades asked Persephone before he ravished her?'

The red smile in the hairy beard so horridly suggestive. The very devil in that smile! It makes you want to slap him (and I hope to heaven Maman didn't hear). I can't respond in any case without seeming ill-bred.

And thank you very much, I think I can vacate a saddle without your sort of help, Sir!

But his hands are there already, gripping me too hard, too close – a strong man's hands with heavy veins and black hair on their knuckles, and taking much too long to set me on my feet. Oh God, aren't men impossible! But there it's done, and I am free to turn my back upon the wrong man and step forward to the right one.

I'm chewing at my lips to make them red (and calm, Elise – keep calm and do this properly).

'Take heed, my love. A graceful sway, a lifted hip and slightly outthrust belly to suggest fecundity and other qualities I need not name,' hissed in a whisper that Sir Hugh can hardly fail to hear. Maman's convinced that my appearance at first sight will make a difference through the years ahead. 'For recollect, my dear, we're dealing with a young man who very likely hasn't the first notion of what a wife brings to marriage.'

I am presentable, I checked in my steel mirror at the fortress. Attractive modesty is what we're aiming for, but without seeming aloof – and silence, because I'm apt to speak before I think, as Mother's all too fond of pointing out.

The tent flap's up and the sergeant is announcing our arrival, speaking loudly (something pompous. I can't listen while I'm concentrating on the graceful sway.) Now then – a quick glance underneath the lashes...

His mother, Lady Constance, is tall and angular in a sage gown (and looking rather stern). A little whey-faced girl of six or seven summers presses to her skirts. Another vacant-looking woman in the shadows, probably a nurse. He's tall as well, I saw that instantly, and something in his favour, taller than Sir Hugh by half a head – straight-limbed, rawboned and standing stiffly like a soldier – long legs, a horseman's breadth of shoulder

underneath the shabby jerkin, large hands (although in keeping with the rest of him, which is more than can be said of his enormous feet!).

He does look strong, and healthy absolutely. But unfinished somehow, not so much more than a boy – short hair, unwashed and a coarse tanner's brown cut level with his ears... Look, someone's darned a moth hole in his sleeve.

I feel... I don't know what I feel, or what I'd hoped for in the first place. (Well yes I do, and it was stupid!)

I am not disappointed in the slightest, not at all. He's as God made him; not uncomely not at all – face shaven, taut and tanned, one ear that's lost its lobe – a neck that's long and muscular (Garda would approve). You really couldn't call him second best. Looks aren't the only measure of a man.

As for him, he's looking at his mother. At the tent pole. Anywhere but at his bride – and you can tell he's nervous by the way he's shuffling his feet. But you'd think he would be pleased at least to see that I am not ill favoured. Not a gorgon or a whale?

'Ladies, your presence honours us. I bid you welcome.' His French is mannerly, voice deep and hoarse – but fumbling the words. And there it is, the smile, at last! Too quick to fade but still quite nice. I think his eyes are quite expressive when he isn't frowning. His teeth are large, but not particularly clean...

Good Lord, I feel as if I'm valuing a horse!

My own smile's small and closed, the one I've practiced to make dimples. He's obviously embarrassed – ducks his ill-trimmed head at me and swallows; looking like a horse and smelling like a stable!

Let's not be silly, he was never going to be a Galahad.

But young, I'm spared a man who's old and rank.

He will look better when his hair is razor-cut.

*As in the fable he'll improve when kissed
and is persuaded to grow facial hair.*

*A neat brown beard for Garon,
not a silky black one.*

CHAPTER TWO

Some things stand out as clear as day. Others fade completely, or possibly were never very vivid in the first place? I wish I could remember everything about my first meeting with Elise. But oddly it's the hardest thing to call to mind when I look back. Since then I've taxed my brain until it aches to find a memory that I can trust, and failed completely. The more I try the more it seems to slip away. Which isn't a good start for all of this.

As I look down from heaven on the story of my life and try to work out where it all went wrong, I think perhaps that I should start with what my father said when I was seven. Or come to it as quickly as I can.

Or should I start with guilt? Because when I look down upon the world I used to share with her, to see myself as I was when I first met Elise – I am ashamed, no other word for it. I was so set on doing what I thought right. But where was judgement? Was it my fault I was such a self-regarding fool? Or is it another kind of folly to judge what I was then from where I've come to now. I mean, can any addle-pated youth of three-and-twenty expect to understand what drives him?

It takes an effort to remember what was in your mind when you have changed it since. But when I try to make some sense of what I was and how I acted, I see that I was fated from the cradle to become a soldier.

'You have to be the strongest man. D'ye hear me, Garon? The bravest and the best. It is expected of you even by the peasants.'

'But how?' my childish treble, 'How must I do it, Father?'

'We'll send you to the sergeantry at Lewes to be trained, my boy, that's how. A knight who isn't skilled in arms can count for nothing in this world, remember that. It is your destiny to fight.'

I think he only told me once, but I believe I have it word for word.

My father died soon afterwards, before he'd time to teach me any of

his skills, before I'd time to know him. I have so little of him even now. His voice in memory seems very loud, and the picture that I have of a red face behind a big moustache might be the real Sir Gervase or merely something from a child's imagination. Because the truth is that I barely knew him. I only know that from that day his words rang in my memory like verses in a chanson: 'A knight who isn't skilled in arms can count for nothing in this world, remember that. It is your destiny to fight.'

Looking back, I see there was no other path to follow. If I'd ever wanted more, or less, I can't recall it. I needed life to mean something and found the meaning in my father's words. To say mine was a simple mind would be to state the obvious.

But boyhood? How should I recall it? At Lewes Fortress in a world removed from all the easy freedoms of the Haddertun domain I was set to cleaning harness, trotting at the heels of any squire who'd take the time to show me what to do. Everything around me was so large and strange that I felt crushed. I learned about the casual cruelties men practice on each other, and on boys. Obedience was beaten into me by squires and sergeants who managed to find fault with almost everything I did. I learned to cope with the pain and take the blows without complaint.

But if I felt small and powerless, I knew that some day I would grow, and when I most missed my nurse, Grazilda, and wept into my pallet, I made sure that I did it in the dark and silently so no one else could hear. Soft living was for women not for boys. If ever I felt weakness through those early days in Lewes, I knew that from hard exercise I'd find the strength to make the most of the peak years of manhood when they came. That was the shield I carried to protect me. I ran headlong and fought and played at war with other boys in service to the Earl to gain the skills I needed. My small body was seldom free of half-healed cuts and bruises. But I took pride them and in the scars they left, as I sought ever to be stronger.

Was I more real then in the body of that child than I am here and now? It hardly seems so from this distance and this height above the world, and yet I have to try to understand the difference.

I hung around the castle armourers to watch them work, collecting notched blades, blunted daggers, shattered spears, learning everything there was to know about the management of weapons, my mind set on a narrow path. And when people talked of life beyond the world of arms and warfare, I closed my ears. I couldn't read or write. But I saw beauty in the sinews of an arm, the true flight of a javelin, the perfect execution of a sword-cut, and if I feared that I would never have the force or courage to become a knight, I hid the fear away. Yes, even from myself.

In due course as a spotty squire I learned to care for what the best knights care for most, their mounts, their arms and armour, and their own oiled bodies. I discovered how to sharpen weapons to so fine an edge they cut a human hair, and all the while I studied to be rigorous and brave, to be the son my father wanted.

'The four best weapons in a soldier's armoury are bone an' sinew, strength of grip, sharpness of eye,' the fortress arms-master, Guillaume, impressed on all of us who trained for knighthood. 'Look after them boys, an' they'll look after you.'

By then we drilled on horseback with cut-down lances and light shields, to stretch the sinews of our arms and shoulders at the pell. We fed our bones and muscles with red meat and gallons of fresh milk, rode at the ring and quintain, fought hand-to-hand with daggers, quarterstaves, with broad and short swords, with bucklers and with clenched fists until we scarce could stand. I learned a number of sure ways to stop a man, by winding, groining, hamstringing, disabling his sword-arm, and other ways to kill him outright. My every thought and action was of arms or warfare, and when I prayed to God I always prayed for more strength, greater valour, prowess in the field, which I believed was where true honour lay.

In time the other fortress boys came to respect me for achievement, although in truth I wasn't so much better than the rest. We sparred and wrestled in the outer ward. We played at quoits and football and at horseplay of all kinds, and talked of girls and cunts and viewed each other's male developments. It was a happy time for me in many ways,

all action and bravado. And yes, I see it now, the things that came to count with me when I'd put Haddertun behind me were the approval of my peers and my dead father.

I never learned my letters and had little skill with speech. But one day when I was twelve or thereabouts, I made bid to impress Guillaume. I can't remember rightly how I put it. But I boasted to him in so many words that more than anything I loved to fight. At which he frowned and taught me something else I kept in mind for years: 'You eat for pleasure, sing for pleasure, fuck for pleasure,' he allowed. 'But ye don't fight for love of it, you fight to win.'

Adult life began when as a lanky lad of fourteen I took the Sacrament for the first time, and brought my own colt from the Haddertun domain to train. I lost part of an ear that year and bled a pond of blood. But it had healed by the spring following, when I was dubbed a knight. They shut me in the castle chapel for a night of vigil, bathed me, dressed me in my father's hauberk, buckled on his German broadsword and pushed me forward to assume my right to fight for Church and King. I felt My Lord of Warenne's blade rest on my shoulder for the accolade. I placed my hands between his palms to swear my solemn oaths of fealty, and took for my knight-motto the single word, 'Victoire'.

And yet in spite of all, my title of Sir Garon felt like my father's linkmail hauberk, something I must grow to fit.

At twenty-one I came of age, and through my service to the Earl was granted profits from my mother's manor. She kissed me formally and handed me the key of Haddertun as its Seigneur, a thing which I confess I valued more for its displacement of her second husband than for the income it would bring me. By then my skill at arms had earned me a reputation with the soldiery, and I enjoyed the fellowship of men whose thoughts and actions were as simple as my own. That's one side of the story. The other was that I had grown into an oaf to whom the exercise of violence was as natural as the movement of his bowels.

And something else. Soon after my majority the Old King died, and

that same year his heir, Duke Richard of Anjou, licensed a trépignée, a tournament of mounted knights, to meet at Lewes on Saint Augustine's Day to raise funds for his enterprise to save Jerusalem. For me it had to be the perfect chance to show my prowess as a knight.

And something else again. Because if this is Judgement Day, I have to make confession that of all the things that were to change my life that year, my marriage seemed the least important. I didn't choose the girl. She had been chosen for me, and looking down it isn't hard to see that at the time my thoughts were elsewhere, with weaponry and preparations for the fray. I had no time to think about the marriage and was content to leave arrangements to my mother. Sir Hugh, she said, would fetch the damsel from the fortress for inspection. All I need do was bid her welcome.

'And try to look a little pleased while you're about it,' she advised.

I see myself inside that tent when I look back. But I don't see Elise, at least not clearly. What was it that she wore? Something rosy-coloured? I know she had a pink gown for the wedding, that may have been the one. It is so difficult when you look back to separate the things you've seen at different times. I'm sure I must have seen that she was small, because she always made me feel a giant beside her. Her hair? I couldn't say for sure, but seem to think that it was gathered up into some kind of veil arrangement? I would have noticed she was fair, that she was small and fair with ripe breasts and a dairymaid's complexion. But none of it quite adds up to a picture of her in the tent. 'Though now I come to think, there was something a little odd about the way she stood, a pose, the kind of thing that damsels practice for effect?

No one had taught me how to greet a lady. So maybe it's as well that I've forgotten what I said. Some kind of clumsy welcome prompted by my mother? Or something even more block-headed of my own? I'm not sure that I even smiled when she presented me with that ridiculous and useless saddle.

Can I remember how we parted? Or her return to Lewes? Or whether Hugh escorted them back to the fortress. I fear I can't. Because the next thing I

recall is seeing her up in the Earl of Warenne's stand when we rode out to take our places on the field of tournament.

Now that I do remember...

Pennons of all colours – sunlight glinting on armour, freshly painted shields, moving figures, horses, bustle. Marvellous!

But here he comes, straight as a candle in the saddle with my green favour on his arm. The black horse is enormous (and we know what's said of men who ride big horses!). And just look at him – so fierce and proud! So thrilled to play the warrior he's positively trembling with excitement!

In just a moment, any moment he'll look up to see if I am watching – the thought I've carried with me since I dressed.

'Lady, I'll strive for you alone.' That's what I'd like him to be thinking – and the thing about a good imagination is that you can take it anywhere you like. (When I was little I pretended sometimes to be Princess Sabra, defended from the dragon by Saint George.) But here's Sir Hugh again on his big dappled grey, helm off for homage to the Earl.

You'd have to be entirely blind to miss the grace of that man's figure on a horse.

*And now they're looking up, both looking up at once
to see me leaning forward. Both men smiling.*

Would it seem ill-bred if I waved?

She was seated in the west stand at the very front, leaning out with one hand on the rail. At least I have that picture clear in mind. On either side of her were our two mothers, a place or two from where the Earl and Countess sat beneath the blazon of Warenne. It was her green scarf around my arm which prompted me to seek her out, and smirk to think where other knights tied married ladies' favours for good fortune.

She raised a hand and smiled. I thought at me until I heard de Bernay laugh. That's when I really saw her first, and how I see her now. Her gown was blue.

But I'm already out of order, because the tournament began for me much earlier that day.

By dawn my father's old campaign tent was wet with condensation. I'd barely slept, but watched the canvas turn from black to grey before I rose and dragged a cloak about my shoulders.

Outside, a track wound through the camp to the defendants' wooden bar-gate, padlocked to horsemen at this hour but not to barefoot youths. The field of combat lay six hundred paces long and near half as wide, enclosed on all sides by the old town walls, the river and the Priory. In winter-time the place was waterlogged, so damp the Priory monks were said to have webbed feet and sooty balls from hoisting skirts to smoking fires. But by the early dawn of Saint Augustine's Day the field was fit for action.

White mist blanketed the river and my feet left footprints in the dew. Watching jackdaws flutter like black rags above the Priory roofs, I thought of Raoul in his canvas stall and reached in my imagination to stroke his silky neck. Staring at an empty field I heard the blare of clarions and felt the quake of the first charge, thirty against thirty, war-hardened veterans and untried knights like me, thundering full tilt from North to South and South to North to crash together in sight of those to whom they owed allegiance – defendants for the Earl and throne of England, appellants for Archbishop Baldwin and the Church.

For weeks I'd trained for this one day. You could say all my life. 'Oh Lord God for whom all things are possible,' I prayed, 'help me succeed, to suffer wounds without complaint and be deserving of the victor's crown. Help me to win more ransoms in the cause of the crusade, than any other knight!'

I didn't mention Hugh by name, although of course if I'd been God I would have known that's who I meant. But then again, if I'd been God and heard a young fool praying in a misty field to be the first knight of the tournament, I'd probably have laughed at his effrontery and made a note to teach the fool a lesson.

The Priory bell tolling for prime office roused the camp, and others were abroad when I returned, reviving fires and coaxing horses out into the thoroughfares between the tents. Men strolled about half-naked, making breakfast, shouting through the woodsmoke. Inside my father's tent Sir Hugh lay face-down on his pallet with the firm hands of his squire, Fremund, working on the muscles of his back and shoulders. He opened one eye as I entered, then the other.

'Well now, you've been to pace the field then have you, boy, to see the way it lies?' he said. 'Don't tell me that you've planned the trépiignée on our behalf whilst we poor dormice slept?'

'No point in asking if you know the answer,' I said rudely, and went on to tell him I had studied where the pitfalls were most like to be, and prayed for victory in the coming fray. Although whatever confidence and depth I tried to put into my voice when I addressed that man, it somehow always managed to sound false, and looking back I see just what a walking invitation I was to de Bernay.

'Ah prayers!' He stretched and yawned, and as he settled back more comfortably I caught the rank scent of his sweat. They say that all of us are woven on the same loom. But that's not true for Hugh smelled differently to me or any of my flesh and blood, and in the difference lay a challenge. Something animal and violent.

'So useful prayers, I always think, against a mounted force of desperate men.' Closing his eyes again he turned his head into his arms. 'I take it then that you've rehearsed the moves you practice in the tilt yard, down to the final flourish?'

I told him sullenly that it was we trained for, and it struck me as I did so that his strong black hair was thinning at the crown. With any luck, I thought, in ten years he'll be bald!

Six years had passed already since he'd made his choice between continued service to the Earl of Warenne or marriage to a widow at his lord's disposal, my mother Lady Constance – and although she's half as old again as him, de Bernay saw his way ahead. His own forbears held Haddertun before they backed the wrong side in the Empress Mathilde's War and lost the manor to my father, Sir Gervase. So by marrying my mother he not only gained life-tenure of the Manor of Meresfeld, which

she'd inherited in her own right, but if I died, a claim on Haddertun as well though any children he could get on her. For Hugh the match made perfect sense. But not for me, with his existence robbing me of tithes and any son that either of us sired a threat in some way to the other.

His marriage and the way he smelled gave me two reasons to dislike the man. The third was something meaner. Come Garon and confess it, you were jealous. There's no earthly point in trying to remember, if you can't face the fact that you were jealous of Hugh's confidence and handsome face, the ease with which he took your father's place at bed and board. All right, you felt wrong-footed by him. You thought he talked too much and laughed too readily. But if he'd been less skilful with a sword and lance, less comfortable in his own skin – be honest, wouldn't you have liked him more?

'So are we to infer that lances are the only weapons you know how to use?'

De Bernay chose the very moment that I dropped my cloak and beckoned Jos for my massage, to raise his head and eye my naked body. 'You'll pardon me for wondering. But will that eager bride of yours approve so short a spear do we suppose?'

It was one of those times that stay with you, that you can't forget, another link in the long chain that's drawn me to this place. He mocked me openly before our squires, and like a dog that can't stand being laughed at my first thought was to turn and hide. My second was to use my fists to smash Hugh's handsome face in. But all I did when it came down to it was scowl and flop onto my pallet, scarlet to the hairline, knowing I was outmanoevered.

'And do try not to grind your teeth, boy,' I heard him murmur from the hairy cradle of his arms. 'It sounds so unattractive.'

We dipped our lances side by side before the Earl and Countess, Hugh and I, as the appellants dipped theirs on the far side of the field for Archbishop Baldwin – a small man in black and white who sat with his secretaries and chaplains in a stand garlanded with bright red poppies to represent the blood of Thomas Becket.

Returned to England for the trépnée and coronation, the Earl had come by road from Dover to join his lady at the fortress on the west bank of the River Ouse, Baldwin came up-river from Newhaven to his manor of South Malling on the further bank. Word of the tournament they were to hold between the two had spread like wildfire through the County. Spectators thronged the wooden barriers, burgesses rubbing shoulders with the peasants. Sunhats sprouted everywhere like mushrooms, some on children perched up on their fathers' shoulders; and on a scaffold a small group of umpires sat apart, two knights from either camp to see fair play with scribes to keep a tally of the scores.

'Knights of Sussex, hear the laws by which you may compete!' A clarion fanfare announced a mounted herald in the Warenne livery of blue and gold, a man as slight as the archbishop chosen for his mighty lungpower.

'By order of Prince Richard, by grace of God the rightful Lord of England,' he bellowed with his hands cupped round his mouth. 'No combatant on pain of death may bring onto the field of tournament a boar-spear, bow or arbalest, a dagger or a slash-hook. Knights may only fight with lances, swords and axes, flails and bludgeons. Squires must go unarmed. Those taken at a disadvantage must be dragged by main force to the stakes erected and there remain until their ransoms are agreed, with one half of all payments, or half the value of their confiscated steeds and armour to be rendered to the Honour of Warenne for contribution at Exchequer to the Kings' Croisade.

'Knights of Sussex, know that you are subject to your Sovereign Lord to do his bidding, and swear this day in presence of this great assembly to bear fealty to Lord Richard, King Elect.' The herald's face was flushed, eyes like a throttled cat's. But none of us were free to arm until the words he'd memorised had been repeated.

'I do so swear in life and limb and earthy honour,' I recited with the others. 'I swear against all men and women who might live and die, to be answerable to Richard Lord of England, to keep his peace and justice in all things.'

And the girl up in the west stand with the Earl and Countess? The girl I was to marry? She was no more to me just then than a figure on

the far side of a hill I'd yet to climb. Just then all I could think of was my own tense body, feeling as I'd only felt before at point of climax with a whore. Panting for achievement!

I know that I was panting, for I'm panting now as I re-live it. 'VICTOIRE!' I couldn't write the word. But it unfolded like a banner in my brain!

Our squires were waiting at the barriers to arm us, my raddle-pated Joscelin and Hugh's Fremund.

'Well don't just stand there, witless,' I called to Jos as we rode up. 'I'll have the short arms and the gauntlets first, and then the shield.'

There's something comforting about the bulk, the sheer weight of armour once you have it on. All I could see of Master Jos as he reached up to tie the flail and bludgeon to the saddle rings and then to lace the gauntlets, was a freckled forehead and a nest of bright red curls.

'Shield and helm, all here My Lord,' he said.

I looped the shield guige round my neck, then asked once more if he would check Raoul's girths.

'Are both bands...?'

'Tight enough and sound?' said Jos, who had a knack of knowing what I was about to say before I said it. He skipped back nimbly in the nick of time from Raoul's savage teeth, to offer me the helm with a broad grin. 'Tight as a nun's cunt as a fact.'

'As soon as I'm accoutred then, you'd best trot up the rail to where the first brunt's like to be,' I told him, busy with my straps. 'If I should fall to an attaint, you know what you must do, Jos? You'll not...?'

'Fail you, Sir Garry? Never!'

I blinked. 'Am I so...?'

'Obvious? No Sir, not by any means.' My squire's eyes, as round as shillings blue as periwinkles, considered me with helm and shield in place and chain-link aventail pulled up to guard my chin. A natural child of Father's brother Anfrid, he'd known me since we both were boys and followed me with cheerful constancy through every stage of training – known me and supported me with cheerful constancy through every step of my career.

‘Sharp’s the word an’ quick’s the motion, Sir.’ He handed up the lance, much heavier than those we’d used for practice and painted in a spiral, red and green.

Another beaming smile. A friendly pat for Raoul’s twitching flank, and off Jos ran to do my bidding.

Anyone on Raoul’s back must look the part provided he could hold him. I shortened reins and wheeled to join the line of our defendants ready for the charge. Five lances to each line. Six lines deployed across the field to face the same formation at the other end. Two horses in our team were close to shying.

I yawned as I’d been taught to do, to ease the tension in my lungs. *No man is worth his salt, I told myself, until he’s given and received a blow.*

‘Defendants show your mettle!’ our leader, Rob de Pierpoint, shouted over the heads of the excited horses. ‘Remember men, we fight in company, each one of us accountable for four confrères. We win by looking to each other’s interests. A man who fights alone may fall to rear attack, and we’ve no use for fallen heroes.’

I saw the other knights stare sightlessly as I did, saving energy for all that lay ahead. Even now and at this distance, even here where all about me is serene, I can still feel the pulse, forge-hammer heartbeat, burning breath, sinew, muscle, blood and brain – the trembling muscles of my thighs? Or Raoul’s, gloved in satin, shivering beneath me? It scarce mattered which. I was as one with the great destrier whose pedigree I could recite back to Seville, and in another line to Duke William’s battle stallion, Mauger. We were as one, Raoul and I, sharing the need to use our fear to spur us into action.

If I fear pain I’ll never show it. I fear no man and nothing save dishonour.

The trumpeters put up their clarions to catch the morning sun. A sound like rising wind passed through the stands.

Big breath and steady, Garon. VICTOIRE for the taking!

And am I there? Or simply watching and recalling? Is there still something in me of the foolhardy youth I was that day, taut as a bowstring, knowing the defeat of fear was what made men, trembling on the brink of violence?

WIN GARON! WIN THE CONTEST! I'd willingly have given the fingers of my left hand to achieve it!

The ear-splitting trumpet blast struck like a bolt from heaven, resounding and rebounding from the hills and down the valley to the sea. The crowd's roar reached a bestial pitch, as first the Earl, then the archbishop signalled for the action to begin.

The strain of waiting over. A wall of sound. My sharp-spurred heels and Raoul's response a single impulse, springing forward to a canter which in five paces had become a full-stretch gallop, grinding his great frame up to the speed that he was bred for.

The earth beneath us shuddered. Six muscled legs, two thumping hearts, four bouncing balls and any number of bared teeth. We were unstoppable!

HAVOC! HAVOC! HAVOC!

My own voice yelling with my friends. I felt invincible – like William Conqueror, the Cid of Vivar, Richard of Anjou and Sir Gervase my father all rolled into one. Charging with the heroes of my dreams!

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