

Prologue

There was so much noise in the market-place, such a hubbub of shouting and chaffering, that Herleva dragged herself to the window of her chamber and stood peeping down through the willow-slats that made a lattice over the opening. Market days brought a mob of people to Falaise from all the neighbouring countryside. There were franklins with slaves driving in the swine and cattle for sale; serfs with eggs and furmage spread on cloths upon the ground; great men's stewards and men-at-arms; knights' ladies on ambling palfreys; burghers from the town; and young maidens in troops of four or five together with little spending-silver in their purses, but full of exclamations for every novelty that met their eyes.

Wandering pedlars with their pack-horses had tempting wares to show: brooches of amethyst and garnet; bone combs; and silver mirrors burnished until one might see one's face in them as clearly as in the beck that ran below the Castle. There were stalls piled high with candles, and oil, and smear; others with spices from the East spreading an aromatic scent: galingale, cloves, cubebs, and sweet canelle. Hard by, the food-merchants had set up their shelds, and here could be bought lampreys and herrings, fresh caught; such rare stores as ginger, and sugar, and pepper; jars of Lombard mustard; and loaves of wastel-bread, each one bearing the baker's seal. Beyond these a chapman with copper-pots, and chargeours for the table plied a brisk trade among the housewives; while near at hand an apothecary tried to catch the women's attention with his salves for bruises, his

dragon's water, and angelica-root, and even, slyly whispered, his love-philtres. His mild voice was drowned by the shouts of his neighbour, who spread length upon length of falding and sendal over his stall, and bade every passer-by see and feel his fine cloths.

But the crowd was thickest round the foreign peddlars, who had stranger merchandise to offer. There was jet brought from outremer which would drive away serpents if one heated it; finer cloth than falding held up by the Frisian merchants; cunningly wrought cups and jewels shown by dark Byzantines; orfrey, embroidered by Saxon women in England; and any number of trinkets, and ribands for the binding of one's hair.

As she caught sight of one of these bunches, invitingly held up to a knot of maids below her window, Herleva lifted the heavy plait that lay over her shoulder, wondering whether a scarlet riband would look well twisted round it, and whether my lord Robert would think her pretty decked out in red. But nobody, not even so hot a lover as my lord Count, could think her pretty just now, she reflected. She was heavy with child, very near her time, and my lord Count was away in Rouen, waiting upon the pleasure of his father, good Duke Richard of Normandy. She wished that her pains might start, and the birth be soon over, so that she might ride up the steep hill again to the Castle that crowned one of its crags, and call upon the men-at-arms to open: open to Herleva the Beautiful, daughter of Fulbert, burgess of Falaise, and mistress of my lord Count of Hiesmes. Involuntarily her eyes turned towards the Castle, which she could just see, high above the squat wooden houses of the town and half-hidden by the trees that climbed its hill.

She thrust out her lower lip a little, picturing to herself the haute ladies of the Court at Rouen. She felt ill-used, and had begun to dwell upon her fancied wrongs, when her attention was diverted by a troop of minstrels who had begun to play quite near the house. They had come to the market on the chance of a few coins from the younger and lighter-hearted of the crowd, and perhaps a bite of supper afterwards in one of the rich

burgher's halls. The harper started to sing a popular chanson, while the juggler in his train cast up plates and balls into the air, and caught them all one after the other, faster and faster, until Herleva's eyes grew round with wonder.

From the window Herleva could see her father Fulbert's sheld, with the furs hanging up in it, and her brother Walter haggling with a burgher over the price of a fine rug of martenskins. Close beside was a chapman who held up trinkets before the eyes of several envious maidens. If Count Robert had been there he would have bought his love the bracelet of hammered gold which the pedlar kept on showing, thought Herleva.

The remembrance of my lord Count made her discontented, and she moved away from the window, already weary of the bustle below it.

At the far end of the room a wooden door gave directly on to the twisting stair that led down to the hall, the principal dwelling-place of the house. No doubt her mother was busy preparing supper for Fulbert and Walter, but Herleva had no mind to go down to help her. The mistress of the son of the Duke of Normandy, she thought, had nothing to do with cooking-pots and greasy patins.

She crossed the floor with lagging steps, pushing the rushes with her feet, and laid herself down on the bed of skins against the wall. It was a bed for a Duchess, truly, made of good wood, and covered over with a bearskin which Fulbert had said grudgingly was more fit for Count Robert than for his *mie*. Herleva snuggled her cheek into the long fur, and smoothed it with her little hot hand, thinking of Count Robert, and how he called her, in his extravagant way, his princess.

Outside the sun was sinking slowly behind the heaths that lay beyond the town. A beam of gold came in through the willow-lattice, and struck the foot of the bed, making the brown hairs of the bearskin glint to an auburn glow. The hum of chatter, and the noise of the horses' hooves, the occasional sharp sound of a voice raised above the general hubbub still continued in the market-place, but it had grown less with the sinking of the sun,

and would soon cease altogether. Peasants from outlying villages were departing already from Falaise to reach home in the safe daylight; the chapmen were packing their bundles; and a stream of mules and sumpters was wending its way under the window towards the gates of the town.

The measured clop of the hooves made Herleva drowsy; she presently closed her eyes, and after some restless twisting and turning upon the bed, dropped off into an uneasy slumber.

Gradually the shaft of sunshine disappeared, and with the deepening of the shadows the noise in the market-place died away. The last pack-horse was led slowly past the house; and the merchants who lived within the town were all busy fastening up their shutters, and comparing each his day's fortune with his neighbours'.

The light faded quite away; the cool of the evening stole into the chamber; Herleva shivered and moaned in her sleep, troubled by strange dreams.

She dreamed that as she lay a tree grew up out of her womb, spreading steadily till it became a giant among trees, with great branches stretched out like grasping arms. Then she perceived, in her dream, that Normandy lay before her gaze, even to the remotest corner of the Côtentin, and the far outpost of Eu. She saw the grey, tumbling sea, and was afraid, and cried out. The cry was muffled in her sleep, but beads of sweat started on her brow. Land lay beyond the sea; she saw it plainly, and knew it for England. And while she lay sweating in a strange terror she saw that the branches of the tree stretched out further and further till they over-shadowed both England and Normandy.

She screamed, and started up on the bed, pressing her hands to her eyes. Her face was wet with her fright; she wiped away the sweat with her fingers, and dared at last, as she realized that she had awakened from a nightmare, to look about her.

Her mother, Duxia, was standing in the doorway with a rushlight in her hand. 'That was a great shout I heard you make,' she said. 'I thought the pains had come upon you, and here I find you sleeping.'

Herleva found that she was very cold. She pulled up the bearskin round her shoulders, and looked at Duxia in a boding way. She said in a low voice: — ‘I dreamed that a tree grew up out of my womb, mother, and no babe.’

‘Yes, yes,’ Duxia replied, ‘we have all our fancies at these times, daughter.’

Herleva clasped the bearskin closer round her, with her hands crossed between her breasts. ‘And as I lay,’ she said in a hushed voice, ‘I saw two countries spread before me, and these were our land of Normandy in all its might, and the land of the English Saxons, over the grey water.’ She let go one hand from the bearskin and pointed where she thought England might be. The bearskin slipped back from her shoulders, but she seemed no longer to feel the chill in her flesh. She fixed her eyes upon Duxia, and in the flickering rushlight they glowed queerly. ‘And the tree of my womb put forth huge branches that were as hands that would seize and hold fast, and these stretched out on either side me till Normandy and England both lay beneath them, cowering in their shadow.’

Duxia said: ‘Well, that’s a strange dream indeed, but meanwhile here is your father sitting down to his supper, and if you don’t bestir yourself the pottage will be cold before you come to it.’

But Herleva still sat motionless upon the bed, and Duxia, coming further into the room, perceived that she had a strange look in her face as of one who sees marvels beyond ordinary folks’ vision. She laid her hands suddenly about her middle and said in a voice that had grown strong and clear: ‘My son will be a King. He shall grasp and hold, and he shall rule over Normandy and England, even as the tree stretched out its branches.’

This seemed a great piece of nonsense to Duxia. She was just about to make some soothing remark when Herleva gave a cry of pain, and straightened her body, with her muscles stiff to meet the sudden hurt.

‘Mother! Mother!’

Duxia began to bustle about her daughter at that, and both of

them forgot all about the dream and its meaning. ‘There, child, that is nothing. You will have worse pain before you are better,’ Duxia said. ‘We will send out to summon our neighbour Emma, for she’s a rare one at a lying-in, and I warrant has helped more babes into the world than you will ever bear. Lie still; there is time enough yet.’

She had no leisure to think any more about Herleva’s prophecy, for Fulbert was calling for the boiled meats downstairs, and at the same time Herleva was clinging to her with both hands, very much afraid, and expecting every moment to undergo another such agony. Duxia found that she had her hands full for the next hour, but presently Emma came into the hall, and after she had seen Herleva and said that they might look for nothing for some hours yet, she helped Duxia clear away the dirty platters from the table, and directed the serfs how they should place the straw and the skins for the master’s bed.

Fulbert was fond of Herleva, but he was a sensible man, and he had a hard day’s work before him on the morrow, so that he thought he would be a great fool if he lost his sleep for nothing more serious than a lying-in. Moreover, he had never quite liked his daughter’s position, and though none of the neighbours considered it anything but an honour for Herleva to be the mistress of so puissant a seigneur as my lord Count of Hiesmes, he still could not feel at ease about it. As he made himself ready for the night, he felt that he would have been better pleased if the child to be born had been the lawful son of an honest burgher instead of a noble bastard.

When everything was set in order in the hall, and all the household disposed round the master for sleep, Duxia and Emma went off up the stairs to the room where Herleva lay whimpering upon her fine bedstead.

Emma was the wisest woman in Falaise. She knew the signs of the stars, and she could read omens, and foretell great happenings, so that presently as the two women sat on stools by a small brazier of charcoal Duxia was minded to tell her of Herleva’s dream. The two coiffed heads drew close together, and

the red glow from the brazier showed the lined faces intent and knowing. Emma nodded, and clicked her tongue in her cheek. It was very likely, she said, and she went on to tell Duxia of other such visions which she had seen happily fulfilled.

An hour after midnight the child was born. A cock in some shed not far away, perhaps catching sight of a star through a chink in the door, crowed once, and then was silent.

There was a pallet of straw in a corner of the room near the brazier. Emma wrapped the babe loosely round in a cloth and laid him down upon this pallet, where he would be safe while she turned back to Herleva. When Duxia presently went to pick up the child she found that he had thrust his arms from out of the cloth, and was clutching the straw on which he lay in both his fists. She was glad to see that he was so lusty an infant, and called to Emma to admire his strength. Perhaps the prophecy was running in Emma's head, or perhaps she had never seen a newborn child so vigorous. 'Mark what I say, Duxia!' she exclaimed, 'that child will be a great prince. See how he takes seisin of the world! He'll grasp everything that comes in his way and out of it, you see if he doesn't.'

Her words reached Herleva, who seemed to herself to be sinking leagues deep into a heavy swoon. She said faintly: 'He will be a King.'

As soon as she was well enough to think and plan again Herleva sent for Walter, and insisted that he should ride to Rouen to tell the Count of the birth of his son. Walter was too fond of her to resent her imperious ways, but Fulbert, who needed him to dress a couple of otter-skins, thought it a great piece of nonsense, and was very near to forbidding him to go.

When Walter came back from Rouen Herleva was up and about again, and he had scarcely set foot inside the hall when she pounced on him, asking a dozen questions at once, and wondering how he could have been away so long.

'It was not easy to come at my lord Count,' Walter explained, in his patient way. 'There are so many great seigneurs about him

in the Castle at Rouen, and the pages would not let me pass the doors.'

'But you saw him?' Herleva said eagerly.

'Yes, I saw him at last as he was on his way to a great hunting of deer.'

At that Herleva broke in to ask how my lord had looked, and what spirits he was in, and what he had said when he heard the news. Walter answered all these questions as well as he was able, but he could only say that my lord looked much as he always did, which Herleva considered no answer at all. Then he fished out of his wallet a girdle of gold links set with matrix, and gave it to his sister, saying that my lord had sent it as a token of his love for her, and had bid him tell her to keep the child safe against his coming.

But after all it was not until some time after the child's baptism that Count Robert came back to Hiesmes. Word was brought to Herleva that he had ridden into Falaise and up the Castle hill at the head of a great train of followers.

At once Herleva and Duxia fell into a flurry of preparation, redding up the hall, strewing fresh rushes, and sweeping up the grey wood-ash that was blown over the floor from the fire of pine-logs in the middle of the hall. Herleva dressed her babe in a robe woven by her own hands, and when that was done she chose a blue robe for herself, which she drew in round her hips with my lord's girdle. Even Fulbert was moved to change his leather tunic for one of fine wool, and he sent Walter outside to see that enough wine and barley-beer lay in the cellar for the Count's refreshment.

These preparations were hardly completed when a great clatter of hooves and jingle of horse-trappings announced my lord's approach. Fulbert and Walter ran out to receive him, and found a cavalcade at the house-door, my lord, in his boisterous humour, having brought several noble seigneurs along with him, and a great many servants.

The lord Count bestrode a black stallion. He was a fine man, with close-knit limbs, and a small head set proudly on his neck.

He wore a mantle of royal purple, clasped on his right shoulder with a large ouch of onyx. He carried his sword at his side, and his tunic, which showed where the mantle fell away, was red, purpled with a design dancetté. Gold bracelets, each more than an inch broad, encircled his arms. The hood of his mantle was thrown back, and his head was uncovered. His hair was cut short, Norman fashion, and was as black as a crow's wing.

He swung himself down from his horse, and Walter, who had knelt to receive him, jumped up to take the bridle. My lord Count clapped him on the shoulder in the familiar way he used toward men whom he trusted, and spoke a jovial word of greeting to Fulbert. Then he turned to the lords who had dismounted with him, and called out: — 'Come, seigneurs, you shall see my fine son of whom I hear so much! In with you, fair cousin; I will promise you a right welcome.' He caught the man he had addressed by the arm, and swept into the hall with him.

The house seemed dark after the bright sunlight in the market-place. My lord Count halted on the threshold, blinking in the smoke of the fire, and looking about him for Herleva.

She came to him with a quick step, and at once he let go his cousin's arm, and gripped her round the waist, lifting her off her feet in his hardy embrace. Some soft lovers' talk passed between them, too low to be heard by the men who stood behind the Count.

'Lord, you shall see your son,' Herleva said, and she took Count Robert by the hand, and led him to the cradle in the corner where the babe lay.

Count Robert, whom men called the Magnificent, seemed to fill the hall with his splendour. His mantle brushed the rushes into little heaps as he passed, and the jewels on his arms glittered as the firelight caught them. Still holding Herleva's hand he stood beside the cradle and looked down at the child of his begetting. There was some eagerness in his eyes, as he bent over the cradle, and a chain which he wore round his neck slipped forward, and dangled above the child. The babe stretched out clutching hands towards the treasure, and as though wondering

whence it came he lifted his eyes to Count Robert's face, and gave him back stare for stare. It was seen that the two pairs of eyes were much alike, and that the child had the same dogged look in his face that all the Norman Dukes had had as their birthright since the time of Rollo. A kinsman of the Count, young Robert, the son of the Count of Eu, whispered as much to the black-avised man at his elbow. This was William Talvas, Lord of Belesme. Talvas, peering over the Count's shoulder at the child, muttered something that sounded like a curse, and upon young Robert of Eu looking at him in surprise, he tried to turn it off with a laugh, saying that he read hatred in the child's eyes, and saw therein the ultimate ruin of his house. This did not seem very likely to young Robert, and he suspected that the Lord of Belesme had drunk too deeply of the barley-mead up at the Castle, for whereas the babe before them was a landless bastard, William Talvas held lands in France and in Normandy, and was accounted an ill man to cross. He looked so blankly that Talvas coloured, and moved away, himself scarcely understanding the meaning of his sudden outburst.

Count Robert was delighted with his son. 'Why, this is very bone of my bone!' he said. He turned his head, and once more addressed the man whose arm he had taken outside. 'Edward, tell me if I have not bred a noble son!'

The Saxon Prince moved forward, and looked smilingly down at the babe. In contrast to these Normans he was very fair, with long, blond ringlets, and a pink complexion. His eyes were of northern blue, rather weak, but very amiable. His younger brother, Alfred, who stood now in the doorway, was of the same type, but he had more purpose in his face, and he did not smile so easily. Both bore themselves proudly, as indeed they had a right to do, being the sons of the dead King Ethelred of England. One day, when Cnut, the Danish usurper, was safe under the sod, they meant to go back to England, and then Edward would be a king. Just now, as he looked up at Count Robert, he was an exile, a dependant of the Norman Court.

'You shall swear to love my son well, all of you,' Count Robert

said, with a challenging yet genial look round. 'He is little, but he will grow, I promise you.'

Edward touched the child's cheek with his finger. 'Indeed, I will love him as mine own,' he said. 'He is very like you.'

Count Robert beckoned up his half-brother, and made him take the child's hand. 'You shall honour your nephew, William,' he said laughingly. 'See how he grabs at your finger! He will be a mighty fellow.'

'It is always so with him,' Herleva said softly. 'He grasps as though he would never let go.' She would have liked to have told the Count of her dream, but in the presence of these nobles she did not care to speak of it.

'A fierce boy,' William said, jesting. 'We shall have to look to ourselves when he is grown.'

Count Robert pulled his great sword from its sheath. 'A warrior, if he is a true son of mine,' he said, and laid the sword down beside the child.

The flash of a jewel on the hilt caught the babe's eye, and he left stretching his hands to the necklace round Count Robert's neck, and at once grasped the sword by the cross hilt. Duxia, who was hovering in the background, quite overcome by such a noble assembly in her house, could scarcely restrain an exclamation of horror at the sight of the gleaming steel within the child's reach. But Herleva looked on smiling.

The babe had one of the cross-pieces of the hilt fast in his hands, whereat there was much laughter from the watching barons.

'Said I not so?' Count Robert demanded. 'He will be a warrior, by the Face!'

'Has he been received into the Church?' Edward asked gently.

He had been baptized a month ago, Herleva said, in the Church of Holy Trinity.

'What name is he given?' inquired Robert of Eu.

'He is called William, lord,' Herleva answered, crossing her hands on her breast.

'William the Warrior!' laughed the Count.

‘William the King,’ Herleva whispered.

‘William the Bastard!’ muttered the Lord of Belesme beneath his breath.

Herleva slipped her hand in my lord Count’s. They stood looking fondly at their son, William, who was called Warrior, King, and Bastard, and the child crowed with delight at his new plaything, and twined his tiny fingers about the heavy sword-hilt.

PART I

(1047–1048)

THE BEARDLESS YOUTH

‘Thus from my infancy I have been embarrassed, but
by God’s mercy I have freed myself honourably.’

Speech of William the Conqueror

One

*H*ubert de Harcourt gave his youngest son a sword upon the day that he was nineteen. ‘Though I don’t know what you will do with it,’ he said in a grumbling voice.

Raoul had worn a sword for several years, but not such an one as this, with runes on the blade, inscribed there by some forgotten Dane, and a hilt wrought with gold. He twined his fingers round the cross-pieces, and answered slowly: – ‘By God’s grace, I will put it to good use.’

His father and his half-brothers, Gilbert, and Eudes, laughed at that, for although they were fond of Raoul they thought poorly of his fighting power, and were sure that he would end his days in a cloister.

The first use he found for the sword was to draw it upon Gilbert, and that not a month later.

It fell out very simply. Gilbert, always turbulent, and, since the days of his outlawry after Roger de Toeni’s rebellion, more than ever a malcontent, had picked a quarrel with a neighbour not long before, and between these two a rather one-sided warfare raged. Raoul was too well-accustomed to such happenings to pay much heed. Raids and pillages were everyday occurrences in Normandy, and barons and vavassours, lacking a strong hand over them, behaved very much as the old Norse fighting blood directed them. If Geoffrey of Briosne chose to come in force and ravage Harcourt lands, Raoul would put on his battle-harness to defend them, but Harcourt owed fealty to the Lord of Beaumont,

a haut seigneur, and Geoffrey, who held his land of Guy, princeling of Burgundy, was disinclined to risk an engagement.

It was hardly a month after his nineteenth birthday that Raoul rode out one afternoon on his horse Verceray to the small market-town not many leagues distant from Harcourt. His errand was to buy new spurs for himself, and it pleased him on his return to take the shorter road which led him across a corner of Geoffrey de Briosne's land. Some thought of the enmity between Geoffrey's house and his flitted across his mind, but it was growing late in the afternoon, and since he hardly expected to meet any of Geoffrey's men-at-arms at this hour, he thought he might well trust to his new sword and Verceray's swift hooves to guard him from any sudden danger. He was unattended, and wore nothing over his woollen tunic but a cloak to keep him warm in the chill spring evening, so that it would probably have gone hardly with him had he chanced on any of his enemies. But it was not an enemy whom he was destined to meet.

The sun was setting when he turned aside from the rough track to follow a footpath that ran beside some freshly ploughed fields on Geoffrey's land, and the level rays made the curves of sod glow redly. An evening quiet had fallen, and now that the town had been left behind, everything was very silent. To the west the river Risle ran between sloping banks, and to the east the ground stretched undulating to some low hills in the distance that were now fading in the blue evening mist.

Raoul rode along at a gentle pace, picking his way. As he rode he whistled between his teeth, and mused on this pleasant country of the Evrecin, thinking it would be a good place for a man to live in and cultivate, if only he might be sure that his harvest would not be seized by a hungry neighbour, or his house burned by pillaging soldiery. This thought was in his mind when his attention was caught by a red glow a little way to the east of him, behind some trees that grew in a dell beyond the ploughed lands. There was a smell of burning carried on the light wind, and as he looked more closely he saw the quick leap of flames, and thought that he heard someone scream.

He reined Verceray in, hesitating, for he was not upon his own ground, and it was no concern of his if a serf's hut caught fire. Then it flashed across his mind that perhaps some men of Harcourt might be responsible, and impulsively he set Verceray at a canter across the fields that separated him from the vale behind the trees.

As he drew nearer he heard again, and this time unmistakably, that tortured scream. It was followed by a confused sound of laughter which made Raoul fold his lips tightly together. He knew that brutal laughter; he had heard it many times in his life, for men laughed thus wildly when they were drunk with bloodshed. He spurred Verceray on, never pausing in his indignation to consider what he should do if he were to find himself suddenly in the midst of foes.

The flames were roaring fiercely as Verceray thundered down the slope, and in the hellish light Raoul saw a cottage burning, and men in leather tunics brandishing torches. A pig ran squealing from out the burning house into the garth; one of the soldiers rushed after it shouting a hunting cry, and drove his lance through its back. Tied to a sapling by his wrists was a peasant, obviously the owner of the ruined cottage. His tunic was slit from neck to girdle, and his back was bleeding. His head rolled on his shoulder, and there was foam on his grey lips. Two men-at-arms were flogging him with their stirrup-leathers, while another stood by holding a dishevelled woman by her arms. She seemed half demented; her dress was torn across her shoulders, and her hair, escaped from the close cap, streamed about her in wispy strands. Just as Raoul came crashing down into the middle of the group she shrieked out for God's sake not to kill her good man, for she would fetch her daughter, even as the noble seigneur commanded.

She was allowed to go, and a man who sat astride a great roan destrier, cold-bloodedly observing all that was going on, shouted to his servants that they need not finish their victim off yet awhile if the woman kept to her word.

Raoul reined in Verceray so hard that the big horse was

wrenched back almost upon his haunches. He twisted round in the saddle to face the man on the roan destrier. 'What beastly work is this?' he panted. 'You dog, Gilbert! so it is you!'

Gilbert was surprised to see his brother. He made his horse move towards Verceray, and said with a grin: – 'Holà, and where did you spring from so suddenly?'

Raoul was still white with his passion. He pressed up to Gilbert, and said in a low voice: – 'What have you done, you devil? What reason had you? Call off your hounds! Call them off, I say!'

Gilbert laughed. 'What business is it of yours?' he said contemptuously. 'Holy Face, but you are in a rare temper! Do you know where you stand, you silly dreamer? That's not one of our men.' He pointed to the bound serf, as though he had satisfactorily explained his conduct.

'Let him go!' Raoul ordered. 'Let him go, Gilbert, or by God and His Mother, you shall rue it!'

'Let him go, indeed!' repeated Gilbert. 'He can go when that old slut brings up his daughter, perhaps, but not before. Have you gone moon-mad?'

Raoul saw that it was useless to bandy more words to and fro. In silence he wheeled Verceray about and rode up to the captive, pulling his knife from his belt to cut the rope that bound the man.

As soon as Gilbert perceived that he was in earnest he stopped laughing and cried out angrily: – 'Stand back, you young fool! Hands off my meat! Here, you! pull him off that horse!'

One of the men started forward to obey the command. Raoul's right foot left the stirrup and shot out, to crash full into the man's face, knocking him clean head over heels. No one else made any movement to come at him, for although these men were Gilbert's own bullies they knew what respect was due to Hubert de Harcourt's other sons.

Seeing that no one else was advancing upon him Raoul leaned over in the saddle and sawed quickly through the rope that bound the serf's wrists to the tree. The man was either dead, or swooning; his eyes were shut, and his face grey under the

flecks of blood. As the last strands parted he fell in a heap on to the ground, and lay there.

Gilbert had spurred angrily after Raoul, but the shrewd kick that had stretched his servant flat brought back his good humour, and instead of storming and swearing as he usually did when crossed, he clapped Raoul on the shoulder, and sang out: – ‘By the Rood, that was neatly done, cockerel! I swear I didn’t know you had it in you. But you are all wrong, you know. The dirty bondman has been hiding his daughter from me this past week, and I’ve been obliged to beat him till he’s three parts dead before I could learn where the wench was hid.’

‘Keep your foul hands off me!’ Raoul said. ‘If there were justice in Normandy you would hang, you hound!’ He slid down from Verceray’s back, and bent over the peasant. ‘I think you have killed him,’ he said.

‘One lousy knave the less, then,’ said Gilbert. ‘Not so free with your tongue, Brother Priest, or maybe I’ll school you a little as you won’t like.’ The scowl had descended on his face again, but at that moment he caught sight of the woman who had gone off to fetch her daughter, and he forgot Raoul’s audacity. ‘Aha!’ he cried, ‘she was not so far away!’ He jumped down from the saddle, and stood waiting with a flushed face and hot floating eyes for the two women to come up with him. The elder woman was dragging her daughter by one wrist, but the girl cried, and hung back, turning her pretty face away as though she were afraid to see the lustful eyes that watched her so greedily. She was very young, and frightened, and she kept calling in a fluttering voice on her father to aid her. Her startled gaze fell on his inert body, and she gave a whimper of horror. Gilbert caught her and pulled her close up to him. His eyes devoured her while she stood shivering, and he brought up one hand to her throat, fondling it. She shrank away, but his grip on her tightened, and his fingers closing on the neck of her gown tore it away suddenly from her shoulder. ‘Well, my shy bird!’ he muttered thickly. ‘So you come at last, do you? I have a mind to you, my girl, I think.’

There was a movement behind him. Gilbert jerked up his

head, but was too late to fend off Raoul's blow. It took him unawares, a tremendous buffet that knocked him clean off his balance. He and the girl went down in a sprawling heap. The girl scrambled up in a moment, and ran to where her father lay, but Gilbert stayed propped on his elbow, glaring up into Raoul's face.

Raoul's sword was out, and shortened for the thrust. 'Lie still!' he snapped. 'I have something to say before I let you up.'

'You!' Gilbert spluttered. 'You nithing! you insolent whelp! God's belly, if I do not crack your skull for this!'

'That's as may be,' Raoul retorted, 'but for the present you will be very ill-advised to move a finger. You can tell that scum you keep for bodyguard to stand still until I have said my say.' Then, as Gilbert only swore at him, he added in a matter-of-fact voice: – 'It will be better for you to do as I bid you, for by the Cross I am in a mood to stick you like a pig with no more ado!'

'Stick me? Why – why – Holy Virgin, the whelp is bewitched in good sooth!' Gilbert gasped. 'Let me up, you young fool! God's eyes, if I do not flay you for this!'

'First you shall swear to let the wench go,' said Raoul. 'Afterwards it shall be as the better man decides.'

'Let the wench go at your bidding? Ha, now you provoke me!' Gilbert cried. 'What traffic have you with the girl, Master Saint?'

'None. Do I kennel with serfs? I shall certainly slay you if you don't swear. I will count up to twenty, Gilbert, and no more.'

At the eighteenth count Gilbert left blaspheming and growled a reluctant oath. Raoul drew back his sword then. 'We will ride home together,' he said, keeping a weather-eye on his brother's sword-hand. 'Mount, there is no more for you to do here.'

Gilbert stood hesitating for a moment, his fingers gripping the hilt of his sword, but Raoul clinched the matter by turning his unarmed back to him. His first blind fury having had time to abate, Gilbert knew that he could not draw steel upon a young brother who was not expecting it. Astonishment at Raoul's conduct again consumed him, and as one in a bewildered muse he got upon his horse, trying to puzzle it all out in his slow brain.

His roving eye caught sight of the sly grins upon the faces of his men, and flushing angrily he rasped out an order to get to horse. Without waiting to see what Raoul would do next he clapped his spurs into his destrier's flanks, and set off at a canter through the trees.

The serf had recovered his senses, and lay moaning at Raoul's feet. The women, kneeling beside him, looked up in some alarm at the young knight. That he was nobly born they knew, and they were at once suspicious of him, finding it hard to believe that he could have intervened for them in a spirit of pure chivalry.

Raoul pulled his purse from his belt, and let it fall beside the peasant. 'Here is something to pay for the house,' he said awkwardly. 'You need not be afraid: he won't come back, I promise you.'

He caught Verceray's bridle, and vaulted into the peaked saddle, and with no more than a nod to the older woman, rode off in the wake of Gilbert's cavalcade.

When he came in sight of the donjon of Harcourt the first stars were winking overhead, and the light had grown dim and grey. The drawbridge was still down, and the gate-keeper was on the watch for him. He rode into the bailey, and leaving Verceray to one of the grooms, went to the main building, and ran quickly up the outside stairway to the door that opened into the great hall.

As he had expected, Gilbert was there, angrily recounting all that had befallen to his father, and to Eudes, who sat astride one of the benches, and roared with laughter. Raoul slammed the door shut behind him, and unclasped his cloak from his shoulders, tossing it into a corner. His father looked at him frowningly, but more in perplexity than in wrath. 'Well, here is a fine piece of work!' he said. 'What have you to say, boy?'

'This!' said Raoul, coming into the circle of light thrown by the candles on the table. 'I have sat at home idle too long, shutting my eyes to what I could not cure.' He glanced at Gilbert, fuming on the other side of the table, and at Eudes, still chuckling to himself. 'Year after year such beastliness as I chanced upon today happens, and men like Gilbert there, and

Eudes, ravage Normandy for their lusts, caring nothing for the weal of this Duchy.’ He laughed shortly to see Eudes staring at him with dropped jaw, and turned his eyes back to his father’s puzzled face. ‘You gave me a sword, father, and I swore that I would put it to good use. By God, I will keep that oath, and wield it for Normandy, and justice! Look!’ He whipped the sword out of the scabbard as he spoke, and holding it flat between his hands, showed them the runes inscribed on the blade. The candle flame quivered in the draught, and the light flickered along the steel.

Hubert bent to read the runes, but shook his head over the strange writing. ‘What does it mean?’ he asked. ‘I have never known.’

‘Brother Clerk will surely know,’ mocked Gilbert.

‘Yes, I know,’ Raoul said. ‘In our tongue, father, it reads thus: *Le bon temps viendra.*’

‘I do not see much to that,’ said Eudes, disappointed.

Raoul glanced across at him. ‘But I see a great deal,’ he said. He slammed the sword back into the scabbard. ‘The good time will come when men who conduct themselves like robbers are no longer allowed to go unpunished.’

Hubert looked in a startled way at Gilbert. ‘God’s feet, is the boy mad? What sort of talk is this, my son? Come, come, you have no need to be in such a heat over a parcel of bondmen! I won’t say that Gilbert is right, but as I understand it you drew steel upon him, and that is a bad business, and gives him some cause to complain of you.’

‘As to that,’ Gilbert growled, ‘I am very well able to take care of myself, and I don’t bear malice against a silly stripling, believe me. I’m glad enough to see the whelp has blood in his veins, instead of the water I always thought ran there, but for the future I’ll thank him to keep his hands off my affairs.’

‘For the future,’ Raoul said, ‘you will keep your hands off that wench, Gilbert. Let that be understood!’

‘Ah, shall I indeed?’ Gilbert said, beginning to bristle again. ‘And do you think I am very like to heed your words, you eft?’

‘No,’ replied Raoul, with a sudden smile that was like sunshine after storm, ‘but I leave for Beaumont-le-Roger at daybreak, and mayhap you will heed my lord instead of me.’

Gilbert’s hand flew to his knife. ‘You tale-bearing cur!’ he stuttered. ‘So you would get me outlawed, would you?’

Hubert pushed him back. ‘Enough of that!’ he said. ‘Raoul will tell no tales, but if these raids of yours come to Roger de Beaumont’s ears you will get short shrift. There must be an end to this wild work. As for the boy, he is enflamed, and will be the better for his supper.’

‘But what is all this talk of justice, and of leaving Harcourt?’ demanded Eudes. ‘What did the boy mean by that?’

‘Nothing,’ Hubert said. ‘It is not so serious that he need leave his home, and when they have eaten, they will clasp hands and think no more of this day’s doings.’

‘With good will,’ said Raoul promptly. ‘But by your leave, father, I shall go to Beaumont-le-Roger tomorrow.’

‘To what end?’ asked Hubert. ‘What will you do there, pray?’

Raoul did not answer for a moment, but stood looking down at the flickering candles. Presently, he raised his eyes to his father’s face, and spoke in a different voice, serious and hesitating. ‘Father, you and my brothers there have always laughed at me for being a dreamer. Perhaps you are right, and I am fit for nothing else, but my dreams are not so ill, I think. For many years I have dreamed of law in this Normandy of ours, law and justice, so that men may no longer burn and slay and pillage at will. I have thought that perhaps some day a man might rise up, with the will and the power to bring order into the Duchy. I would like to fight in his cause.’ He paused, and looked rather shyly at his brothers. ‘Once I hoped it might be our Lord of Beaumont, for he is a just man; and once I thought perhaps it would be Raoul de Gacé, because he was Governor of Normandy. But of course it could not be these. There is only one man who has power enough to curb the barons. It is his service I would enter.’

‘This is bookish talk,’ said Eudes, shaking his head. ‘Poor stuff.’

‘Holy Cross, what fancies a boy will get into his pate!’

exclaimed Hubert. ‘And who may this fine man be, my son, of your grace?’

Raoul’s brows lifted. ‘Could it be any other than the Duke himself?’ he said.

Gilbert burst out laughing. ‘The young bastard! A lad no older than yourself! Foh, here’s a piece of wool-gathering! If he keeps his coronet even it will be a strange thing, I can tell you that.’

Raoul smiled a little. ‘I saw him just once in my life,’ he said. ‘He rode into Evreux at the head of his knights, with Raoul de Gacé on his right hand. I saw his face for a minute as he passed me, and the thought came to me then that here was the man I had dreamed about. I don’t think that that one will lose – anything.’

‘Silly talk!’ Hubert said impatiently. ‘If a base-born lad of nineteen is to work his will on Normandy it will be a more marvellous thing than anything you ever dreamed about. There has been trouble enough for him already, while he was still in ward, but if it’s true he has turned off his guardians now we shall soon see a lively state of affairs in the Duchy.’ He shook his head, and went on grumbling to himself all about the folly of making a by-blow Duke of Normandy, and the child no more than eight years at that; and how he had known from the first, when Duke Robert the Magnificent made up his mind to go on that disastrous pilgrimage, what would come of it. Normandy would not be ruled by a beardless youth, and if Raoul wanted peace – which was every honest man’s desire – he had better look for a new Duke, and one more acceptable to the barons.

Eudes broke in on this monologue to ask Raoul whether he was fool enough to try and join the Duke’s court at Falaise. Raoul did not answer at once, but when he did he spoke so earnestly that even Gilbert forgot his anger in surprise. ‘Bastard he is,’ he said, ‘bastard and stripling, even as you have said, father, but since the day that I looked into his face I have wanted to follow him, perhaps to great glory, perhaps to death.’ The lashes veiled his eyes suddenly. ‘You don’t understand. Maybe you have not seen him. He has that look in his face which draws

me. A man might put his whole trust in him and not fear to be betrayed.' He stopped, and seeing how they stared at him, coloured up, and said more humbly: 'Perhaps I shan't be allowed to serve him. I thought my lord would be able to tell me.'

Hubert banged his fist down on the table. 'If you want to serve a great seigneur, serve Roger de Beaumont!' he said. 'God knows I have nothing against young William – no, and I would not join Roger de Toeni against him, as your brother Gilbert was fool enough to do! – but it does not take a sage to know that the Bastard's days will be short in Normandy. Why, you silly boy, from the day that Duke Robert – God rest his soul! – died on his pilgrimage there has been no peace in Normandy – and all on account of the base-born child who was set up to rule the Duchy! What has happened to his guardians? Alain of Brittany was the first, and a rare end he made of it. You were no more than a babe yourself then, but Alain died, poisoned at Vimoutiers, and the King of France marched into the Argentan, and seized the border stronghold of Tillières which he holds to this day! Was there peace then? Was there peace when Montgomeri slew the Seneschal, Osbern, in the Duke's own chamber? Was there peace when Thorkill died, and Roger de Toeni fought the ducal troops? Will there ever be peace while a mere lad holds the reins of government? Why, you are raving to think to find glory in the service of that ill-starred boy!'

'Am I so?' Raoul retorted. 'Yet will you say that our Duke has made so ill a beginning? You speak of his childhood, but I seem to remember that when Toustain Goz dared to hold the castle of Falaise against him not so long since, my lord Duke had a short way with the rebels.'

'Bah, De Gacé took the castle by storm on the Duke's behalf!' said Gilbert scornfully. 'It seems to me that you have filled your head with silly imaginings, and would be the better for a sound trouncing.'

'Try it!' Raoul challenged him. 'I am ready for you, I promise you.'

'No more of that!' Hubert interposed. 'The boy will soon find

his mistake. Let him take service with the Duke, if my lord can so arrange it for him. If I am right and he comes back disappointed – well, there will be a place for him still at my board. If he is right, and the Duke is a man even as his father was before him, why, so much the better for us all! But now you shall clasp hands, and think no more of this quarrel.’

Hubert’s word was law at Harcourt when he spoke it in just that tone. Across the table Gilbert and Raoul clasped hands with as good a grace as they could muster. Eudes still sat pondering over the talk, with his brows knit and his gaze abstracted, until, presently, having unravelled it to his satisfaction, he looked up, and said portentously: ‘I see what it is. Raoul looked upon the Duke, and finding him comely enough, he has taken it into his head he would like to serve under his gonfanon. Boy follows boy.’

‘So be it,’ said Hubert. ‘I see little good, but no harm. Let boy follow boy.’

TWO

The hall of the Castle of Falaise was rush-strewn, and hung with tapestries; at the dinner-hour trestle-tables were set up, with benches and stools for the Court to sit upon. Only the Duke used a chair with carved arms and a high back; his nobles had each a stool, but the knights and the squires crowded on to benches at the tables that ran down the length of the hall. There was a fire of logs on a pile of wood-ash, and beside this a couple of huge alaunts lay stretched out, blinking at the hot glow. The other dogs roamed among the table-legs at will, waiting for chance scraps of meat, and wrangling over the bones tossed to them by their masters.

The hall seemed crowded to Raoul, still, after three months, unaccustomed to life at Court. The hangings shut out the draught, and the place was stuffy, with a mingled smell of dogs, smoke, and roast meats on the air. Up at the high-table the Duke sat in his great chair, and between the courses his minstrels played and sang, and Galet the Jester cut capers, and told lewd stories which made the barons about the Duke shout with laughter. The Duke smiled sometimes, and once he frowned a quick menace when Galet cracked a jest at the expense of the new King of England's chastity. This was Edward, the son of Ethelred, until two years before a guest of Normandy, and the friend of the young Duke. But for the most part the Duke's attention was all for his haggard, which he had taken from her perch behind his chair on to his wrist. She was a fierce bird, with talons that dug into his hand when he teased her, and bright cruel eyes above her hooked beak.

‘A rare hawk that, beau sire,’ Hugh de Gournay said. ‘They tell me she never misses.’

William smoothed the hawk’s feathers with his finger. ‘Never,’ he answered, without turning his head.

A flourish of trumpets at the end of the hall heralded the coming of the boar’s head, the same animal that had been stuck by the Duke in the Forest of Gouffers two days before. The head was carried on a great silver chargeour, and brought up to the high-table. One of the stewards began to carve it, and the servers ran with the slices on long spits to offer to the Duke’s guests.

There was a considerable noise of talk at the far end of the hall, where the lesser people sat. The talk was all of the Duke’s projected visit to the Côtentin. He was going to Valognes to hunt bears in the forests there, and would take only a small retinue with him, since the dwelling to be set aside for his use would hardly accommodate even so meagre a Court as this held at Falaise.

Some of his barons would go with him, and a bodyguard of knights and men-at-arms under Grimbauld du Plessis, a dark, saturnine man with a lip twisted by a scar received in some past combat. He was of the Duke’s personal retinue, and sat next to Raoul now at the table near the door. Raoul had heard of two lords only who meant to accompany the Duke, and these were Humphrey de Bohun, whose lands lay on the Côtentin border; and Guy, younger son of the House of Burgundy, who sat now at the Duke’s right hand.

Guy was a little older than William, whose cousin he was, but he had been brought up with him at the palace of Vaudreuil. He was a handsome youth, but too much aware of his charm. Raoul thought his long-lashed eyes womanish, and found that his smile soon cloyed a man’s stomach. He was graceful and indolent, set much store by his own importance, but made it his business to be accessible to all men. Raoul preferred a sterner, less affable prince, whose favour was not so easily won. He looked away from Guy, and allowed his gaze to rest on the Duke’s face, once more pondering this silent young man to whom he had sworn allegiance.

Although he had been in his service for three months he had scarcely come into contact with the Duke, and knew no more of him than was shown to all the world. It was impossible to guess what thoughts lurked behind William's eyes. These were set well apart, and were not unlike the eyes of the haggard he fondled, only that they were so dark that they looked sometimes almost black. They held a hidden gleam, as though they watched even when they seemed most abstracted. Their gaze was direct, and often disconcerting. Raoul thought that whatever a man might wish to conceal from the Duke would surely be betrayed under the ordeal of that hard stare.

Springing between the eyes the Duke's aquiline nose was at once haughty and masterful. His mouth was clearly defined, its lips well curved, and the expression a trifle sardonic. It could smile with unexpected good humour, but in repose it had a grim look. He kept his lips firmly pressed together, as though he guarded his secrets, but in anger the corners of the mouth were observed to quiver. One saw then what passion the man had in him, curbed nearly always, but apt to leap up under provocation and sweep everything before it: kindness, justice, policy.

In person William was sturdily built. His father's height was curiously combined with the stockiness of his mother's burgher blood. There was a thickness to his body which did not come from Robert the Magnificent, and his hands, although the fingers were long and tapering, were square in the palm: powerful, workman-like hands, Raoul thought.

Already, and young as he was, he possessed great strength and endurance. Fatigue never seemed to trouble him; he could out-ride the hardiest of his knights, and the shock of his charge in a mock combat had been known to unseat even Hugh de Grantmesnil, one of the finest warriors in Normandy. He was passionately fond of hunting, and hawking, and every form of knightly exercise. Raoul had seen him nock an arrow while he rode at full gallop, and it was said that no one but himself could bend his bow.

A voice intruded upon Raoul's wandering attention. He

turned his head and found that a man seated opposite to him was inquiring whether he was to be one of the few bound for the Côtentin. He answered diffidently that he believed the Seneschal, FitzOsbern, had spoken his name as one of those to accompany the Duke.

‘You will have rare sport there, I dare say,’ said the other, wiping a morsel of cocket-bread round his platter.

It seemed to Raoul that Grimbauld du Plessis looked up rather sharply at this remark. A cackle of laughter came from behind his chair, and he started round to see the jester cuddling his bauble. ‘Rare sport for the Duke’s knights,’ grinned Galet. He held his bauble to his cheek. ‘Oh, my little one, praise the saints you will be safe in Galet’s girdle!’

Grimbauld’s face darkened; he shot out a hand to grasp the jester by one thin arm, and jerked him to his knees beside him. ‘Ha, fool, what is that you say?’ he growled.

Galet postured and whined at him. ‘Do not harm poor Galet! Rare sport, I said; oh, rare sport at Valognes!’ He peered up into Grimbauld’s face, and gave again his silly laugh. ‘Will you hunt a noble hart, cousin, in brave company? Nay, but you will find it a cunning beast.’

‘Go, you are a knave!’ Grimbauld struck him aside, and he fell sprawling on the rushes. He twisted his deformed limbs grotesquely, and howled like a dog. One of the pages, hurrying down the hall, tripped over him, and came down with a crash of the silver dish he carried. Galet shook his big head at him, and groaned: ‘Why, here’s a brave company upset by the poor fool!’ He grovelled for the scraps of the boar’s head that were scattered over the floor, and went limping off to the fire at the end of the room.

‘The fool lacks a whipping,’ Grimbauld said, and turned back to pick over the meat on his platter with his thick, short fingers.

Raoul’s eyes had followed the jester to the fire, watching curiously how Galet threw himself down beside one of the hounds, and murmured his nonsense into a cocked ear. Galet shook the bells in his cap, and muttered, and glanced about him

with many odd grimaces, and a hunching of his crooked shoulders. When he saw Raoul looking at him he grinned his sad, half-witted grin, and began to rock himself about, hugging his body in his arms. Raoul wondered what clouded thoughts troubled the fool's brain. He tossed a scrap of meat to him, and jester and hound fell on it together, wrangling each one alike with growls and bared teeth.

A stir at the high-table made them all look round. The Duke had risen, and was on his way to the twisting stair that led to the gallery and the rooms above. He had paused to listen to his cousin of Burgundy, who had intercepted him with a hand on his shoulder in the familiar way he always used. He still held his haggard on his wrist, and still absently smoothed her plumage with his finger, but his glance was on Guy's face, impassive and unsmiling. A shaft of sunlight slanting down through a window set high up in the wall touched with gold his crisp black locks, and glinted on a ring he wore upon the stroking finger. His uncle Walter, a solid man of middle years, stood a little on one side, waiting for him to finish with Guy.

‘See the noble tanner's son!’

The softly spoken words just reached Raoul's ears. They had been uttered by Grimbault, and as Raoul looked quickly round at him he saw the scarred lip twisted into a sneer. It was of no use to pay any heed to such whisperings. Ever since he had come to Court Raoul had heard them, covert jibes directed at the Duke's base kindred: Walter, the tanner Fulbert's son; Walter's son William; and, not less, the Duke's own half-brothers, Robert and Odo, children born to Herleva by her marriage with Herluin, knight of Conteville. They were both present now: Robert a few years younger than the Duke, a heavy boy with a dogged, open face; and Odo, his junior, brighter-eyed, and readier of tongue. They waited beside their father at the bottom of the table, but the Duke had spoken with them on their way to the stair, and again Raoul had caught a vague murmur of dissatisfaction, so faint that he could not locate whence it came.

Still standing by the bench he watched the Duke walk to the

stairway, and go up it, with Walter following him. Guy of Burgundy lounged back to his place at the table, and called to a server to fill up his cup.

There had been silence while the Duke was on his way out, a puzzling silence fraught with some emotion Raoul could not understand. Up at the Duke's table two barons exchanged fleeting glances as they resumed their seats. Again Raoul knew an instant's feeling of unrest, as though in that quick enigmatic look he had seen danger. A gleam in Grimbauld's narrowed eyes that were fixed so intently on the Duke made him catch his breath. Something in the concentration of Grimbauld's gaze made him feel uneasy, afraid of a danger he could not see.

Two days later the hunting-party was on the road, the Duke riding at the head of his cavalcade, with the Burgundian beside him. He had business at Bayeux, so that the first day's ride was to the north, and short. They swept into Bayeux at the dinner hour, and were received by the Bishop, by Ranulf de Bricassart, Viscount of Bressin, and by several other lords of the district. Once more a disquieting feeling stole over Raoul. As he slid down from Verceray's back, and saw the Duke walk forward between strangers to the door of the palace, he could have sworn that danger lurked in the air. So acute was this premonition that he was almost uncontrollably urged to run after the Duke with an absurd warning to him not to stop in this grey town with its twisted streets, and furtive corners. He fought back the impulse, and just as he had satisfactorily argued away his fears, there was Galet bestriding his mule, and grinning at him as though he knew what suspicious thoughts had crossed his mind.

'Fool, you haunt my footsteps,' he said irritably.

Galet slid down from the mule's back. 'Why then, I am as good as your conscience, cousin, and thereafter more fool than I knew. Where is my brother William?' He saw the Duke in the doorway of the palace, and laughed shrilly. 'Propound me this riddle, Cousin Raoul: which is the wolf, and which the sheep of those yonder?' He pointed to the group about the Duke, and twisted his face into a leer.