THE TIDE MILL

Richard Herley

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For Lesley

It is not by chance that the word ‘grinding’ is associated with hardship and poverty. Among the curses heaped by God on Adam, in the third chapter of Genesis, is this, the most terrible of all: ‘In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground’. Thus were we condemned, in the Garden of Eden, to grind corn. The quern-stone is our eternal tyrant. No sooner is one harvest made into flour than we must sow another, all the years of our lives. Before the serpent tempted Eve, mankind lived free of the sickle, of chaff, of dust and the grindstone. We were not men, but children.

Now what manner of thing are men? And in God’s name, why are we so cruel to one another?

— *Stanislau*

PART ONE

1

Ralf turned to look at his sister and found her still sleeping, curled up behind him in a bed their mother had contrived from a fleece. Now that the shadows had lengthened, Imogen's hair, silver-blond like his own, was no longer catching the sun. Her thumb had returned to her mouth. In the enclosed space among all the furniture and baggage, her features had taken the inward reflections and made them into a serene and private thing, entirely her own.

That she, and not he, the son, the firstborn, was his parents' favourite seemed to Ralf not only proper but natural. So completely did he share their view that, aged nine, he was fashioning himself into her third guardian.

He reached down and, being careful not to wake her, pulled her hand and thumb away from her lips.

The cart, not very new, hired without driver, was being drawn by two oxen, one white, the other roan-brown. The motion of their broad, fly-pestered backs and horns, the containing sides of the cart, the creaking of axles and felloes, the occasional flick of his father's switch: all these, like his parents' desultory conversation, produced for Ralf, who had never yet been in one, the simulacrum of a passage by boat.

His ponderous land-vessel, following the roads through open downs or woods full of birdsong, sometimes passing another more or less like itself, or people on foot, and

making ever-deeper headway into his apprehension, left the trees for good and crossed the furzy wastes of Mape Common.

The heavy perfume of the gorse, spreading on the cloying, pollenous air, had at last succeeded in stupefying the wayside grasshoppers, whose chorus had almost collapsed. The road began to descend and the chirping stopped altogether. The cart passed through an acre or two where the bushes had burned away, all but their charcoal skeletons. The soil, the road itself, scorched black, smelled like a hearth. As the road dipped further a view opened up below: marshland spreading as far as a long bank of shingle. Beyond that, glittering in the south-westerly light, Ralf saw the sea.

Mape Marsh, salt and fresh, comprised vast reed-beds and, in the drier parts, rough grazing for the hardy black cattle of the village. The reeds were harvested in winter for thatching, transported to Alincester and beyond. Thousands of bundles were cut each year, but still the reeds kept enlarging their kingdom, crowding upon the coast road and colonising the verge on the other side, the pond, the brackish banks of the river, the front gardens of the lowest-lying cottages. In those days the plumes in summer spread, purplish-brown, the whole mile from village to beach.

As each reed ripens and grows heavier, the curve of its stem increases and, in concert with the multitude, changes most subtly the character of a marsh. With the onset of autumn the flower-heads turn silver-bronze. The leaves fall, the stems dry out, and the ceaseless rustling becomes harsher, louder.

A boy who has grown to manhood in Mape, an observant and introspective boy who has spent his most important years roaming there, if blindfolded and somehow transported back to the marsh sixty years later and required on pain of forfeit to tell the season: why, such a one, without any other sense to guide him, could tell you the month and perhaps the very week from the particular quality of reed-rustle that met his ears.

This southern coast seeps into the soul. Flat, ever shifting, dazed and triturated by winter storms, it is reduced by their onslaught to a delirium of heat-shimmered shingle, lagoons, undertows. The gnarled oaks along the shore, the wind-shrivelled holly and blackthorn, the gorse, the seablite and the butcher's-broom: all cringe before the subjection of the sea. His breath, tainted with tar and rotting fish, hoars the furrows and stunts the tender shoots. Sometimes, turning gigantically in sleep, he puts out an elbow and the dike itself is breached.

Mape is awash not just with water, but light. The sky merges with what lies below. Ripples, reflections, clods, shingle, cloud-colours: these are of the same. In the least mist, the least tremor of convected heat, the horizon dissolves away as with a motion of wings. Even the marsh birds are an emblem of ambiguity. They own neither earth nor sky.

None of Mape's birds is more ambiguous, or strange, than the bittern: a kind of heron, patterned in brown and darker brown to mimic the stems among which, standing erect with bill pointing skywards, and swaying in time with any motion of the reeds, it becomes invisible even to the practised eye. The bittern feeds on eels and water-rats.

It is resident, solitary, reluctant to fly, and so elusive that even the marshmen rarely see it.

Stranger than the bird itself is its spring call, a deep, ventriloquial, and almost disyllabic *hwoomp*, not loud especially, but so carrying that one may hear it at a great distance. The favoured time is evening; just such a warm, sunny, late May evening as this, in which Ralf's family and all their remaining possessions came down from the common and reached the coast road on the outskirts of the village.

The cart turned left. Beside it, the reeds were vibrant with the song, jagged and flowing, of many warblers. Then, from somewhere in the marsh, Ralf heard a sound as of thunder suppressed by mud: infinitely mournful, wide-ranging, desperate.

The landscape of his bleak home-to-be had spoken. With this exuded cry it had simultaneously noted his arrival and expressed the perfection of its indifference. His anxiety for the future, which had begun even before he had learned that he was to leave the city, and which had so greatly intensified on the journey south, now crystallised into fear.

'What is it, Ralf?' said his mother, with a hand to his shoulder.

'That noise.'

'It's only a bittern.'

'What's a bittern?'

'A bird,' his father said. 'Even I know that.' And he explained, with a single mild correction from Ralf's mother, what sort of bird it was.

As he spoke, Ralf looked up at him and felt a little better. For his father he reserved a special kind of worship. If his father could remain so calm and good humoured in the

very teeth of the calamity, then perhaps, after all, there might not be so much to fear.

He had been indentured for fourteen years to John Hampden, chief carpenter at the cathedral. By the age of twenty his skills had far outgone those of a mere artisan. Long before his apprenticeship had ended, he had been one of those chosen by the bishop to work not only on the choir but also on the rood screen. Ralf's mother had shown him the most beautiful carvings, some of which bore, among the intricacy of their design, the small crescent moon that formed the signature of Linsell Grigg.

For a time, therefore, Ralf's father had found himself among men of other crafts. The masons had inadvertently taught him much about stone, and he had been fascinated by the groundworks in the precincts of the bishop's palace, where the river had been diverted with a series of culverts. Master Hampden had been engaged on this project also, and he it was who devised the rotatory sluices, the first of their kind, which still regulate the water in the great carp pond beyond the city's western gate.

After his apprenticeship, Ralf's father established his own workshop. It did well; he was able at last to free Ralf's mother and marry, and Ralf and his sister were conceived in a narrow house in Shawcross Street. Five years after Imogen arrived, the family moved to more spacious premises just inside the city walls. Ralf was enrolled in the cathedral school. He learned to read and write, was taught some Latin and even a little Greek. He was eager to learn. Had he stayed, his teachers said, he might have won a scholarship to Dorley.

But then his father fell prey to bad debt and his workshop failed. He was forced to sell up.

Ralf had made some good friends in the city. It had been hard to leave them. And once the word 'Dorley' had been uttered in his presence, he had dreamt of little else: the illustrious school, the finest in England, often led to the University. He had felt himself, somehow, destined for a bigger place than Alincester.

There was no school of any description in Mape. The nearest was seven miles along the coast in the town of Rushton, and that only had a few pupils and one master; and anyway, no money could be spared for fees. This town, which Ralf had never seen, had acquired in his imagination a hateful aspect. It was a port, mainly for fishing but also for trade. Mutton, wool and, he supposed, live sheep, were taken there from the downs and sent to the Low Countries. He envisioned the streets as cramped, cobbled, covered in droppings where they led down to the quay, perennially wreathed in greasy fog.

Mainly he disliked Rushton because it was there that, six days a week, his father was to be exiled. Though Linsell was no shipwright, the best work he could find anywhere near Mape was in the town's boatyard. He had to be near Mape because he could afford nowhere else to live. Mape was the village of Ralf's mother, and they were to stay, with the permission of the lord, in her father's house.

Ralf had been there twice before, once as a baby and again at the age of five. He could remember his grandfather only indistinctly. Ralf knew that he was not a freeman like his father. He was a serf. His life was attached to the manor. Unlike most of his kind he was not a labourer, bound to the land, but a fisherman.

In a cathedral window Ralf had seen Simon Peter and Andrew, adrift on a luminous Galilee, flinging high their

net. The beatific, interchangeable features of the two brothers, so vividly impressed on his mind, had become confused with those of his grandfather. He did recall that his grandfather's beard was white and that his face was ruddy, quite unlike those of the disciples; and he recalled also that, in his speech and broad frame, he could scarcely be less ethereal than the figures in the window.

His grandmother he could remember no better. She had died since his last visit. He had been considered too young for a funeral or to make a winter trip to Mape and its windswept graveyard overlooking the marsh.

Attended by most of the village dwellings, the church stood on an eminence bounded to the east by the river. Behind it rose the Hall, the residence of the baron, Gervase de Maepe.

Most halls and castles elsewhere in this diocese, the richest in the kingdom, had by now been reconstructed in stone. Mape Hall was still framed of wood. As the cart drew nearer Ralf could discern, emerging from the trees, more and more of its tower. From it hung a cream and scarlet pennon which he did not then know as the flag of the de Maepes.

'Hello, Ralf,' Imogen said, placing her chin on his shoulder and clasping her arms round his chest.

'Have you only just woken up?'

The cart rumbled across the boards of a white-railed bridge. Looking down, Ralf glimpsed stagnant water among the reeds.

A moment later his eye was drawn to movement on the rising road ahead, where the first straggle of cottages began. A boy, barely older than himself and shabbily dressed, was evidently the first to have caught sight of the

newcomers and was now running towards them, shouting a greeting.

Ralf felt the heaviness returning to his heart as he half turned and, almost whispering, said to his sister, 'We're here.'

2

Three years later, almost to the day, Ralf set out on a certain evening for the beach. A hint of rain met his cheek as he descended the path beside the churchyard and started along the dike; the buffets of warm wind that had made the yews and lime-trees sway now hit him with exhilarating force. Thunder had been heard earlier. Perhaps there would be a storm.

Luckily his mother had not been at home to prevent this excursion. He had been looking forward to it and did not care whether he got wet.

This morning there had been an exceptionally high tide. All sorts of things might have been washed up.

Ralf loved beachcombing. He was carrying his usual accomplice, an old shoulder-bag. He always found driftwood, often fishing-floats which he gave to his grandfather, and sometimes unexpected objects such as a crushed pewter goblet or a single boot with a tarnished buckle. Best of all he liked the mysterious treasures of the sea itself: mermaids' purses, sea-urchins, starfish, sea-cucumbers, dead men's fingers, the grey cylinders of belemnites. The little shelf above his bed bore his collection of stones and shells.

The tide had let him study in detail the plumage and dark webbed feet of auks, terns, scoters, gannets. He had

observed that the beak of the gannet, a seabird that made spectacular plunges for fish, was equipped with inward-pointing serrations to grip the prey. He had examined the nostrils, the slopes of the head, the articulation in death of the neck and wings; and at length felt he had begun to arrive at an understanding of the bird's design and the masterly way it had been fitted for its hunting life. Now, whether from shore or sea, whenever he saw gannets – huge, majestic, the adults pure white with the outer wings black, the juveniles scaly and dark – he felt the secret kinship that his knowledge had brought.

He could not pass a dead bird or animal without at least turning it with a stick. Many times he had come across seals or pups, more or less decomposed and crawling with maggots. Once, alerted by the stench far upwind, he had discovered a rotting porpoise and marvelled at its skull and the many teeth of its jaws.

Such carcases smelled not just of putrefaction but of the sea itself. Ralf had heard that there was in the sea an equivalent for every creature of the land. Just as a human body in the graveyard crumbled to earth, so did that of the porpoise dissolve to brine. Brine was the essence of the sea. In its most rarefied form it merely flavoured the air. At his whim, God condensed it into the porpoise, the seal, the gannet, and all the curious forms that Ralf and his grandfather, together with the other fishermen and boys, daily brought ashore.

Ralf could not rid himself of a feeling that people had no business on the sea. The catch seemed like plunder. Yet, after nearly three years of fishing, he no longer felt he belonged to the land. That was why he liked the tideline. Wandering close to the surge, his ears full of its noise, he

could believe himself invisible. He was happiest between the sea and land, indebted to neither.

The marshes formed part of this magic kingdom. Here the boundary was less obvious but existed nonetheless. At one spot by the base of the dike the mud would take your weight and was, at a given moment, land; six inches further out it wouldn't. The mud there, malevolent, inscrutable, gannet-billed, was of the sea.

The gurgling runnels and gullies of the saltmarsh were like nothing on land. Even its plants, its samphire, sea-lavender and sea-purslane, even they disdained the loam and rain that ordinary plants held dear and throve on salt and submersion.

Now the tide was flooding again, nearing its height. Ralf paused to inspect the sky. When he looked north, back towards the village, it appeared darker than over the sea. The wind was from the south-east. He decided it would not rain heavily after all.

The path along the top of the dike was well worn but narrow, hemmed in by stems of milfoil and sea-aster that hindered his legs as he passed. To his right, beyond the course of the borrowdike at the base of the slope, the grazing had given way to reed-scrub. To his left lay the broad saltmarsh that edged the harbour; ahead rose the shingle of the beach.

A heron hoisted itself from the borrowdike, laboured into the wind and out towards the water.

Had his gaze not idly followed it, Ralf might never have noticed that someone seemed to be trapped in the saltings. All that could be seen was a head and a pair of slight shoulders, facing away, just visible above the expanse of grey-green purslane, so far off that he could make out little

but the dark, collar-length hair. The owner of the head had descended into a channel; his shoulders were agitated, moving as the unseen body struggled to get free.

Ralf himself, like most people in the village, had often been out there to dig bait or gather samphire. At low tide, if you had companions, it was safe enough. But if you were alone and the tide was swelling, the saltings were forbidden. It was so easy to lose your way in the maze of channels, to get cut off, to drown, that even the most confident marshmen never risked it.

Ralf cupped his hands to his mouth.

'Hello there! Hello!'

Had he been heard?

'Hello! Hello!'

A mere boy's voice could not compete with the wind. Ralf clenched his fists in frustration, looking back once more towards the distant village. There was no time to fetch help.

From here, the victim was in line with the top of Boling Down, ten miles away to the east. Ralf hurriedly surveyed the pattern and course of the larger channels, trying to fix them in his mind. He pulled the leather strap of his bag over his head so that it no longer hung from one shoulder but crossed his breast. Next he stamped down the vegetation on the top of the dike, making a gap three or four feet across. And then, without hesitation, his heart pounding, he scrambled down the slope.

At the bottom, as he was pushing through the waist-high thickets of seablite, he knew that what he was doing was foolish, dangerous, even mad. He knew that he should be afraid. Perhaps he was. Perhaps he knew very well that he too would get stuck and that, trapped by the ferocious

suction of the mud, he too would be overwhelmed by the sea. He knew all this, yet still he kept on, forcing his pace, driven further and further from safety by a rising excitement he had never known before.

The seablite dwindled and was left behind. The firmest ground now was covered by a luxuriant growth of samphire. He made several detours to keep to it, pausing only to confirm his position using the line he had established between the dike and Boling Down. From this elevation the victim was no longer visible.

Ralf arrived at the first sizeable gully, jumped across, leapt another, and a third. The next was too wide. He turned left, realised he was being driven back on himself and went the other way. The mud underfoot was becoming softer, vibrating more and more readily with his weight.

By now he was two hundred yards into the saltings. His shoes were already caked, his leggings already spattered: it was not always possible to keep to the crowns of the tummocks. Coming at speed to another gully, he misjudged its width and fell, making himself filthy as he scrambled upright.

Without thinking, he dragged a hand across his face.

He came to a halt, making a deliberate attempt at calm. Only if he kept a clear head would all be well. He did not know how much higher the sea had to come, but there was still time, time enough, surely, to do what was needed.

A little further on he encountered a line of deep footprints leading out. Beside them, crossing them and there obliterated, wavered the prints of a small dog. At once he guessed the identity of his quarry and of the tan and white terrier, and knew what must have happened. Guided towards the right by the direction of the tracks, he

now saw, almost hidden by sea-purslane, the top of the head of a boy of about his own age and size, a boy with whom, throughout his three years in the village, Ralf had not exchanged so much as a single word: the Honourable Godric, youngest son of Lord de Maepe.

When Ralf reached him, he was horrified to see that he was already chest-deep in fast-flowing water, his arms held level before him, his face, viewed from the side, a mask of disbelief. He did not even see Ralf approaching.

'It's all right!' Ralf cried, getting as close as he dared and unhitching his bag. 'It's all right!' he repeated, although he knew it most certainly was not.

The boy turned his head.

'How deep is the mud? Where does it come to? Your knees?'

'Higher.'

'Your waist?'

'Nearly.'

'Take this!' Gripping the centre of the strap, Ralf flung the bag towards him. It splashed just out of reach. Ralf tried again, and a third time, before Godric, leaning to the side, was able to grab it.

As soon as Ralf began to pull, two things happened. He felt his feet being driven into the mud; and, almost immediately, the strap broke. Unable to help himself, he fell backwards in a heap.

The stitching had parted where one end of the strap had been fixed to the bag. Ralf saw the advantage. They could use the full length of the strap, so that he could stand further up where the mud was firmer. They could wrap the ends round their wrists, to get a better grip. As Ralf imparted this information, the boy nodded blankly.

‘Ready?’

‘Yes.’

‘Hold tight.’

‘I will.’

‘Point your feet if you can.’

‘I will.’

‘Now put your head under.’

‘What?’

‘You’ve got to let the water take your weight. I can’t manage otherwise.’

To Ralf’s amazement, Godric understood him at once. Ralf saw him take a deep breath, lean sideways, and his head duly went below the swirling surface of the tide.

Ralf pulled with every ounce of his strength, pulled ten times harder than ever he had pulled on the heaviest, most bulging net, and was rewarded with nothing but his feet once again sinking and the knowledge that Godric had absolutely and terminally been claimed by the marsh.

It was no good. Godric spluttered for air.

‘Again!’ Ralf shouted.

Again Ralf failed. The churned mud at his feet showed how desperately he had tried.

The water was rising towards Godric’s throat. Part of Ralf’s mind was aware that he also was at the mercy of the tide: the gullies he had leapt, like this very channel, were now filling, widening, becoming impassable; but mainly he was seized by an appalled determination that no one should have to die in such a stupid and horrible way. For a dog, a little yapping dog!

‘Again!’

As he pulled, as his feet slithered and floundered, as he realised he could never do it, Ralf remembered God. He

remembered he was supposed to pray for strength. But the remote, all-knowing god of the village church or Alincester Cathedral, the father on high, who had sent his only son to be reviled and crucified, this god was just someone in a story. The god Ralf knew, knew intimately, lived down here. His ruthlessness and beneficence were of another kind. He made the weather and the sky, the downs, the forests, the porpoise and the gannet. His message, expressed everywhere, was clear. Self-reliance.

These thoughts had consumed no more than a moment. They produced a single idea that changed everything. It was no longer a matter of trying, but deciding. Ralf decided. Not only would Godric come free, but they would both get back to the dike alive.

As he hauled anew, he could not be sure whether he had become endowed with miraculous strength or whether his previous strivings had served to loosen the mud's grip. At first so slight as to be no more credible than wishful thinking, a sensation of yielding, of success, grew to the stage where he accepted it was happening. His eyes, tight shut in the extreme grimace of his effort, opened to see that he was dragging Godric out.

* * *

It was not until they reached the seablite that Ralf gave any thought to what might happen next. The uncertain passage back, diverted again and again from the reassuring course of his own outward footprints, conducted largely in silence, had frightened him more than he cared to know. As for the other, he remained distracted, disbelieving. He had been encased in slime from the waist downwards. Ralf

had helped him to scrape the heaviest part of it off, but the mud, cracked, paling here and there as it dried, still made a sort of strange and clinging garment. Godric's tunic, hands and face, like Ralf himself, were hardly any better.

'We can't go back like this,' Ralf said. His mother would be so angry that he might be beaten, either when his father returned from Rushton on Saturday afternoon, or sooner, by Grandfather. To have fouled his clothes and ruined the bag would have been bad enough, but to have ventured into the saltings, alone and at high tide, would merit the most severe punishment. He had been warned, most sternly, over and over again: all the village children had.

'I agree,' Godric said, sounding for the first time as though he might be capable of rational speech. 'I'll be thrashed if he finds out.'

Ralf wondered if 'he' was the baron, the holder of eleven thousand acres, lord of the manor and dispenser of justice, who, it was said, counted the Bishop of Alincester, and even the King himself, among his personal friends. Ralf had never before considered the baron as a father like his own, yet indubitably he was. Did he not have two daughters and three sons, the smallest of whom, here beside him, chilled to the bone, numb with shock, and barely able to utter a coherent word, was already conspiring with him to keep the adults at bay?

They started up the slope of the dike.

Over his shoulder, Ralf asked, 'What will you say about Letty?' That, he had just learned, was the name of the dog.

'Don't know.'

'Tell the truth. She ran off and got stuck. Just don't mention the rest.'

'Yes,' Godric said. 'That's what I'll do.'

The beach was not far away. Godric had lost his boots. The shingle pained his feet and he trod gingerly. Ralf crouched in the surf, washing his face and forearms, before returning to dry land, where Godric was standing with arms clasped. He had begun to shiver even more violently. 'What's it like?'

'Cold,' Ralf said.

'I thought as much.'

'You'll have to go in.'

'I know.'

'I can rinse your clothes, if you like.'

'Thanks.' Godric looked at him. 'What's your name?'

'Ralf Grigg.'

'How old are you?'

'Twelve.'

'I'm thirteen.' He unclasped his arms and pulled off his mud-laden tunic, revealing a torso which to Ralf seemed absurdly puny. 'You live with old Jacob Farlow, don't you?'

'He's my grandfather.'

'Your father's the shipwright? A freeman?'

'Yes. Hurry up. I'm getting cold myself.'

Godric removed the rest of his clothes. Ralf took the bundle into the surf while Godric himself reluctantly followed. Just as Ralf had done, he crouched down in the water, splashing and washing himself all over, before moving further out to immerse himself fully. He soon waded back to the stones, squeezed his hair and did his best to brush away the water from his skin, then sat down and embraced his legs in an effort to get warm.

The clothes were of a quality Ralf had rarely seen. He wrung them out again and again, and to his satisfaction saw most, and then all, of the mud flowing away. 'Clean as

you like,' he announced, returning the bundle to its owner. He extracted the tunic. 'Here. Take one end.'

By twisting the material between them as tightly as they could and pulling, they rendered it no more than damp. Ralf, having bathed, repeated the procedure with his own clothes.

'When are you expected back?' he said.

'A long time ago,' Godric said.

'Will anyone come looking?'

'Not yet. I hope.' Godric stared at the shingle. 'I really liked that dog,' he said.

He had rather close, intense features and dark eyebrows that almost joined in the middle. Ralf felt drawn to him, though he did not know why. 'Do you want to use my shoes? To get back to the village. I don't mind going barefoot. I work like that in the boat. My feet are tough.'

'You'd lend me your shoes?'

'Why not? As long as I've got them on when I get home.'

As they walked along the dike, Godric asked Ralf more questions about his family. Against his own inclination, Ralf found himself exaggerating the part his father had played in building the cathedral, the size of his workshop and the scale of the debt that had led to its downfall.

By the time they reached the village end of the dike the wind had dried their clothes further and their hair completely. Still they had encountered no one. They climbed towards the church, unlatched the stock-gate and, overhung by the restless branches of the limes, hurried along the path beside the graveyard.

They paused under the big yew, just before the other gate. Godric removed the shoes and handed them back. Except for his lateness and his missing boots, nothing

remained to get him into trouble. 'You're a good fellow, Ralf,' he said diffidently, and extended his hand. 'What you did, I mean, I'll never forget.'

'You won't tell anyone?'

'No.'

On the other side of the gate Godric turned right, to skirt the north side of the church and head for the Hall.

Ralf, having turned left, and walking along the road beside the village green, found his mind dwelling hardly at all on the terror he had experienced, or even on the far greater terror felt by the one whose life he had saved. Rather, he could not help thinking of the way his prayer – if that was what it had been – had been so swiftly answered. Once his decision had been reached, the rest had seemed inevitable: the safe return to the dike, their words about the dog, the walk to the beach, his affinity with Godric. Somehow, they had known each other already. Thinking further, he remembered the way the heron had struggled aloft, into the wind, guiding his eye. Could that really have been chance?

Ralf pondered these matters for the rest of the evening. And at last, as he drifted into sleep, becoming oblivious of the mice in the thatch, his disjointed thoughts went back to the place of chilly green water and seething foam where he and Godric had washed their clothes and cleansed themselves, to the place where their friendship had been baptised.

3

When he was working, Ralf rarely got home at the same time two days running: the boats usually launched on the

morning high tide and returned eight or nine hours later. His grandfather might go out again, after dark, but never with Ralf.

The fishing year began with potting for whelks, lobsters and crabs. Now, in late spring, many of the men were also setting drift-nets at night for mackerel and herring, and then, during the day, shooting seines near the beach for sea-trout. When the mackerel season ended, lining would begin for flounders and skate and, later yet, cod. In rough weather or when fishing was bad there were cockles to be raked and bait to be dug.

Jacob was required to fish two days a week for the manor, which provided the shallop and gear. These he shared with another serf. For the other four days a week – working on Sundays was not permitted – Jacob and Edwin worked for themselves.

Their haul on the two fief-days was judged by the steward, who compared it with those from the other boats. If he deemed it short they could be fined or made to give up a number of free-days till the deficit was met. Though the manor was generally fair, it expected there to be no consistent difference between catches made on a fief-day and those on a free.

Edwin Maw was nearly twenty years younger than Jacob, tall and strongly made; Jacob was acutely aware that he could no longer contribute as once he had. Moreover, Edwin's son, a field-worker, sometimes gave a day to the enterprise. Jacob disliked taking Ralf as much as Ralf's parents disliked letting him go, but the boat, and the family, needed the help. Even with Linsell's contribution, there was hardship in the house: most of Linsell's wage went perforce to his creditors.

Today had again been cloudy with a warm onshore wind. By late afternoon the *Meg* had visited all her sixty crab-pots, each attached to a float bearing a wooden tag branded with her mark. Most of the pots were close to the shore or in the estuary mouth. Today's catch had been average, with about three pots in five yielding crabs, some too small to be worth keeping, others extremely large.

The crabs, still alive, had been sorted by size into baskets; three pots, two floats and a flag-buoy had been brought back for repair; and now, as the shallop followed the harbour channel in, little remained for Jacob and Edwin to do but sit in the thwarts and talk.

While working they remained largely silent, sometimes issuing a grunt or a brief and superfluous request for this object or that which was immediately granted. When they broke for their bread and beer they might speak of their families, discuss matters of moment in the village, talk about people Ralf had never known, or rehearse improbable stories they had told each other a hundred times before. Young as he was, Ralf marvelled that they never argued or showed signs of irritability, even when things were going wrong.

He was at the tiller. From the very first his grandfather had taught him how to sail. One day, his grandfather had said, he might be the only able-bodied hand left aboard.

Ralf could feel in his grasp the rivalry between the breeze, three-quarters astern, and the bubbling resistance of the rudder and hull. His eye took pleasure from the wind-filled curve of the reefed, tan-coloured sail: its shape was a perfect expression of the tensions between the mast and boom.

This was the part of his working day he liked best. Though they were both kindly, well-meaning men, and their occasional jokes at his expense were harmless enough – unlike some of the pranks played on the other boys who went out – Ralf had no understanding with them. He still remembered his days at the cathedral school; he had, assisted by the village priest, tried to keep on with his Latin; and, using precious sheets of parchment, also provided by the priest, he had continued to take solace from drawing.

He had always drawn, especially buildings and tools, and now the more interesting things he found on the beach: anything that seemed to him beautiful or well-adapted to its purpose. The more he drew, the more closely he needed to observe. Drawing was observation made permanent. Since there was always something else to be seen, however much you looked, the very nature of a drawing made it obsolete, and Ralf was never satisfied, even though the priest himself had called some of his efforts 'very like'.

He glanced to starboard, at an approaching channel marker. Beyond it ran the village shoreline, saltings backed by the tree-grown eastern dike, behind and below which lay arable fields. Nearer the village, on the far side of the river, the ground rose and the trees became thicker, culminating in the stand of limes around the church and Hall. Ralf could already see, by now in line with the church tower, the sheds and landing-stage of the staith where, in a few minutes' time, he would help to unload the catch and wait for the reeve to mark the ledger.

To port lay more saltmarsh, lined by seablite, and the rise of the long shingle beach which, at its shifting, scattered, incurved point, marked the entry to the harbour.

Ralf glanced again at the channel marker. 'About,' he said.

Jacob and Edwin slightly raised their hands, to show that they had heard, and, like Ralf himself, now ducked under the boom as he put the tiller over and changed tack.

Theirs was the sixth boat to arrive. More came in as they waited for the reeve to assess their baskets. The *Meg* was not dragged ashore but left at anchor: Jacob and Edwin, and Edwin's son, would be sailing again this evening, with lanterns, going far out for mackerel.

The sun broke through the clouds. The horse-drawn dray of the usual Alincester fishmonger emerged from the trees, blocking the trackway from the village, but the crabs had yet to be weighed, the ledger marked, or the damaged pots, floats and buoy duly noted.

'Run along, Ralf,' Jacob said.

'What about the pots? Don't you want me to carry one?'

'We can manage. I'll see you at home.'

No more than two hundred yards from the staith, Ralf came upon Godric de Maepe, sitting on a stile.

He got down. 'I hoped I might see you. I didn't thank you properly.'

'No need for that. Please.'

'I wasn't myself.' He gave an awkward smile. 'Are you walking home?'

'Yes.'

They set off. Ralf felt uneasy. Today he was far more conscious of his place and they walked for a time in

silence. The river, its banks much overgrown, was spanned here by a wooden bridge with rough-hewn rails.

As they crossed it Godric said, 'Did you get into trouble?'

'No. I think I can mend the bag.'

After a moment he went on. 'They asked a lot of questions about Letty. I let them think I gave up as soon as I lost my boots. My father sent someone to look for her body. He didn't find it.'

'She'll be on the Point by now.'

'Really?'

'I expect so. That's how the current runs.'

Godric wordlessly yielded to Ralf's knowledge of the tides. 'Then I've got to get my clothes rinsed in fresh water without anyone knowing.'

'Can't you do it yourself?'

'No. They'd find out. Besides, I've no way to hang them up to dry.'

Ralf had never had cause to set foot inside the Hall, but at second hand was quite familiar with its offices as they pertained to regulating the manor. Perhaps even before the church, the Hall was the most important building in Mape and most of the villagers thought nothing of going there to see the steward to settle questions of pannage or strip-boundaries, or even to petition the baron for a ruling in some more thorny dispute.

Just as he had never considered the baron to be a father like his own, so Ralf had never before thought of the Hall as a family dwelling with private chambers the lowlier vassals never saw.

It struck him as quaint that Godric, with so much at his command, could not even arrange the private drying of a

suit of clothes. He was tempted to offer to do it himself, but then saw that he, too, would be subjected to unwelcome questions at home.

'I've got a tercel,' Godric said. 'Have you ever seen him?'

'I think so.' Ralf had often noticed the baron and his retainers, with or without one or more of his sons, setting forth on horseback, bent on hawking or hunting. 'A little one, isn't he?'

'A hobby. He doesn't catch much. A few martins. Mostly he gets dragonflies.'

'Not much good for the table, then.'

'No. Unless you like dragonflies.'

'I've never had them.'

'Nor me.' Godric gave another smile, broader this time, and without any trace of awkwardness.

They walked a few steps more. Ralf felt his sense of inferiority diminishing. It seemed that Godric had, at Ralf's request, laid his gratitude aside.

'I'm flying him this evening,' Godric said. 'Would you like to come?'

'I don't know,' Ralf said. The invitation had taken him by surprise, and he was not sure whether he could be spared. There would be chores at home and the crab-pots needed mending. 'I'll have to ask.'

Godric assented with a motion of his head in which Ralf detected disappointment. He realised that he was being offered what he most lacked, what he had not known since the cathedral school: the companionship of one his own age. Last night and again today he had recalled their easy, pleasant conversation on the walk along the dike. Now it seemed that Godric might have recalled it too.

'Where were you thinking of going?'

‘Out to the Severals.’

These reed-fringed lagoons, near the end of the eastern dike, comprised one of the wildest places in the manor and one of the best for birds. The ground there, falling away towards the harbour mouth, was so low that the whole area sometimes flooded, even if the dike did not give way, which, in winter, it occasionally did.

‘I may have to work,’ Ralf said, ‘but I’ll do my best.’

Almost imperceptibly, Godric brightened at this, though, much like Ralf himself, he was trying to appear indifferent.

So was it arranged that, when the evening bell sounded, Godric would come to the north door of the Hall and wait there for a few minutes in case Ralf was able, after all, to be spared.

* * *

For Anna Grigg, having once been convinced that she was escaping the drudgery of this damp and confining cottage, her husband’s fall had been particularly hard. Not that she disliked her father or wished to be parted from him; not that she disliked Mape itself or its lenient baron, or even its backwardness and isolation; but for Linsell to have bought her freedom, to have established her as the mistress of a household inside the high flint walls of the finest city in the south, and then for her, her husband, and their two beautiful children, to return, penniless, to the place of her birth: this had not been easy.

None of the girls she had grown up with, who were now women like her, of middle age, with children of their own, had found a freeman willing to pay their price. They had envied her at the time, envied her good-looking

bridegroom and her lavish wedding at the village church. They had envied her at a distance, and during her infrequent visits they had envied her still more. It was not surprising that, behind their hands, some of them had expressed satisfaction at her plight.

Their station was now better than hers. They had the protection of the manor and would never starve. Their menfolk would never be at a loss for work or a house, however mean, in which to live. Because they had never left the place, they and their children had been drawn ever more tightly into the village. They knew what the future held.

The catastrophe had begun with deceptive auguries of smoothness and ease. Linsell had won his biggest contract yet, to build a dozen almshouses for the city beadle.

Linsell's usual merchant had been unable to supply at short notice the quantity of seasoned oak needed, so he went to another, named Acklin. Six weeks into the contract Acklin was charged with stealing trees from royal land and all his stocks – seasoned as well as green – were seized, including twenty prime standards for which Linsell had already signed. All timber at the site, some of which Linsell had supplied from his own yard, was also seized.

His assumption that the bishop would make good the loss was soon dispelled by the beadle's masters on the diocesan panel. Since Linsell's tender had so notably undercut the other contractors', there was also a possibility that he would be accused of conspiring with Acklin.

Linsell could not afford to sue the bishop, whose advocates were the best in the land. He could no longer raise credit, even to buy more timber. He necessarily defaulted on the contract, losing the value of the work

already done, and was prosecuted by the panel in the county court. The fine and costs amounted to over a hundred and twenty marks. Meanwhile Acklin's trial, to be held at Westminster since the Crown was the plaintiff, was postponed and postponed yet again.

Orders at the yard had ceased. The men were dismissed and the workshop closed. Anna's husband was no longer invited to the houses of other guildsmen and merchants. Some even ignored him, and her, in the street.

The conspiracy charge was not made; Acklin was found guilty and hanged, but not before his clerk had deposed that Linsell had acted throughout in good faith. Linsell's petition to the diocese for the value of his own timber was granted. He eventually recovered most of his losses from Acklin's estate. At the end of the three years the whole affair had consumed, he was left twenty-seven marks in debt.

This sum represented over a year's wage for a master in charge of carpentry at a major project such as Alincester Cathedral. Linsell was a master, but until his debt was repaid his guild, bound by its ancient ordinances, would withhold his master's licence.

He had at least been allowed to keep his tools. As a skilled journeyman at the boatyard he was receiving six marks a year. Even by living rent-free and practising every economy possible, it could take him another seven years before his licence was restored.

Anna cared little for herself, but she could not forgive the effect all this had had on her innocent husband, daughter and son; and on her children unborn who now, through poverty, would never be. Her only Ralf, whose promise had shone through from his earliest age, had been

denied his schooling, his future. Without a miracle, in the form of a free apprenticeship, what would he amount to? And what now of poor, sweet Imogen?

Anna blamed the bishop. Linsell refused to listen, but she blamed the bishop nonetheless. This old man, rich beyond imagining, richer even than the King, could have ended their troubles with one slight pressure of his seal in warm wax. He lived in remote splendour, so far above the cares of the people that he might have been the Pope himself. The cathedral, still unfinished, had been forty years in construction; that, and his palace, were devouring the diocese.

As a child, Anna had listened with credulity to the priest's words about the downtrodden. According to the Saviour, they would be exalted. The gospel said other things too, just as subversive, about the rich. Had he not in righteous rage overturned the tables in the temple?

Linsell was never moved to rage, righteous or otherwise. She was impatient with him for his acceptance, but could not in earnest be sorry for it. His mildness was one of the qualities that had most attracted her when first they had met, sixteen years ago, here in Mape. He had been sent by Master Hampden among a party of cathedral-men choosing wind-formed oak, the best of which grew near the sea.

He was not only mild but exasperatingly impartial. Sometimes Anna could not help herself. In the extremity of her frustration, disappointment and weariness, sometimes – but never in the hearing of the children – she found herself reproving him or even trying to quarrel. That injustice too he bore without complaint.

This afternoon she was so tired that she had again been unable to suppress unreasoning resentment of his absence. In Rushton when his working day was over, Linsell had nothing more to do. His lodgings, at the house of another workman, never needed cleaning by him. He never had to fetch water or to launder these threadbare clothes. He never had to cook, to grind corn, to eke meals out of nothing, to nurse any who might be ill, to sew, to mend, endlessly to mend. Her family never had anything new unless, received as alms, it inflicted yet more injury on her pride. All this had to be endured under a roof that was not their own.

Like most of those in Mape, her father's cottage was cramped and gloomy, with ceilings so low that one could barely stand up. Linsell had done what he could, but the doors and shutters, warped and in places even rotten, no longer fitted. Only the tiny, smoke-filled kitchen had a pavement; the other floors downstairs were of beaten earth. Damp came from below, from the walls, and from the thatch, which was so old and black, so sodden and leaky, that it should have been stripped ten years ago. The manor had promised repairs but they never came.

'I'm sorry, dearest, I can't do much more with this,' Anna told Imogen, as she tied off the thread on her second shift; the split seam had already been mended two or three times. Imogen, cleaning a bowl of parsnips in her lap, thanked her and said she did not mind.

For a tender moment Anna gazed at her daughter's profile. They were sitting outside the front door, making the most of this unexpected late-afternoon sun.

'Mother,' she said, 'why aren't … Mary says we aren't supposed to be here.'

Mary Ibbott was one of the little girls with whom Imogen played.

'She says Father isn't a serf, so we shouldn't be living here.'

Anna kept back the reply she wanted to make. 'The Seigneur decides who may occupy his houses.'

'The baron?'

'That's right.'

'Is he a good man?'

'Yes. He is.' Except, perhaps, for his steward's promise about the roof.

'He won't make us leave?'

'You mustn't listen to Mary,' Anna said gently. 'His Lordship has always been kind to us. Even when your grandmother was alive. Especially then.'

The baron need not have permitted Anna's purchase. Nor need he have set the price so low. He could even, on the wedding-night, have insisted that she attend him instead of her groom. And he had been generous to Jacob, allowing him to continue alone in a cottage that might have housed a whole family, or even two.

The manor encompassed part of another village besides Mape and, at some remove along the coast, land which was rented by a neighbouring, ecclesiastical, manor. The baron farmed about a third of the total, his demesne, for himself. He had five other tenants. The rest was villein land. Each family of glebe-serfs, bound to the soil, had its own strips in the communal fields, widely separated and interspersed with demesne strips, usually handed on from father to son. The baron controlled all buildings except the church and could move his serfs around at will.

Imogen was about to frame another question, but her attention was drawn away, as Anna now saw for herself, by Ralf's appearance in the gap in the hedge that served as the gateway between the long, narrow front garden and the village green.

* * *

The evening meal, rabbit stew, was ready soon after Grandfather got home. Ralf sat down to eat without having broached the subject of Godric or the Severals.

Even as grace was being said, Ralf, eyes closed and hands clasped, was still wondering what to do. Last night the main reason he had omitted mention of Godric was a fear of questioning that might have exposed what had happened in the saltings.

Ralf was innately truthful and disliked even prevarication. He preferred to avoid venturing into any territory where he might wish to tell a lie. Besides, he was so little accomplished at deception that he usually got found out, especially by his mother, whose powers of penetration were so much greater than those of his father.

But Ralf had also failed to mention Godric for another reason. The baron's family was so far above his own that he could not predict the reaction of his mother and grandfather, whether they would disapprove, or even feel slighted.

'Amen,' he murmured, and opened his eyes. While waiting for his turn with the parsnips and attending to Imogen's questions about his day, he could not help continuing to listen out for the evening bell.

There was only one big bell in Mape, in the church, rung on Sundays to mark the seven canonical hours, and as a tocsin when a boat was in trouble or a house had caught fire. During each weekday the doorward's boy came over from the Hall six times, at three-hourly intervals, to ring the sequent which regulated work in the fields and in the village. Ralf had heard the afternoon sequent, faintly across the water, as he had helped Edwin to haul in the last of the pots.

It could not be much longer before the evening sequent sounded and he was due to meet Godric. If he did not bring the subject into the open well beforehand, it would by then be too late to speak. For Ralf had now admitted to himself that he wanted very much to visit the Severals this evening, not just for the sake of his new acquaintance, but also to see the hobby.

Everyone was served. Ralf swallowed his first spoonful.

'May I go out after supper?' he said to his mother, and then, before anyone could speak, he turned to his grandfather with: 'I haven't forgotten the broken pots, but I've a chance to see a hobby.'

'A hobby?' Jacob said.

'It's a hawk,' Anna said.

No: a falcon, or, to be really strict, a tercel, but Ralf, waiting for the next question, forbore.

'Whose is it?' Anna said.

'Godric de Maepe's. He was on the staith-track just now. He asked if I could come.'

Anna looked at her father with a significance Ralf did not understand. 'I didn't know you knew him,' she said.

'We met yesterday.'

'Beachcombing?'

‘He lost his dog in the marsh.’

‘I heard something about that.’

Jacob said, ‘Are you quite sure he asked you?’

‘Yes. He’ll be at the Hall when the evening bell sounds. He’s going out to the Severals.’

‘Them old pots can wait,’ Jacob said, readdressing himself to his stew. ‘I see no harm in it.’

‘Nor me,’ said Anna.

‘I can go, then?’

‘If you’re back well before dark.’

Imogen now piped up, taking Ralf by surprise. ‘Can I come?’ When informed by her mother that she could not, she rejoined with a drawn-out ‘Please’ that made even Ralf smile.

‘It’s not fair,’ Imogen said.

‘Mr Godric only asked your brother,’ Anna told her. ‘Anyway, even if he’d asked you as well, I wouldn’t let you go. You’re too little.’

‘That’s what I mean about it not being fair.’

Ralf saw that his mother was studying him. ‘Is anyone else going?’ she said. ‘His brothers?’

‘I don’t know. I didn’t think to ask.’

‘Remember who they are, Ralf. We depend on the Seigneur. Do you understand?’

‘Yes. But he’s not at all stuck up.’

Her expression had become even more dubious. Ralf glanced at her uneasily. She seemed to be weighing, for the first time, his maturity, his judgement. Was she reflecting that she had given her permission too readily? Was she, contrary to all his experience, about to change her mind?

Jacob, oblivious, asked Imogen to pass the greens.

When, a moment later, Ralf dared to look at his mother again she gave a slight, curious smile and engaged his eyes. She knew what he had been thinking.

'Don't forget,' she said. 'Not too late back.'

4

From then on, Ralf and Godric became firm friends. Two or three times a week, when Ralf had finished work, they would set out for the beach, lagoons, woods or gorse. A pair of the baron's deerhounds might go with them, or, more often, the hobby, which, neat, compact, and indescribably graceful, had captivated Ralf from the start. As time went on Godric showed him how to carry the bird, to remove its leather hood, to let it fly and then bring it back, elegantly panting, to the glove. The hobby was Godric's first falcon. If he treated it properly, if he learned all it could teach him, his father had said, he would, when he was older, have a man's bird: a saker, a lanner or, if he really showed ability, a peregrine or gyr.

Ralf discovered that, like himself, Godric was wont to spend much time on his own, whether physically, on his solitary expeditions or, which was less tolerable, mentally, in the presence of those who did not understand him. His two elder brothers, seventeen and twenty-two, were far too exalted to consider him worthy of notice. His elder sister, at nineteen, was already married and living elsewhere. With the other sister, a year younger than himself, Godric felt he had nothing in common.

All this had emerged by degrees. Their conversation was usually light, even joshing, but Ralf realised early on that Godric not only retained everything that he heard said, but

also thought about it later, as one or two of his remarks made plain.

No further mention, however oblique, was made of the rescue. He had understood that Ralf did not wish him to feel beholden, that Ralf had acted instinctively or impulsively, without any reference to Godric's identity; and that a sense of obligation would raise a barrier between them by implying that Godric's condescension derived solely from gratitude.

Their social difference he treated with the utmost delicacy. At no time did he attempt to play down his own father's wealth or eminence, but he also spoke of Ralf's family with due respect, and managed to convey his sympathetic conviction that their straits were as temporary as they were undeserved.

He wanted to know about daily life in Alincester and the cathedral school. He himself was being tutored by his father's clerk and could already read and write Latin with some fluency. As the youngest son he was destined for the Church, and at the age of fourteen would begin the course of training which, at twenty-one, would lead him into holy orders.

Perceptive as he was, Godric did not seem conscious of the price Ralf paid for his friendship. There were ten or twelve other boys in the village of similar age, the sons of serfs, by whom Ralf had always been equably regarded, even if he was a freeman's son. Now their manner towards him had become cautious, and it was spreading to their fathers and uncles. At the staith or games of football on the village green, Ralf felt himself becoming marginalised. He had trespassed on nothing that was theirs, but they resented him as if he had and at first he did not know how

to respond. His pride would not let him curry favour, and anyway he did not see why he should. Then, one Sunday at the end of August, he realised that he did not care.

The morning service proceeded as usual. The church was full. Standing between his mother and sister in a lowly place far from the altar, Ralf was letting his mind roam free. He liked the smell of incense and the meaningless sound of the mass, but that was all. He was surreptitiously studying the congregation and the garishly decorated interior of the building, wondering how the trusses of the roof had been put together and how many men it had taken to shape the stone blocks of the walls. There was a single stained-glass window, showing St Nicholas, the patron saint of mariners, to whom the church was dedicated. Compared with the windows at Alincester it was crude indeed, just as the whole church was crudely made. It held communicants to match. Besides their senior retainers – the steward, the doorward, and the rest – only the de Maepes themselves would not have looked out of place in the cathedral.

A pillar blocked Ralf's view of that family, but he had seen them going in: Godric, his parents, his sister and two unmarried aunts. During the singing Ralf had heard the baron's voice, enthusiastically raised above all others. The contrast with Ralf's own lacklustre efforts always made him smile.

He had never met the baron or any of Godric's family. Nor had Godric ever called for him at Grandfather's cottage. They always started from the Hall, where Godric would be waiting at the north door.

When the service finished and Ralf, just behind Imogen, filed past the priest and emerged in the sunshine, he saw

that Godric, the baron and the others of his family happened to be near by, among the throng of people standing about in the churchyard. Godric saw him and waved. Ralf waved back. The baron, noticing, looked at Ralf and then, inclining his head somewhat to be closer to his son, seemed to ask a question during which his hand, while not exactly pointing, indicated Ralf. A moment later, to Ralf's consternation, and in full view of the whole village, Godric and his father were approaching.

Linsell's hat, which he had only just donned, was snatched off.

'Good day to you, Master Grigg,' said the baron, and smilingly acknowledged Anna and Jacob. Even Imogen, who, following her mother's example, gave a deep curtsy, received an indulgent beam. 'A splendid sermon, I thought. "The voice of the Lord is upon the waters." One always comes back to the Psalms.' He was of middle height, burly, grey beginning to appear in his hair. A gold ring with a brilliant green stone encircled his right forefinger; above his tunic of rust-coloured velvet he was wearing a say robe in cream, decorated along its edges with a wreathing, abstract pattern, like ivy.

His brown eyes settled on Ralf. 'So this is Godric's friend. Ralf, I believe?'

Ralf managed a passable bow. 'Yes, my lord.'

'Godric tells me you are skilled in drawing, Ralf. Father Pickard says the same, do you not?'

Ralf turned to see that the priest had left the porch and joined them.

'Skilled he is, sire,' said Father Pickard, and Ralf, as a proprietorial hand alighted on his shoulder, felt his cheeks and ears ablaze and wondered how much worse his

embarrassment could get. Involuntarily he gave Godric a pleading look.

‘May Ralf come to the Hall this afternoon, Papa?’

‘Of course. Why shouldn’t he?’

‘Ralf, will you be able?’

When the baron and his son had returned to their own party, Ralf wanted nothing more than to flee. All eyes had been upon him. Yet, when he eventually followed his parents and grandfather through the churchyard, he knew that he was not sorry to have met the baron or to have been asked to the Hall. More than that, he was excited by the prospect of taking his drawings for inspection, as the baron, in parting, had requested.

Holding Imogen’s hand, Ralf passed through the lich-gate and started on the short walk home.

‘Well, well,’ said Linsell. ‘His Lordship must like you, Ralf.’

‘No doubt of that,’ Jacob said. ‘Dun him for a new roof, there’s a good lad.’

‘You’ll do no such thing, Ralf,’ said Anna, playfully pushing at her father. ‘Just be yourself.’

That was not so easy. Before the noon meal Ralf ascended the steep, narrow staircase to the little room he shared with Imogen, opened the shutter so that he could see, and, from under his cot, dragged out the shallow box in which he kept his private things. He sat looking through the folder of drawings, which by now comprised sixty or seventy half-sheets, quarter-sheets, and even scraps of parchment and palimpsest. None were as he remembered. All now seemed lazy or artificial. Slowly, irresolutely, he chose the least bad and laid them out on the counterpane. A place in the final selection was assured only for two or

three pages – including one covered with studies of the hobby – that Godric had already seen and had presumably recommended to his father.

Ralf's indecision after the meal was equally protracted. The only halfway presentable garments he owned were those he wore to church. The baron had seen them this morning. If Ralf put them on again this afternoon it would not only make him look affected, especially in front of Godric, but also emphasise, even exaggerate, the poverty of his everyday clothes. But of these he had none that had not at some time or other been drenched in seawater, stained with fish-slime, or covered with burs or mud; and hardly any that showed no sign of mending, darning or alteration.

Finally he just put on the cleanest he had. He was poor; the people at the Hall were not to be competed with.

In this frame of mind he arrived fifteen minutes later at the west door, under the tower, and was admitted by the ward.

* * *

Mape Hall was nearly two hundred years old, dating from 1070, but the original structure had been so badly damaged in a fire that the third baron had demolished most of it and started again. His centrepiece was a spacious hall-house of two storeys, timber-framed and roofed with red tile. The buttery, kitchen and pantry served the large central hall. Beyond lay the solar, or accommodation for the lord and his family. This comprised two ground-floor rooms, a parlour and dayroom, and three chambers above, the largest of which was fitted with a garderobe, or privy, connected by a wooden conduit to its cesspit.

Since then, the accommodation had been extended upstairs and down, quarters for the steward had been attached to the north wall of the buttery, and some of the windows on the first floor had been glazed. But the main changes had occurred elsewhere. At the edge of the enclosure, outside the palisade, a new farmhouse, milking-parlour and barns had been built by the present baron's father, the fifth Lord de Maepe. A cluster of single-storey buildings incorporated the stables, kennels, hawk mews, and offices for the clerk and others of the staff.

Mape had never come under serious threat. Gervase de Maepe's military obligation to the king had long ago been commuted into scutage, money paid in lieu of service, and the garrison with its wooden tower had been left pretty well untouched for nearly a hundred years. Repairs to the palisade had left it as little more than an ornamental fence running through the shrubbery, and the west gates, once fitted with great locking-beams, had actually been removed as a nuisance and left leaning up behind a barn.

Gervase's obligations did not end with his scutage, onerous as it was. He was required to contribute to the dowry of the king's eldest daughter on the occasion of her first marriage; to join with other barons in ransoming His Grace should he be captured by a foe; to attend court when required, and there give counsel; to fund one week of the County Assizes; and to be answerable to the Justiciar for the peace of the manor. And even today he still undertook commissions for the Crown, both here and abroad, to settle disputes or smooth ruffled feathers; at one time there had been many of these.

His greatest burden remained a debt to the Treasury of four hundred and twenty marks. According to custom, a

relief of one hundred pounds, or one hundred and fifty marks, was due to the Crown whenever a baron succeeded his father. The king effectively increased this amount by making his permission contingent on a gift which amounted to nothing more than a bribe. In the case of the present baron, four hundred pounds had been the price of the Manor of Mape. Since his succession seventeen years earlier, only a hundred and twenty had been paid back. The rents and scutage which he could himself demand of his tenants were in turn limited by their ability to pay. The price of wheat had been falling for twenty years, and most of the other revenue-bearing products of the manor also commanded lower prices than they had in his father's time.

Gervase tried to dwell not on the magnitude of his debts, but on the advantages of his rank. In return for his fealty to the king, he received political favour and military protection. His sons were entitled to knightly or ecclesiastical education with its promise of future preferment. And despite the fact that his eldest daughter's dowry – and the cost of her marriage licence, granted by the king – had worsened his position most gravely, Gervase had succeeded through her in allying himself, and thereby his faction at court, to the Earl of Warwick. He had similar hopes for her sister. In sixteen months' time, at fourteen, Eloise would reach marriageable age.

A baron was a vassal of the king. The king was a vassal of God. The archbishops who had presided at his coronation derived their authority from the pope.

The king was sovereign, above all. His court, his treasury and his army were the visible symbols of his might; but the wealth and power of the Church, more shrewdly exercised,

were no less. The revenues of the Alincester diocese alone were rumoured to be greater than the king's.

Eloise was thinking of its bishop as she heard Godric and his village friend approaching. According to Godric, the boy's father, a craftsman, had worked on the cathedral. She had been in Alincester earlier in the month, for the first time in nearly three years. The scaffolding was coming down now from the west front: the great window was in place; the soaring stonework, with statues of the saints, had been completed; and at the apex, so high up that it had made her dizzy just to bend her neck to look, the benign figure of St Oswin now gazed out over the densely packed city roofs to the walls, over the Broad Pond and onwards, all across the shire.

A new flagstone walk approached the west front squarely across the cathedral precincts, leading in from Minster Street. Following it with her mother, looking up and yet further up as the cathedral drew near, Eloise had felt herself not just marvelling, but awestruck. *This*, the building proclaimed, *this* is what Bishop William, through God's grace, can do!

The new cathedral replaced the minster where the relics of St Oswin had been housed. Since the tenth century Alincester had been a place of pilgrimage and miracle: the walls of the Minster had been hung with hundreds of abandoned crutches. The priceless gold and silver feretory enshrining the saint's bones, donated by King Edwald in 967, still drew the sick and halt from all over the realm.

The Benedictine monastery had also been rebuilt. Its scriptorium had produced the Alincester Bible, reputedly the most valuable book in the known world, made under the patronage of William of Briouze by a single scribe and

six artists over a period of nineteen years. The skins of two hundred and fifty calves were said to have gone into its vellum pages. The decoration incorporated gold leaf and, even more costly, lapis lazuli, imported from the east. But the magnificent Bible, like all the other treasures, paled before the achievement of the building itself.

Five hundred and thirty feet from east to west, in the plan of a cross with transepts to north and south, comprising tens of thousands of tons of stone, wood, iron, tile and lead, it rose from reclaimed water-meadows in the heart of a settlement which even under the Romans had been among the most prosperous in Britain. The structure was visible for miles around. It dominated the landscape and the city.

Yet even this had left Eloise defenceless, unprepared for what lay behind the massive west doors. She had never been inside them before. During her previous visit, her first, at the age of nine, the cathedral had been closed to all visitors while the vault of the nave was being finished.

There were no words for it. Gaping, wondering, stunned, she had indeed been rendered speechless. And still the interior was incomplete. What would it be like when at last the workmen withdrew?

Since then she had thought often about the cathedral. It was worship made manifest, her father had said. They were not so much workmen as divines. To have one in the village was intriguing. She had seen him at a distance, mostly at church, with his wife and two children. The younger was a girl, quiet and very pretty. The elder, Godric's friend, had the same fair hair, though he took more after the father. He also was well-favoured, she thought: they all were.

Godric had been showing him the grounds, probably lingering at the hawk mews or kennels. She had watched the two of them from her chamber window. Since then she had come downstairs and was now seated with her embroidery on a bench outside the parlour. Even here, out of the sun, she felt too warm, but indoors it had been stifling.

The bench was almost touching the wall. On either side of it, between the house and the shingle path, lay a bed of flowers and low shrubs. Looking along it as the crunch of footfalls grew louder, she saw Godric and his friend turn the corner and come fully into view.

They stopped in front of her.

'Eloise, may I present Mr Ralf Grigg? Ralf, this is my sister, the Honourable Mademoiselle, Eloise de Maepe.'

'How do you do,' she said.

The boy made a bow, as befitted, not quite as formal as the one he had given her father, this morning, in the churchyard.

'Have you been with the hawks?' she asked, for want of something to say.

'Yes,' Godric said. 'We have. Where's Papa?'

'He and Mr Caffyn have ridden out. To Eyton.' This was the other village in the manor, part of which her father held.

'Ridden out?'

'What of it?'

'He said he wanted to see Mr Grigg's drawings.'

She had already noticed the half-sheet portfolio under his arm, made of two pieces of thin board tied with ribbon. 'Well, I'm sorry for that,' she said.

'When will he be back?' Godric said.

‘I don’t know. Late, I think.’

‘Never mind, Ralf.’

The boy’s sunburned face showed no change of emotion, except perhaps a tightening of his lips. His eyes were neither blue nor grey, but something in between. For a moment they held her own.

‘I can leave them for him, if you think … if you think he really wants to …’

‘I’m sure he does,’ Godric said. ‘He wouldn’t have asked you, otherwise.’

Eloise heard herself saying, ‘May I look?’

‘By all means.’ The boy untied three of the ribbon bows and proffered the folder. She laid her frame aside to take it. With that, Godric sat down next to her. The boy remained respectfully standing.

‘That’s the well-head on the green,’ Godric said, as she examined the uppermost sheet.

‘Yes, I can see,’ she said. The drawing, in intensely black ink, perhaps coprinus, had been most deftly done. The following few pages, some bearing only one image, others covered in studies in various stages of completion, depicted a medley of equally mundane objects. What a curious taste he had for the trivial! An axe from three angles, another stuck in a log; an outhouse; a ploughshare; a mallet; an oar; a reed-cutter’s punt.

‘Good, aren’t they?’ Godric said.

‘Do you never draw people?’ she asked, looking up.

He was unable to reply before Godric said, while reaching over to turn the page, ‘Look, he’s drawn my bird.’

This sheet Eloise picked up and studied. The other drawings had been lifeless, mere exercises in technique, but the animation in these was striking. In one the hobby

sat on a sketchy gauntlet; in another it skimmed the reeds with winnowing wingbeats; in others, across the top of the page, it made a series of tiny silhouettes, each different, each capturing its character in the sky; and, larger now, having brought forward a clutched dragonfly, it bent its head to nibble in mid air.

'He did all those from memory.'

She set the page face-down. The next showed a bird's webbed foot, open, half open, and closed.

'What's this?' she said.

'A wigeon's foot,' Godric said.

'What's a wigeon? A duck?'

'Yes,' he said. 'There are lots of them on the marsh in winter.' He turned his head again and pointed at the drawing. 'See, this shows you how it works. When a wigeon pushes the water, his toes open and spread the skin. When he pulls back to make another stroke, the toes come together and save effort. Moorhens can't do that. Their feet aren't webbed. That's why moorhens can't swim as fast as ducks.'

The remaining drawings showed more evidence of this strange boy's way of seeing. As she leafed through them, she began to understand. He was fascinated by utility. Where a courtly artist might profess to find beauty, he saw none. For him, beauty lay in function. She almost felt amused, but his manner was so solemn and his obsession with detail so remarkable that she did not dare to risk a flippant remark. Instead, having herself tied the ribbons in neater bows than they had had before, she merely gave the folder back.

'I'm sure my father would like to see your drawings,' she said. 'They're very good.'

‘Thank you.’

‘I mean it,’ she said. He was talented, in the way that the cathedral-men were talented, though as yet undeveloped; and she saw that he must take after his father in that way too, just as Godric, in his complaisance and imperturbability, took after his own.

Since no subject for conversation remained, the two boys departed, and Eloise, having watched them go, and feeling oddly unsettled, turned to pick up her frame.

5

The next day Ralf and his grandfather joined Edwin and most of the other villagers in the fields. On Saturday also they had left the boat beached: this was harvest-time and Jacob wished to quit, or repay, the debt he owed to Cebert, Edwin’s son.

Like his father, like Jacob, like all the fishermen, Cebert was a villein regardant, tied only to the manor. Below him were the villeins in gross, belonging body and soul to the lord. The lowliest of these, bordars, laboured merely in lieu of rent. Above them were the cottars, whose families worked no more than a few acres of land.

Cebert’s acres had been harvested on Saturday. Now the harvesters had moved on and were cutting demesne as well as villein corn. Here Cebert was discharging his obligations to his neighbours and to the lord. Jacob had already paid him in coin for much of his contribution in the past year. By working today, with Ralf’s help, Jacob’s quit would be fully made.

The village arable consisted of a dozen large fields, some as much as two hundred acres in extent. Each was divided

into narrow strips measured according to the pole, five and a half yards long; the steward kept the manor's standard pole at the Hall.

Strips were four poles wide and twenty or forty poles long. A forty-pole strip covered an area of one acre. Its length, two hundred and twenty yards, made a furrow's-length or furlong, and it was the ridges left by the ploughboard itself that divided one man's strip from his neighbours'.

Today they were harvesting the largest field in the manor, stretching all the way from the staith-track to the edge of the Severals. The baron's demesne strips were mixed in with his serfs'. Some of the strips lay fallow; most had been sown with wheat, but a few held other crops. At inland manors, the heads of wheat alone were cut, with sickles, leaving the stalks to stand till the first frosts, when they became brittle and could be broken off and used as thatching straw. But here, as in other places yielding reeds, the stalks were cut as close as possible to the ground and, after threshing, used only as fodder. In this way ploughing and a new sowing could proceed as soon as the stubble had been burnt.

Nearly every serf, of every class, participated in the harvest. The men and older boys cut the corn; the women and children gathered the cut stalks and tied them into sheaves. Twelve sheaves, set on end and supporting each other, formed a shock. The shocks from each strip were assessed by the steward and while the weather remained fine would be left where they stood. As soon as rain threatened, the shocks would be collected by cart and taken for threshing.

Last year Ralf had done no more than help with the gathering, but this year, now that he was thirteen, he was expected to cut.

The reapers started once the dew had dried. Ralf felt the muscles of his arms and shoulders, which had been aching since Saturday, becoming looser, freer. He soon picked up the swing again, and by the time the sun had burned off the freshness of the morning he was engrossed in the rhythm of the line.

The steward, on horseback, came down once. There was a short water-break at the mid-morning sequent, and then the cutting resumed.

The blue above and behind, turning ever deeper and darker, sparkled with bits of straw rising, drifting, settling. White dust rose from the ground. Ralf's ears were filled with the swish of blades, his own the loudest. Those without scythes, raking, making sheaves and shocks, might have been dumb for all he knew.

As he worked, his mind was wandering as if in a dream, coloured by yesterday's visit to the Hall. He had seen the baron's hawks and hounds and horses. Godric had shown him the formal garden with its low, clipped hedges of yew and box, and plucked a leaf or two from the aromatic herbs in the physic garden where, he said, his mother the baroness herself cultivated many of the plants. They had explored the house, the high, smoke-blackened hall, the buttery, kitchen and pantry, and Godric had taken him up the tower to see the view.

The more time Ralf spent with Godric, the better he liked him. He had never had such a close friend before.

Godric had been right about his sister, Eloise: he and she had nothing in common. Where he was open and

enthusiastic, she was cool and withdrawn, standing upon ceremony. 'Do you never draw people?' she had asked, a remark that had cut Ralf deeply, for it revealed the loneliness behind his drawing and the reason why he found it so soothing.

He had sensed her opinion of his threadbare clothes and clumsy manners; and in the end, when she had handed the drawings back, her praise had been as sterile as it had been conventional. It would have been better if she had said nothing.

Since yesterday he had wavered somewhat in his judgement of her. He wondered if he might have been influenced by her dark eyes and darker hair, by her trim figure, or the ladylike way she spoke and moved. Godric had told him about her elder sister, now a countess. That sister could hardly be more beautiful, so what would the younger become when, in due course, her father married her off?

She was high born, destined for a higher place yet. He was destined for – nothing. Not even an apprenticeship. Perhaps, he thought, he had been too quick to take offence. Then he remembered the amusement in her eyes and slashed with renewed violence at the standing crop.

The reapers on either hand were grown men, practised by years of harvest, and Ralf, as on Saturday, was finding it increasingly hard to keep up with them. For him it was punishing work, heavier than anything in the boat. For them it would be easier, and he suspected they were not driving themselves too hard. They would be cutting for at least ten days more.

‘Break,’ the reeve told him. He dropped back while another boy took his place, and joined those making sheaves. Then he was brought forward again.

When at last the noon bell chimed and Ralf, straightening up with all the others, found he could legitimately stop work, he stood mopping his brow and staring without comprehension at the ground they had made. He tried to count the number of strips laid bare, but sweat ran into his eyes.

What little breeze there was, coming in off the harbour, was being blocked by the dike and the trees at its base. The sun was so strong that the harvesters walked over there to sprawl in the shade and take their meal.

His mother and sister were at the far end of the group, among the other women and children, partly obscured by an outgrowth of holly and butcher’s-broom. Ralf sat down with his grandfather.

The air smelled of seaweed. He could hear the piping of oystercatchers in the estuary behind him and for a hopeless moment longed to be wandering the shore.

In a haze of fatigue, his throat parched, Ralf ate his bread and mutton, munched a green apple and took draughts of musty water, poured from leather bags. Saturday had been bad enough: he had been exhausted by this stage then, but somehow today was far worse. He was dreading the afternoon, the expanse of time before the evening bell. Compared with that, this morning had been nothing.

Next to him, Jacob was already stretched at full length, a forearm across his eyes. His food remained untouched.

‘Grandfather?’ Ralf said, feeling his first stab of alarm.

Silence.

‘Are you all right?’

‘I’m all right.’

‘Don’t you want your dinner?’

‘Let me rest, Ralf.’

‘Shall I get Mr Kenway?’

Jacob sat up. Even in the dim light under the trees, he looked awful. Until now Ralf had forgotten how old he was.

‘Please, Grandfather, I want you to go home. Your quit doesn’t matter. I’ll cut again tomorrow. Edwin will understand.’

Eaton Rendell, just beyond Jacob, leaning on one elbow, was watching. About thirty, with red hair and beard, he lived in one of the adjoining cottages. ‘Jacob,’ he said.

‘What do you want?’

‘Listen to the boy. You’re done up. Anyone can see that.’

Ralf felt his heart swell with gratitude. He had never much liked Eaton; or Eaton had never much liked him. He was grumpy and sometimes shouted at his wife and children.

Jacob said, ‘Mind your own business, Eaton.’

‘Don’t be an arse.’ Eaton got to his feet. ‘Ralf, see if you can make him drink some water.’ With that he went to speak to the reeve, who returned with him half a minute later.

‘Farlow,’ Mr Kenway said, ‘you’re finished for today.’ He looked over his shoulder and then down at Ralf. ‘Fetch your mother.’

When Ralf and Anna and Imogen arrived, Jacob was saying, ‘I tell you, I don’t want no fuss. There’s nothing wrong with me.’

Mr Kenway ignored him. To Ralf he said, ‘No fishing tomorrow. The day’s void for you and him. If he wants to

launch on Wednesday he must come and see me first. Maw can cut tomorrow. That'll serve in your grandfather's quit.' He dropped to his haunches. Anna, an arm round her father's shoulders, had been trying to persuade him to return to the village. 'You'll have to go with her, Farlow. I won't let you work any more today. Mrs Grigg, make sure he rests tomorrow as well.'

'I will.'

They retreated across the stubble. Ralf sat down again. He felt cold. Those three people, and his beloved father, were all he had in the world. If something happened to his grandfather, if he died, Ralf did not know what he would do. Jacob was sixty-five or sixty-six, one of the oldest people in Mape. Never before, to Ralf's knowledge, had he missed a moment's work. He sailed at all hours and in all but the worst weather. Yet he was mortal. Like his wife, he too would eventually make a forlorn mound in the churchyard.

Ralf's eyes had filled with tears.

'Don't you worry about old Jacob,' he heard Eaton say. 'Strong as an ox, that one. The heat got him, that's all. Could get any of us.'

Ralf hurriedly wiped his eyes.

'You want to watch it out there yourself,' Eaton continued. 'Keep your hat on. It gets sweaty, I know, but you've got to keep your hat on all the same.'

Despite himself, Ralf smiled.

'That's it, young 'un. Cheer up. If it gets too hard this afternoon, you stop and tell Mr Kenway. Who's the quit for?'

'Cebert.'

'What, him?' Eaton turned his head. 'Cebert! Hey!'

‘What d’you want?’ Cebert shouted back.

‘A word!’

‘Please,’ Ralf said. ‘I don’t mind. I’ll work the quit.’

‘You sound like your grandpa.’ He tossed his head at Cebert, who, having stepped over a number of legs and bodies to reach them, now squatted on the ground.

‘What is it you want?’

‘A favour. You saw old Jacob go.’

‘I did.’

‘Your dad’s not fishing his day tomorrow.’

‘I know that. He’s to give it to me.’

‘Ralf here still owes you this afternoon.’

‘That’s true.’

‘Look at him. He’s broke.’

Examining Ralf, Cebert stroked his beard. His eyes swivelled craftily back to Eaton. ‘He looks all right to me.’

‘I don’t mind working,’ Ralf insisted, but he had already been excluded from the conversation. He did not understand what was passing between these two men.

The subtle system of obligation and quits was central to the way the village worked. It was the basic currency of the serfs. They might sell their free produce at market or to the dealers who came; some might even have a hidden hoard of coins and be reckoned rich; but all had to give part of their week to the manor. Unless voided by the steward or his reeve, a fief-day had to be worked no matter what. The same applied to the quits arranged among themselves. If ever a man was so foolish as to renege on his obligation to another, he would immediately find his life impossible. No one would ever help him again.

‘Let him stop at the afternoon bell,’ Eaton said. ‘He’s my neighbour. And yours, you stingy goat.’ He jerked a thumb

towards the place where Edwin was sitting. 'If you don't know it yourself, ask your old man how Ralf works in that tub.'

Cebert grunted. 'His mother and sister have walked off, too.'

'How long have I known you, Cebert?'

'Always.'

'Do I ever work short?'

Ralf wanted to protest again, but in truth he did not even know whether he would be able to scythe as far as mid afternoon, never mind the evening. He saw Cebert's expression change.

'The afternoon bell, you say?'

'As a favour to me.'

'All right.' To Ralf he said, 'Work till then, Ralf, and we'll call it quits.'

* * *

Having taken their constitutional walk, Eloise, her mother and Aunt Matilde returned to the Hall and the dayroom, to be served with barley-water and almond biscuits by the pantry maid. Though they had all worn broad-brimmed hats and had not walked far – just to the church and a little way along the dike – the sky over the marshes was so glaring and the wind so hot that Aunt Matilde, in particular, had soon felt faint and in need of refreshment.

As the maid filled her cup, Matilde noticed the portfolio left by her brother-in-law on a low oak table under the window.

'What is that, Margaret?' she asked Eloise's mother.

‘Some drawings, by a village boy. Gervase wanted to see them.’

‘Drawings? By a serf?’

‘His mother was a serf, but his father is freeborn. The shipwright. You know.’

‘Do I?’

‘Grigg.’

‘Ah, yes.’

‘It seems the son was in the cathedral school. For a time.’

‘Really?’ Matilde looked again at the portfolio. ‘Did the drawings please him?’

‘Whom?’

‘Gervase.’

‘He didn’t say.’

‘Eloise, would you mind?’ said Matilde, beckoning at the portfolio, indicating that she wished to see it. Chin raised, lips pursed, she turned the first few pages, but soon gave it back. ‘Have you seen them?’

‘Yesterday, Aunt.’

‘What do you think?’

‘He shows skill, as Father Pickard told Papa.’

‘What sort of boy is he?’

‘Godric’s new friend,’ the baroness interjected. ‘Godric has these crazes. I expect he’ll be forgotten next week.’

The conversation moved on. Eloise, having for the third time tied the ribbons, slid the portfolio back on the table, where, unmoving and silent, it gradually became so reproachful that she consciously turned away. She had not informed her mother, as she ought, that Godric’s friend was not some new craze. She had not said, as she ought, that Godric spoke of him with warmth and admiration; and she had not said, as she ought, that she had examined his

drawings again this morning, on her own, at length, and found in them something wonderful.

As far as she could tell from the limited extent of her education in such matters, his technical skill was not yet especially great. His powers of composition seemed instinctive, a matter of taste rather than learning. But his focus, which at first she had found so eccentric, was of a piece with the clarity of his vision. Each subject for his pen was equally valid, or precious, or interesting, and his curiosity enquired into things which most people never even saw.

This morning, lingering again over the sketches of Godric's bird, she thought she had discerned tenderness as well, but the prime allure, the insidious charm, of his work lay in his ability to expunge himself from it. Every painting she had seen hitherto, every sculpture, had been as much about the artist, or his patron, as its subject. These drawings told one nothing about Ralf Grigg; or everything.

She was not too young to have felt the effect of his eyes, or to have observed how well he filled his clothes, and now, thinking back, she acknowledged that she had been noticing him every Sunday in church. That was why, yesterday, she had paused to watch him and Godric from her chamber window; and that was why, as they had crossed the box walk, she had drawn back in case they should look up and see.

'More barley-water, Miss?' the maid said, with a certain insistence, and Eloise realised with a start that the question had just been put to her for the second time.

* * *

Ralf remained with the harvesters until they trudged back to the village. At the afternoon bell, instead of leaving, he had given up reaping and worked at gathering instead. Without mentioning it, Cebert, and those to whom Cebert owed Ralf's quit, had apparently noted this willingness: Ralf was not sure how else to explain their change in behaviour towards him. Their antagonism had vanished.

Puzzling about this while he raked, he recalled Eaton's kindly intercession and puzzled even further, for at that time nothing had changed except his grandfather's fitness to go on. Had Eaton, had the rest of them, pitied Ralf's tears? But then why did Eaton, even before then, take such pains to get Jacob excused? Until today Ralf had known Eaton only as a disagreeable neighbour whose relations with Jacob had been far from cordial.

Whatever the reason, Ralf was surprised to find how glad, and how grateful, he felt to be welcomed back into the village fold. Two of the boys who had recently become hostile, John Hollins and Aholiab Peake, shared a joke with him at the final water-break and, despite his anxiety about Jacob, Ralf even found himself laughing aloud.

When he got home his grandfather was resting upstairs. He felt much better, Anna said, and had slept. She told Ralf that it was nothing serious and he was not to worry.

'He shouldn't be working in the fields,' she said. 'He's not used to it. And neither are you. You especially shouldn't be in the fields.'

Ralf was sitting at the kitchen table while his mother served his meal. Imogen, having already eaten, had gone out to play.

He was still perplexed by the conversation between Eaton and Cebert. He began to ask his mother what it had

meant. As he described what had happened, she seemed to forget what she was doing and sat down heavily, staring across the table at him in horror.

'Is that what he said? "As a favour"?'

'Yes. I think so.'

'Eaton said "as a favour"? Are you sure?'

'Yes.'

'O Ralf!'

'What is it?'

She leaned forward, elbows on the table, and put her face in her hands. He heard an intake of breath and she began to weep, quietly at first, and then, as he rose to his feet, uncontrollably.

'Mother, what is it?'

'Ralf, Ralf!' she cried, accepting his embrace, holding him close. Her softness, her smell, her warmth, transported him back to his helpless days, to the time of Alincester, of his fearful beginning at the school, and in his anguish he began to cry too. 'You weren't to know,' she sobbed. 'O God I hate this village! O dear God!'

'What have I done?'

'Nothing. You've done nothing. Except living here. Except being born under Bishop William. O Sweet Jesus! I can't bear it!'

She disengaged herself and with her apron dabbed at her swollen eyes. 'I'm so sorry, my darling. I'm so sorry.'

'What is it? What's happened?'

'You've put us under obligation to the Rendells.'

'But —'

'Ralf, your father is a freeman. So are you.'

'I don't understand.'

'They're bordars. Nothing. Less than nothing.'

‘But Grandfather —’

‘Grandfather is a regardant. He’d never accept favour from the Rendells. Never. Not unless he set the terms.’

‘I still don’t understand.’

‘You can’t understand it, Ralf. I don’t want you to understand it. You weren’t born a serf. And for that, and that alone, I thank God.’ She sniffed and tried to put her face to rights, brushing back the hair from her forehead.

‘What can I do?’

‘Nothing. Yet. We’ll have to live it down. Then I’ll take something to Eaton’s wife. Fish. Dressed crab. Something. She’ll sneer, but she’ll have to accept.’

After supper he was too tired to do anything but go to bed. Imogen was still downstairs with her mother. Grandfather had joined them, and Ralf could hear the muffled tones of his voice. What were they talking about? The Rendells?

Ralf had never been so miserable. All afternoon he had imagined that Eaton’s actions had sprung from kindness. Why else would he have been so quick to speak to Mr Kenway, if not actuated by selfless concern? Ralf now knew his real motive: to get Jacob out of the way.

The thought was horrible. Ralf could not believe anyone capable of such nastiness. And Cebert too, with whom Ralf had so many times worked in the boat! And all the others, all who had smiled on him: were they too no better than Eaton? Did they hate him because he was freeborn and they were not?

He would never forgive what they had done to his mother.

For some minutes a bar of the setting sun, admitted by the vertical gap at the edge of the shutter, had been

traversing the rough brown surface of the wall, rising and changing shape as it passed across the things on Imogen's shelves. It reached the corner and turned, moving towards her bed; and slowly, imperceptibly from moment to moment, grew fainter and more slender.

If it got as far as the nearest bedpost, he told himself, then he would be wrong about them. But that also meant his mother would be wrong, and she had been born a serf.

Part of his mind was still questioning Eaton's motives for speaking to Mr Kenway. As it sought to explore further, it uncovered an older and even more disturbing wound. What if all this stemmed from his friendship with Godric? What if, yesterday in the churchyard, they had marked the way the baron had singled him out?

There were no secrets in Mape. They would know he had been to the Hall.

The strip of light became a sliver, a trembling filament, straining to stay alive, still moving rightwards. Ralf watched its final, melancholy moment of waning, half an inch short of the top of the post.

He had no friends. He did not belong here. He belonged in the city, with the craftsmen, the traders, the men of free birth.

Only Godric. Godric was his friend. In the cottages there was nobody. Nor, but for Godric, at the Hall. The people there were worse than the serfs. Far from envying him, they looked down their nose.

Ralf had his family and, he thought, he hoped, he had Godric. He needed no one else. He would have nothing to do with Eaton and nothing to do with Cebert. He would rather die than weaken; and he would rather die than, ever

again, be made to feel small by the likes of Eloise de Maepe.

6

After a fitful night, Ralf fell deeply asleep just before dawn. He awoke slowly, groggily, to the chirping of sparrows. When he became conscious of the strength of the daylight and saw his sister's bed empty, he realised that he had overslept. For a few seconds more his merciful memory withheld the reason.

He dressed and went downstairs. His mother and Jacob, with Imogen, were weeding carrots in the back garden. By the time Ralf had visited the privy and washed at the tub by the back door, his breakfast of oatmeal and hazels was ready. Imogen and his grandfather remained outside.

'Ralf,' his mother said, spooning honey into his bowl, 'why don't you go out somewhere this morning? Get away from the village. Go beachcombing.'

'Yes. I might.' He felt drained, listless, but the idea had already occurred to him, not so much of beachcombing, but of putting as much distance as he could between himself and the Rendells' cottage.

He poured more goat's-milk from the earthenware jug. His mother sat down opposite him in her usual place, the one she had occupied yesterday evening. 'Take some dinner. Make it a day. There's nothing I need you to do.'

He turned, aware of movement in the open front doorway, and was astonished by the sight of Godric hesitating there, with the portfolio. At once Ralf felt all the squalor and poverty of his home, and with this a twinge of fear that Jacob or even Imogen might come in and say or

do something to show him up. His mother, wiping her hands on her apron, had already risen, and Ralf too now rose to his feet.

'Please don't get up, please,' Godric said, in evident pain. 'Mrs Grigg, please. I've only come to bring Ralf's drawings. I didn't think I'd see you here, Ralf.'

'I've got a void.'

'Not harvesting, then?'

Ralf shook his head.

Anna said, 'Won't you come in, sir?'

'No, I won't, Mrs Grigg, thank you all the same.'

'Are you busy?' Ralf asked.

'No. Not really. I expect I'll go for a ride later.'

'I thought I might walk out to the Point.'

Godric nodded his approbation. 'I've never been. Not right to the end.'

'Nor me. Well, we've landed there a few times, in the spring.'

'For the gulls' eggs?'

'Yes. But I've never done the walk.'

'It's a long way.'

'Are you up to it?'

'Me? What, now?'

'Why not?'

Ralf could see him considering; and then he had agreed, and come inside, into the kitchen, and was sitting at the table while Ralf's mother busied herself with the supplies they must take to sustain themselves on such an expedition. Ralf and Godric exchanged a glance replete with tolerance of their respective mothers and of mothers everywhere, and Ralf, half turning, answered such questions as she put to him. His shoulder-bag became

packed with cloth-wrapped bread, cheese and two slices of gammon – which he knew had been meant for supper tonight; she added six plums, a stoppered jug of this morning's water, and some biscuits which, like the gammon, Ralf knew could not really be spared. It was more than enough for both of them, more than enough to requite Godric for the small-beer and sweetmeats Ralf had tasted on Sunday.

Ralf's listlessness was forgotten. Nothing untoward took place when Imogen and her grandfather were drawn into the kitchen by the sound of an unfamiliar voice and, by the time the two boys set out for the Hall, Ralf felt ashamed of ever having doubted them.

It was decided that the deerhounds should be left behind. The hobby, which both knew would dislike the beach, was not even mooted. Godric went inside to inform his mother and change his clothes, leaving Ralf sitting on the bench by the west door.

No one came in or out. The village was unnaturally quiet. Nearly everybody was at the harvest. Ralf savoured the satisfaction of having been noticed in Godric's company by Mrs Ibbott and Mrs Creech, who, left in charge of the harvesters' smaller children, had gathered them for games on the green. What Mrs Creech knew in the morning, the whole of Mape knew by eventide.

Leaving his shoulder-bag on the bench, he got up and crossed the few yards to the gateway, where he had noticed the rusty tholes from which the fortified gates had once been hung. The pins were at least three times the size of any he had ever seen. Horizontal grooves showed where the iron eyelets had worn them away. The bracket section was fluted, either to give it greater rigidity or to allow it to

be driven more easily into the oak of the post. Or, he thought, perhaps that shape would make it more stable, reduce its tendency to twist. He now wondered whether the bracket had been hammered in at all: whether an exact mortise had been cut, using a gouge specially shaped for the job. Surely such a simple profile could not support the tremendous weight of the gates, still less withstand a battering-ram. The outer side of the post gave no clue. He went to the other post and palpated the wood opposite the middle thole. Despite its great age and the weathering that had taken place, that surface also seemed perfectly flat. He squatted to examine the bottom one.

Behind him and to the side, he now heard an imperious female voice. 'Have you lost something, young man?'

He turned to see four women; no: three women and a girl: the baroness, her daughter Eloise and two of Godric's many aunts. They had emerged from the open doorway in silence. For all he knew, they had been standing there watching him.

It was the baroness who had spoken. Ralf stammered an explanation in which she evinced no interest. He had been introduced to her on Sunday, but she gave no sign of remembering him. At mention of Godric's name she appeared to place him, to connect him with the outing she had obviously just sanctioned for her son.

'Very well,' she said, vaguely, as if giving him permission to be alive.

The women proceeded through the gateway. Ralf, standing aside, bent his head as they passed, but could not resist looking up when he deemed it safe, and for an instant met the eye of the daughter, who, on the left of an aunt, and walking behind her mother, happened to be

closest. Before she turned away he was certain he had seen her features forming into a supercilious smile. She addressed some unheard remark to her companion, no doubt at his expense, and the four of them disappeared in the direction of the green.

Ralf was determined not to let her affect him.

'I don't think your sister likes me,' he said, when Godric had reappeared and heard about the meeting.

'Take no notice of her,' Godric said.

* * *

Gervase leaned back in Walter Caffyn's seat, which was now facing inwards, away from the writing slope, while the steward himself sat down on Kenway's. Stephen Tysoe, the clerk, was still reading the letter.

'There's no mistake,' he told Gervase, looking up. 'That's what it says, all right.'

The document had arrived this morning with others, by horse, from Alincester. Gervase, having waded through the long-winded, sanctimonious expressions of salutation and regard, had lost patience with the contorted Latin of the final paragraphs, those concealing the nub of the letter. He had given the thing to the steward to decipher. Walter had then called upon the clerk to confirm what he thought he had understood.

'Is there no end to it?' Walter said.

'No,' said Gervase. 'Apparently not.'

The letter, from the Molarius, or diocesan officer in charge of mills, outlined changes in the way grain was to be reckoned. Whereas previously it had been charged by volume, now it was to be charged by weight: a fairer

system to all, the Molarius declared, having due regard to the new and harder strains of wheat which many of his esteemed customers were now producing by virtue of their most excellent management and ingenious husbandry, et cetera, as also having due regard to the advances in drying achieved by many of his esteemed customers, through their most excellent foresight and ingenious industry, and so on and so forth; in consequence of which, petitions from the slightly less ingenious and excellent of his esteemed customers, having been placed before his lord, the Right Reverend and Most Noble Willelmus Briousensis, by the grace of God bishop of Alincester, et cetera, et cetera, had moved His Lordship in his compassion to give ear to their pleas, and accordingly command his panel, and through that august body his humble servant, the undersigned Molarius, to attend to this injustice without delay, wherefore the new tariff was to be observed as from a. d. III Kal. Oct., Anno D. MCCLIII.

All of which, translated, meant that, in one month's time, at Michaelmas, the milling charge would again be going up.

Last year, the charge had been one shilling and threepence a bushel. Now it was to be two and sevenpence a hundredweight.

The density of grain varied with the variety and the dryness, but a bushel, eight gallons, weighed about sixty-two pounds. There were a hundred and twelve pounds in a hundredweight. Sixty-two divided by a hundred and twelve, multiplied by two and sevenpence, made one and fivepence. The charge per bushel had therefore gone up to one and fivepence: an increase of twopence.

‘Yes,’ said Stephen, having examined his arithmetic again. ‘Tuppence on the bushel. More if the wheat is dense.’

Wheat was traded by the quarter, twenty-eight pounds. The latest price of unmilled wheat, at Alincester, was six shillings and eightpence-farthing a quarter. First grade flour fetched eight shillings a quarter, so the difference between the prices of grain and flour was one and threepence-threefarthings a quarter. Of that, the Church now wanted sevenpence-threefarthings – nearly half.

‘Eightpence, then,’ Walter said. ‘That’s the best His Lordship will allow us.’

‘It’s hardly worth it,’ Gervase said, because from the eightpence had to come the cost of carting the stuff to and from a mill, of sacking and certification for adulteration, dryness and weight. ‘We might as well use our own mill.’

But the manor’s push-mill, worked by oxen or horses, was inefficient and kept breaking down. Moreover it took the animals and their attendant away from the ploughing where, in autumn, they were most needed.

The push-mill was classed by the diocese as a molendinium profanum, using neither wind nor water to drive its stones. If a baron wished to build a molendinium sacrum – a mill driven by the divine forces of wind or water – he would first need to obtain an annual licence from the Church. The cost of this began at three marks and increased steeply, according to the capacity of the mill.

Next, such a baron would be assessed on the profits made by his mill. A tithe, one tenth, would be payable to the diocese in which his manor lay. The assessment would apply to the value of the milling to his own manor and to any profits he made by working for others. He would

further be bound by the Molarius to adhere to the standard scale of charges, so that mills in ecclesiastical manors were not undercut. While negligible compared with its other tithes, milling provided a source of revenue for every diocese. The laws dealing with it were extremely detailed and enforced with the maximum zeal.

Few barons could afford a molendinium sacrum. Most sacred mills were sited in ecclesiastical manors where, besides grinding corn, they were used for wood-turning and sawing or driving the bellows and hammers in iron-working.

Windmills on the coast were at particular risk of storm damage and were otherwise problematical, but Gervase de Maepe had in the past toyed with the idea of a watermill. His river had sufficient flow. Upstream, outside the manor, there was as yet no other wheel; if his were the first, its licence would be cheaper and would reduce in price if subsequent mills were built. He had gone so far as to have his clerk reckon it all out. Even if the cost of building and manning were taken into account, the advantages of owning a watermill were real enough. What Stephen could not forecast, however, were the caprices of the bishop. From what Gervase had heard, the cost of the cathedral was proving so ruinous that even William of Briouze was feeling the strain. Unless he had a long-term guarantee of the liabilities, Gervase could not risk the capital needed to erect a mill. The project had remained as nothing more than a sheaf of optimistic calculations, buried somewhere among all the other optimistic manuscripts in this room.

This year's harvest was already looking lean. That might hold the price up a little, provided the harvest were equally bad elsewhere. That in turn would reduce his milling costs.

‘We need more serfs,’ Walter said.

‘You know my feelings on that,’ said Gervase. There were exceptions, but most of his people were idle and fractious. He upheld his compact with them: he gave them housing, protection and certainty. In return he received insolence, indolence, sullen intransigence.

This morning, the letter from the Molarius was not Gervase’s only worry. The contract with the reed-merchant had not yet been signed. The fellow was still muttering about terms, and Walter had reported that the church dike might need repairs this winter, which would divert labour from the reed-harvest. Early next month Gervase had to travel to Westminster and spend time at court. And, to cap everything, he had received new tidings of the extravagance of his eldest and self-named son, Gervase.

Of all his children, he supposed that only Godric gave him no trouble. Gervase and Henry, in the army, between them spent more on horses and drink than the manor itself. Adela’s marriage had cost him so dear that he did not even want to think about it. The next wedding, of Eloise, was his new preoccupation. He and Margaret had begun to scatter groundbait; among others now assembling, the satisfactory shape of a certain duke’s son could be seen through the ripples.

Eloise was a worry in herself. For all her outward obedience, he never could tell what she was thinking. Who knew what was going on beneath that demure exterior, or how she would react to her chosen husband? In every way, he feared, she was quite the opposite of Adela.

But Godric was different. Gervase was reminded of himself at that age, except that Godric was more thoughtful. He asked for nothing, was acceptably studious

– as Stephen, who was schooling him, would attest – and, in short, caused no difficulty at all. He found it hard to make friends, at least among noblemen's sons, a trait that would soon disappear once he had started at the abbey. A favourable portent might be his recent friendship with that rather impressive Grigg boy. If Godric were to get on in the world, and especially in the Church, he would have to learn how to cultivate goodwill and turn it to his advantage.

Goodwill, suitors, the king: all had to be cultivated, like the soil of this manor, manured if necessary with flattery, money or obsequiousness, with hints and half-promises of favour and allegiance, and with compliance when unavoidable.

Gervase always recognised the unavoidable. It frequently took the form of the Church.

He gave Walter a wry smile. The milling charge had been most cunningly set. A fraction more and the diocese would have lost revenue; a fraction less and the greed of Bishop William would not, for now, have been satisfied.

'We have no choice,' he said. 'We'll have to pay.'

* * *

On the walk out to the beach, Ralf told Godric about the trick Eaton Rendell had played. Godric, listening intently, made little comment, but when Ralf said that he was going to ignore Eaton and Cebert in future, Godric said, 'Don't do that.'

'Why not?'

'It's not worthy of you.'

'I hate them.'

‘They’re serfs, Ralf.’

‘So is my grandfather.’

‘You must allow for them.’

‘They know not what they do. Is that it?’

Godric said nothing.

It had just slipped out. Ralf had not meant to cheapen the gospel. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said. He was walking behind, on the narrow path along the top of the church dike. The bare part was hidden by lank vegetation: the yarrow and sea-aster, the lyme-grass and docks, were now as thick as they would ever be.

Godric said, ‘Can you imagine what it’s like to be born in servitude? To know you’ll never be free?’

‘No.’

‘Neither can I. My father taught me that. He’s always complaining about the serfs, but he tries to understand them. He loves them. All of them. Including Eaton Rendell.’

Ralf looked at Godric’s back in surprise. He said, ‘What should I do, then?’

‘Read the Sermon on the Mount.’

‘I don’t have a Bible.’

‘There’s a New Testament in the church. Ask Father Pickard.’

‘It’s in Latin.’

‘“Do good to those who hate you”,’ Godric said, over his shoulder. ‘That should keep you going for now.’

Ralf was assailed by contrary feelings. He had never suspected that Godric’s belief ran quite so deep or that it governed his daily life. He still hated Eaton and Cebert. He still hated them for what they had done yesterday evening to his mother. But, for Godric’s sake, he would try not to ignore them.

During the night the wind had increased and changed to a fresher direction, north-east. Great waves of motion were rippling across the reeds. Ralf breathed clean morning air and looked up at a flawless sky. Godric was right. This was freedom. A mile away, hidden behind the eastern dike, the harvesters were still submerged in their suffering, still toiling their way through dust and sweat across the two-hundred-acre field.

The path ended at the beach. They climbed the rise of shingle to its crest and stood facing the sea.

'Rough today!' Godric yelled.

And blue. 'Eiders!' Ralf cried, pointing at a small, heaving raft of sea-ducks two hundred yards offshore.

'I meant to ask you, how do you know all the birds?'

'My mother taught me.' Most of them, anyway. She could identify any dead ones he brought home, and on their walks together, when he and Imogen had been younger, she had always named the birds, their songs and calls.

Godric grinned for no discernible reason and ran slithering and crunching down the slope towards the surf. Ralf followed.

Low water would come this afternoon. The ebb, three hours old, was uncovering an irregular strip of sand halfway down the beach. This strip, smooth, firm, still gleaming, and sparsely studded with pebbles and the occasional shell, formed an almost unbroken pavement three miles long, all the way out to the end of the Point. Ralf had often seen it from the boat; he had walked part of it, both to east and west.

From the Hall Godric had brought a game-bag and an earthenware bottle of small-beer. He had insisted on unpacking Ralf's bag and sharing the weight.

Ralf removed his shoes, brushed away the sand as best he could, thrust them into his bag and rolled his leggings up his calves. Godric did the same.

Turning their faces to the east, with waves crashing on their right and the wall of shingle concealing the saltings, the village, and even the downs, they set forth on that unprinted highway left by the sea.

7

Mape's river rises from chalk springs in the downs. By the time it reaches the coast it has gathered water from three tributaries. Twelve thousand years of forest silt have been discharged into its estuary.

The coastal current trends eastwards, churning, grinding and grading the chalk and flint that make the sea-bed. Trapped between the sea and the estuary, deposited shingle and sand have extended the beach into a spit. Its long body remains more or less constant from year to year, but the broad, ragged point, curving inward, is always changing. The limit to growth is set by the river. As the estuary widens, its flow can no longer compete with the waves.

A titanic struggle is waged here between land and sea, between fresh water and salt. Mape Point is a battleground, a desert of dunes and spindrift, hardly visited except for birds'-eggs. A single storm can wash out a third of its area. Rebuilding instantly resumes and might last unchecked for years.

To seaward, low tide reveals spacious sandflats, and on the furthest edge of these is the place where the seals haul out to bask and digest.

'How many, do you think?' Ralf said, shading his eyes.

'Two hundred. At least.'

He and Godric, sitting on the shingle near the top of the beach, had completed much of the outward walk; the sand stretched below them and away to the left.

The seals were so far off that it was not easy to count them, and so far off that they had as yet shown no reaction to the intruders. At their leisure, as soon as they felt threatened, they would hitch themselves across the few yards to the sea, slip into the water, and disappear. Though Ralf himself had never participated, his grandfather's boat was one of those which converged to kill seals each autumn, for their skins and fat, but mostly for the quantity of fish they ate and the pots they ruined.

The hides fetched a good price in the city. They were used to make rainproof hats and clothes, and things that had to be soft as well as durable, like gaskets, washers, glaziers' mats and the kneepads worn aloft by masons. The kneepads worn also, Ralf now remembered, by thatchers.

'Godric,' he said, after a moment. 'I've got something to ask you.' And he began to recount the story of his grandfather's roof: what happened every time it rained, the eternal dampness of the bedding, Imogen's chesty cough which, last winter, had so worried their mother.

Almost as soon as he had started, Ralf regretted raising the subject. He faltered.

'Has your grandfather spoken to the steward?'

'Yes, but I don't want you to —'

'What did he say?'

‘This was two years ago.’

‘Did he say he’d mend the roof?’

‘Yes. More than once`.’

‘I’ll speak to my father.’

‘Godric, I didn’t mean —’

‘You were right to mention it. It’s not a favour. You’re entitled to be dry. After all, we’re not short of reeds.’

The Rendells’ roof, and the Whitlocks’, while not so bad, also needed thatching. Ralf suddenly saw how it would look if only Jacob’s were renewed. He wished more than ever that he had held his peace.

‘What is it?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Tell me.’

‘Ours isn’t the only one.’

Godric smiled, the sun above him and to the right, and in that instant Ralf felt more than ever that he had known him before, at some other time, long before Mape. ‘Don’t worry, Ralf. My father isn’t a fool.’ To put an end to the conversation, and Ralf’s discomfort, he raised a hand to his brow and squinted again at the seals.

The highest parts of the sandflats had already dried out. Just above the surface swirling patterns of blown grains were being driven before the wind, like mist. Elsewhere pools of seawater remained trapped. On the far side, to the right of the seals, a loose flock of gulls faced into the breeze; and to the right of them, much further right, at the water’s edge, stood four gull-like birds, smaller, but heavier-looking, and very dark.

‘What are those?’ Godric said, pointing, at the moment of Ralf’s seeing them.

‘I don’t know.’

First one and then the other three dark gulls launched. With powerful beats they flew low towards the seals, on wings long and narrow. There was something languid as well as purposeful, almost sinister, about their flight, and as they approached it the entire white flock of gulls swirled and scattered in terror. The four continued south-eastwards, gaining altitude, and were lost to the glare.

'Demons,' Godric said, and with that word fixed the amorphous feelings rising in Ralf's breast. The unknown birds belonged to the vastness of the creation, or its underside. They belonged to the sea.

'Come on,' Godric said, 'let's go.'

A few small clouds, very white, had appeared. The wind had grown stronger and, despite the sun, felt cold.

The shingle gave way entirely to sand. From the summit of a dune the whole harbour was visible. Along the base of the eastern dike the mud and marsh-plants lay exposed. Along its top, the billowing foliage of the windbreak trees stretched towards the lagoons. Under one of those oaks, this time yesterday, Ralf had sat by his grandfather and yearned to be here.

It was hot in the dunes, out of the wind. They returned to the shore. A few minutes later, near the furthest reach of the Point, they came across a bleached and eroded framework of timbers about four yards long, half buried in the sand. At first they could not make it out.

'It's a ship,' Ralf said. 'Part of a ship. On its side.'

'A wreck,' Godric said. 'Do you think anyone was killed?'

'Bound to have been.'

'I expect it broke up. In a huge storm.'

To judge from the shallow curve of the main bearer, the vessel must have been at least sixty feet long. The beams had been halved, drilled and treenailed, just as Ralf had seen his father do. 'It's beautiful,' he said. 'The way it's made. The way it's weathering.'

'How long has it been here?'

'Ages.'

'How big do you think it was?'

'A sixty footer. Perhaps more.'

'A navy ship, then.'

'Or a transport.'

'I wouldn't be a sailor for anything,' Godric said.

Ralf was not so sure. Walking round these timbers, he had already wondered what it would be like to put to sea. Not just for the day, not just to collect crabs or to fish for flounders, but really to set sail. Beyond the horizon, on the open ocean, you would depend utterly on the men who had built your ship. But even their care and science, and even the bravest crew, could be overwhelmed by the fury of the sea.

He thought of his father in the boatyard at Rushton. They built crabbers, mainly, but also bigger vessels like smacks and even coasters.

Ralf had never seen it before, but there was heroism in the shipwright's craft. Better to build something real, something for a purpose, than a saintly statue or the arches of a cathedral. A church was supposed to glorify God, but what glorified him more? Could a church spare anyone from labour or hardship? Could it carry wool across the Channel or goods along the coast?

At thirteen, Ralf knew such thoughts to be heretical and wrong. He had never breathed a word of them to anyone,

even his own mother. At Sunday service when the congregation prayed, when, with everyone else, Ralf shut tight his eyes and tried to speak to God, he encountered only silence. While Father Pickard spoke of Moses or the Virgin, Ralf tried to listen, to maintain an interest, but soon was thinking of other things. Boredom: that was what he found in church. He feared the presence in himself of grievous sin. He constantly resolved to do better, though he never could.

That was why he had been so struck by Godric's certainty. As they walked away from the wreck, Ralf wanted to ask him more but was unable to find the right words; and then the moment, and with it the impulse, had passed.

To get out of the wind they sat in the dunes to eat. High in the marram-grass, overlooking the sea, they tore the bread apart and swigged their beer. No sails were visible. Fishing had been all but suspended during harvest and the sight of larger vessels was rare. In any case, they steered well clear of the Point and the shoals beyond.

With Jacob and Edwin, Ralf had seen most of the ships that passed. Eastbound for Dover or London, westbound for Portsmouth, Southampton, Bristol and perhaps even more exotic places, the most usual were heavy merchant barques, square-rigged and three-masted, or smaller, single-masted cogs and barges plying the local ports. None, now, ever came up to the staith: the channel was too choked. Occasionally the castles and full sails of a navy ship could be seen.

But today nothing whatever interrupted the horizon. Ralf felt as though he and Godric were masters of some undiscovered island. The stretch of barren shingle between

the dunes and the church dike might have been a gulf a hundred miles across; and indeed, thinking of how far they had already walked, he did not know how he was to get home. His lack of sleep was catching up with him.

Their conversation about the roof was still on his mind. It seemed unresolved but was not. Ordinarily he would have felt the need to explain further, to seek reassurance that Jacob Farlow's would not be renewed alone; yet the matter was settled. 'My father's not a fool,' Godric had said. Neither was his son. A few words were all it took for him to understand. 'Demons,' he had called them, those dark birds, not just reading Ralf's thoughts but leaping ahead. Almost from the first moment of their meeting, and certainly during their leave-taking under the churchyard yew, Ralf had been aware of this unaccountable familiarity, a sympathy of outlook that should have come only after long acquaintance. He had liked Godric immediately. Now he was learning to respect him too.

All this would have been strange enough on its own, but there was more. Godric was the son of Lord de Maepe, inheritor and ruler of this manor. The baron controlled his serfs in the same way that he controlled his fields and boats. He had controlled Ralf's mother, too, until the moment when he had chosen, on a whim, to let the manor part with her.

Ralf had been born free, but from necessity was almost becoming a serf himself. 'We depend on the Seigneur,' his mother had told him, and it was so. Hauling up crab-pots, Ralf was as much a serf as his grandfather.

In the flux of the city, rank might be less rigidly observed than was considered proper. Sometimes the guildsmen at his father's yard had called each other by

their unadorned forenames, instead of 'Brother This' or 'Brother That'; sometimes, while working, when accidental touch had been made of his father's hand or arm, no apology to the master had been made or even expected; and sometimes, when his father had passed, not every man had stood aside and lowered his head. It had been the same in the street and in the houses of Ralf's schoolfriends. He had heard the loss of distinction deplored, denounced as an indecent and sorry sign of the times.

In the country, though, nothing had changed, which made it all the harder to understand why Godric's father permitted his son such licence. Ralf could ascribe it only to the former status of his own father. The baron addressed him as 'Master', even though his licence was in abeyance; and he had addressed Ralf not as 'Grigg', but by his Christian name. Godric's mother, it was true, treated Ralf in the expected way. So did his sister. Surely she had been offended by the form of Godric's introduction on Sunday. Her scorn had followed Mr Grigg along the shingle path; had rested, for a moment, upon him again today. How clownish he must have seemed, crouching there, ruminating on gate-hinges!

'Take no notice of her.' Sound advice from one who knew, from one inside her family, impervious to her dark-eyed snares.

The biscuits were eaten, and the cheese. They ate the plums and vied with each other to see who could spit the farthest stone. Godric won.

He took a drink of water and said, 'I don't suppose I'll ever come here again.'

'Why do you say that?'

'Once I'm at Leckbourne, that'll be the end of it.'

The abbey was at least twenty miles away. Godric was due there in November, on his fourteenth birthday. He would be allowed home for four days a month and for two weeks at both Christmas and Easter. Ralf had clung to the idea of these visits and tried not to think of the truth of the matter. As Godric grew older, his studies and contemplation would become more and more demanding. When he was twenty-one he would be absorbed into the Church and might be sent anywhere, even to Rome.

Godric pulled a face, expressing wistfulness, resignation. For the first time since that grey, windy evening in the saltings, Ralf felt sorry for him.

'Don't you want to go?'

At first he did not answer, or even look at Ralf, but stared out to sea. Nothing could be heard but the wind and the distant surf.

'I know you don't want me to talk about it,' he began, 'but I must say this. When we first met … when I got stuck, I was so frightened I can't tell you. I prayed and pleaded. But, however much I begged God, the water kept on rising. When it reached my chest I knew I was going to die. I tried to prepare. I tried to abandon this life and give myself to him. Even though he hadn't done what I'd asked.' Godric plucked a blade of marram and twisted it in his fingers. 'Suddenly I thought of Christ on the cross, when he shouted out, "Why have you forsaken me?" I couldn't help myself. It only lasted a second. Then I begged God's forgiveness. I promised him anything if he'd forgive me. I didn't mind dying, as long as he didn't send me to Hell.' He glanced at Ralf. 'I'd stopped praying for my life. It no longer seemed to matter. I'd left it behind. Then you arrived.'

Ralf remembered his rigid arms and distracted, mask-like face, and his own certainty that Godric was going to drown.

'I already belonged to God, but you went and pulled me out anyway.'

'Would you rather I'd left you?'

'No, of course not.'

'Then I don't understand.'

'I've got no right to be alive. The hardest thing is how sweet it is. Every moment now. It's quite different.'

'You think you've cheated God?'

'Yes. But not just that. Once you've had that thought, about being forsaken, really had it, I mean, it never goes away.'

Every hour at the abbey, from lauds to compline, Godric would have to make proof of his faith. Only faith would see him through the religious and lay studies whose extent and complexity Ralf had glimpsed at the cathedral school. Only faith would sustain him each night, alone in his cot and far from home. Only faith would convince him of his vows, reward him for his abstinence and crown his ordination. Without faith he would be lost.

Ralf's recollection of the saltmarsh was the clearest of his life. He said, 'When I first tried to pull you out I couldn't. Do you remember?'

'O yes, I remember.'

'Then I prayed for strength.'

'You did?'

'I did,' Ralf wanted to say, but to tell only half of it would be a terrible lie. As best he could, he described what he had felt.

‘So you don’t really believe,’ Godric said, when he had finished. ‘Except in your own god.’

‘The two are the same. Yours and mine. The one up there and the one down here. If he created the world, they must be the same. He’s everywhere, in everything. If you’ve got doubts,’ Ralf went on, hoping that this also applied to him, ‘if you’re not sure, then that’s his doing too.’

‘Do you believe in the Resurrection?’

‘All I’m saying is that, if you got out of the mud, which you did, it must have been God’s will. If he hadn’t wanted you to, you wouldn’t have lived. There’s no need for you to feel guilty.’ He remembered then how he had first noticed Godric’s head, and told him about the way the heron had risen from the borrowdike. ‘I’d never have seen you, otherwise. Why else did he fly into the wind?’

‘You’re saying God gave you a sign?’

‘If you like. That’s one way to put it.’

‘What’s the other way?’

‘He’s in the heron. He is the heron.’

Godric expelled his breath.

‘Whether or not I hold every article of faith, I believe in God. I pulled you out, but I couldn’t have done it without him.’

‘He made you his instrument?’

‘No.’

‘What, then?’

‘He made *me*.’

* * *

On the way back to the village, for the sake of easy walking, they retraced their footprints in the strip of sand.

The tide had turned. Its diagonal swash was stretching further and further up the beach: with almost every collapse, every fumbled retreat, the drag of froth and gravel gained half an inch from the flood behind. The wind, backing north-west, had grown stronger, the sea rougher, with white horses. The cloud had thickened. Now and then the sun went in. It was beginning to look like rain: as if the harvest might be disrupted.

They talked of boyish, inconsequential things, but a division had appeared between them. Ralf had sensed it in the dunes. He could not regret what he had said, only the effect it had produced. He had spoken truthfully, brutally so, but for Godric's sake and to give him comfort. In that, at least, he thought he had succeeded.

Ralf was very tired. Twice he asked if they might sit and rest. While they did so, Godric searched about them for unusual stones or threw round ones, at intervals, into the waves.

'This one's like a sheep,' he said, holding it out for Ralf's inspection. 'That's the head.'

Ralf conceded the likeness, as he had with others.

Without ado the sheep was discarded; Godric uncovered a piece of basalt, smoothed almost to a sphere. Instead of showing or throwing it, he kept the pebble to himself and, between his palms, continued the work of the sea.

The silence grew. Ralf watched him. 'What's wrong?'

Godric shrugged.

'You're angry.'

'I'm not angry.' He paused. 'But you shouldn't have said that about the heron. About its being God. That's blasphemy. And what you said afterwards. It's like saying you yourself are God. As if there's no need for the Church.'

‘I didn’t mean it that way.’

‘I know. I know what you meant.’ He turned to look into Ralf’s face. ‘Aren’t you afraid of what’ll happen to your immortal soul?’

Ralf thought of all his resolutions to become devout. He thought of his inability to stand in church without regretting the loss of time; of his wandering attention during the lesson; and even of his suppressed smirk as the baron’s singing led the rest. His impiety was incorrigible and deep-seated. He had always felt the same.

‘These ideas are wicked, Ralf,’ Godric said. ‘I hope you haven’t spoken of them to anyone else.’

‘I haven’t.’

‘Good.’

‘I want to ask you,’ Ralf said. ‘What should I do?’

They resumed walking. Ralf listened to Godric’s earnest suggestions about prayer and paying closer heed to Father Pickard, and knew at heart that he would never follow any of them. The lecture made Godric feel better. Ralf’s submission to it seemed a small price to pay. Yet his acquiescence was also a form of deceit. It made between them a division of another kind, one of which Godric was probably unaware.

When at long last they reached the stock-gate by the church and closed it after them, Ralf saw how unreasonable he had been in expecting blind unanimity. There was more to friendship than that. If he were to respect Godric, he had also to respect his differences.

The sky had completely greyed and the sticky churchyard limes, heavy now with summer, were again in motion, turning their mass of foliage to show pale

undersides; and were even, Ralf noticed, shedding a few premature leaves.

'Rain's coming,' he said. 'For sure.'

'So's the autumn. You can feel it.'

Once more they paused by the other gate, under the venerable yew whose fissured bole long predated the church itself. For no reason that he understood, Ralf put out his hand. 'I'm probably working tomorrow,' he said.

'Don't get too wet.'

Later, as the first drops pattered against the shutter, Ralf knew why he had wanted to shake Godric's hand on parting. The reason was simple.

If the previous day had been the most miserable he had ever known, then this might well have been the happiest.

8

'No, the meaning is subtler than that,' Father Pickard said, peering at Ralf, who was seated beside him at the table. 'The adjective comes from the verb "beo", I bless or make fortunate. That in turn is connected with "bonus". Horace has this phrase: "agricolae prisci, fortes parvoque beati."' The priest inclined his head and gave that patient smile which meant Ralf was supposed to translate.

This was the second Saturday following Ralf's visit to the Point. Almost as soon as he had returned from the staith, he had crossed the green to Father Pickard's house.

'Priscus?' Ralf said.

'Ancient, of old.'

'Ancient farmers were strong and blessed with little? A little? Brave and blessed?'

'No, Ralf.'

‘Agricola. That’s a farmer. Masculine. “Beati” agrees. Is “parvo” in the ablative?’

‘Yes, it is, but there is no understood verb. Agricolae prisci, fortes parvoque beati. “Farmers of old, strong and blessed with little”. They were happy with little means: not just content, but blessed. Favoured.’ He looked again at the parchment Ralf had brought him, a fair copy and translation of the Beatitudes. At his elbow, duly lying open at St Matthew, Chapter Five, was the copy of the New Testament he had just recruited in his weekly attempts to improve Ralf’s Latin.

The text had been chosen at Ralf’s request, prompted by what Godric had said on the way out to the beach. At first Father Pickard had resisted. It was his role to read and interpret Scripture, and the congregation’s to listen. Latin, and hence much of the Mass, was unintelligible to all except the educated few. Here in Mape the Bible was read by, at most, four other people. It was all very well to help Ralf with his schoolboy Latin, but another matter entirely to make his the sixth pair of eyes capable of reading holy writ. Ralf had been taken aback by the vehemence of his refusal. Then Father Pickard had asked which part of the gospel he wished to study, and at the words ‘Sermon on the Mount’ had softened immediately. He had told Ralf that this was his favourite passage, not just in the New Testament but in the whole Bible. And so, last week, he had let Ralf look at, if not actually touch, the precious book.

‘I do like your script,’ Father Pickard told him, not realising, perhaps, that he had said this many times before. Ralf automatically thanked him for the compliment but appeared not to have been heard.

Except for Mrs Creech, who came in once a day to clean and to prepare his main meal, the priest lived alone. His cottage was scarcely better than those of most of his flock, though this downstairs room had a flagstone floor, two brass lamps, and a newish oak dresser that might not have looked out of place in the Hall.

To Ralf, Father Pickard seemed old. If pressed, he might have said that he was older than his father and younger than Jacob; Ralf just thought him old. He had lost much of his hair. His beard was grizzled, he breathed heavily, and his coarse serge habit smelled of some indefinable condiment, like garlic. He knew Latin better than any of the masters at the school. Though Ralf thought he liked Father Pickard, he was still a little afraid of him.

Father Pickard continued reading. 'Beati pacifici quoniam filii Dei vocabuntur … blessed are the peacemakers, because they shall be called … not "sons", I should say, but "children" of God. Or "the children" of God. Women can be peacemakers too, you know.' Speaking more quietly now, to himself, he went on. 'Beati estis cum maledixerint vobis … blessed are you, when they speak ill of you, and persecute you, and … on account of me … "propter me", here, I think, is better translated by "for my sake" … great is your reward in Heaven, sic enim persecuti sunt prophetas qui fuerunt ante vos. Yes. Yes, quite so.' He had come to the end. 'No mistakes. Good, Ralf. I do believe some of it's sticking in that noddle of yours.'

Ralf thanked him again.

'And the Beatitudes themselves. Are you trying to understand what lies behind?'

'Yes, Father Pickard.'

‘Memorise them, and live in Christ. The latter, alas, is not quite so easy.’

He now went through verses thirty-eight to forty-eight, explaining unknown words and constructions while his pupil scribbled notes on a slate. After that, the priest left Ralf alone to copy out the text.

As before, he left space below each line for the English translation, which he would make at home, before presenting the whole to his teacher the Saturday following.

Father Pickard had provided the parchment; Ralf had brought his own pens and pen-knife and a horn of ink. The ink he made himself every autumn, from the strained and diluted remains of the shaggy-cap fungus. This grew commonly on roadsides or in any grassy place, so the ink was free. Most of the other boys at Alincester, especially the poorer ones, had used the same recipe. The ink flowed so well and remained so black that Ralf preferred it to anything that could be bought.

For his pens he used goose-quills. These also cost him nothing, and he could not have hoped for a better source than Mape Marsh, where thousands of geese spent the winter. Goose made a smoother and more durable nib than everything except swan. For drawing it was superior, since it could be shaped into any tip from the finest to the most broad.

Today the thumb and first two fingers on his right hand were again staining black. As he painstakingly copied the verses, he was conscious of the pleasure of forming his letters. The script he had been taught in Alincester formed no more than the basis of the one he used now. He was still experimenting with letter-shapes, strokes, sweeps, flourishes. The old-fashioned scribe who had filled these

closely-packed parchment pages had employed a particularly handsome *g* that Ralf was trying to emulate.

There were illuminated capitals at the head of each gospel. The book had little decoration other than this, and a much worn binding. It was the only book in Mape outside the Hall or here, in Father Pickard's house. Father Pickard owned a copy of the *Epistles* of Horace, inscribed by himself, together with a pocket Bible and assorted extracts from Juvenal, Ovid and Statius. The baron also had a Bible, Book One of *The Aeneid* and part of the *Categories* of Aristotle with commentaries by Boethius, which he had purchased for Godric.

Ralf had no feeling for Latin other than for its ruthless precision. The words fitted together like the parts of a machine.

Latin was the language of learning and administration, essential to those destined for higher things. He was no longer sure why he bothered to continue with it. The pretence pleased his parents, and especially his mother; and it pleased Father Pickard, who seemed fond of him. The lessons had been going on ever since he had come to Mape.

When he got home Ralf found his father there. As usual, he had walked the seven miles from Rushton. Once he had finished eating he gave Ralf the disquieting news that he wished to talk to him and suggested that they went outside.

The day was overcast, though dry. Beyond the hedge dividing Jacob's front garden from the roadway, the village green rose towards a clump of three English oaks. Under the largest of these stood an old bench. The ground just in

front of it, worn bare of grass, was littered with small twigs and a few husks and cups of acorns.

'Ralf, how would you feel about working at Rushton?'

He had been twice to the boatyard where his father was employed, ostensibly just to look, but also to be shown. Last winter Linsell had tried to secure him an apprenticeship.

'As an apprentice?'

'No. That's not possible.'

'What would I be, then?'

'A sawdust-boy. One week in two. But you'd be learning. If an apprenticeship comes up you'll be well-placed for it.'

Ralf wondered if this had anything to do with what had happened at the harvest with Eaton and Cebert. Last weekend his mother was sure to have spoken of it and to have searched, however desperately, for a way to get her son out of the village.

The owner of the yard was a master and, of course, every craftsman there was in the guild. Ralf had been impressed by the atmosphere of efficiency, of work at the edge of what was possible. They used the latest techniques and materials, his father had said. The yard designed and built most of the boats on this part of the coast. It had also, twenty years ago, made the *Meg*.

A sawdust-boy was the lowliest creature in any woodsmith's shop. His opportunities for practical education were limited. But if he had eyes, he could see what the men were up to, especially if one of those men were his own father: a father whose licence, moreover, would not be in abeyance for ever. Once Linsell had paid his debts he would be free to start again and Ralf could join him. He had already said as much.

If Ralf was to be a tradesman, he could think of nothing he would rather do than work in wood. And if he could not secure an apprenticeship and thereby guaranteed entry to the guild, he would find his way in by any means possible.

'What do you think, Ralf?'

'Who will help Grandfather?'

'You'll still be here half the time. Your grandfather approves.'

This had definitely been plotted among the adults. Even part-time, he would be earning more than he did in the boat, and he saw that, until now, he had been more of a burden than a help. While he was at Rushton there would be one less mouth to feed – and his sister could have the room to herself, which would solve an imminent problem.

The nights were drawing in. With the dark evenings there would be less opportunity for outings with Godric, who would, anyway, in a few weeks' time, be leaving for the abbey. Ralf would be losing little there.

All these were advantages of the scheme, but the greatest was the chance to be with his father.

'Well, Ralf? Do you want to try it?'

'Yes.'

* * *

Ralf started at Rushton immediately. The walk was too long to be made twice in a working day, but short enough to let them leave their departure till Monday morning.

The first week was hard. He missed his mother and sister, his grandfather and Godric too. His duties consisted of sweeping, tending gluepots, cleaning grates, fetching charcoal and working the bellows at the forge. He was not

allowed near anything that might be construed as skilled work: even the grindstones were turned by an older boy, an apprentice. The various craftsmen treated him with indifference, though not unkindly, perhaps from the obvious esteem in which they held his father, whose expertise, Ralf saw, was applied only to the most advanced and demanding operations. Six fishing-boats were in progress in the main shed; outside, on frameworks poised above slipways into the harbour, a dredging-barge and a brig were taking shape. Ralf perceived that his presence was superfluous and that he had been accepted only *propter patrem* – for his father's sake. For that reason particularly, he worked as hard and as well as he could.

He slept on a narrow cot placed in the corner of his father's room. His father lodged with the chief sawyer, whose family shared a house with two others in the centre of the town. Except for the streets he needed to traverse, in his first week Ralf saw little more of Rushton than he already knew.

As he approached his grandfather's cottage the following Saturday he saw ladders against the eaves and four men with spar-knives and leggetts renewing the thatch. The Whitlocks' roof, starkly pale, had already been finished. The Rendells' was to be next.

Ralf called at the Hall and spent time with Godric before attending his lesson with Father Pickard. The following Wednesday, and on Friday, Ralf and Godric managed late-afternoon excursions with the hobby. On the Sunday Ralf went again to the Hall, and then it was Monday morning, long before dawn, and he was starting out beside his father, through rain, along the muddy coast road.

November came, and with it Godric's departure. By now Ralf's was a familiar face at the Hall, and by now he was confirmed in his opinion of Godric's sister. Her aloofness seemed to feed upon his reaction to it. Their occasional and accidental meetings were barely polite.

Early in February Ralf was engaged to work at Rushton full-time. His hourly wage was increased. He was allowed to sharpen tools, to undertake coarse shaping with sandstones, then medium shaping, and then fine shaping with dogfish skins. He helped the sawyers and learned about selecting wood; the seasoner showed him how the stacks were made and taught him the arcanum of circulating air. Master Brocq, the owner, on discovering that Ralf could read and write, saved clerks' fees by getting him to copy bills of sale; and, on discovering that his sweeper could draw as well, set him to producing sketches for prospective customers. Orders accrued from at least two of these and Ralf's wage was again increased. Another sawdust-boy was engaged, but still there was no sign of an apprenticeship.

Rushton's population naturally included girls, in whom, as the seasons passed, Ralf began to take interest. In the narrow, crowded streets, overhung by the upper storeys of the houses, shops and taverns, he took special notice of the ones who cast glances in his direction, and of these there were not a few. The chief sawyer, his father's landlord, had a daughter. She laughed too loudly, Ralf did not care for her face, and she was already promised elsewhere, but he liked to study her. A new aesthetic was appearing in him, the aesthetic of women. Their merits were various, bewildering, and sometimes intoxicating. With an appreciative eye he appraised the curves of the sawyer's

daughter, the course followed by the material of her skirt when she was seated, the shape of her arms and the quality of her skin. In the same way he was alive to the emerging womanliness of Godric's sister, whose December birthday, it transpired, had been less than six months after his own.

As she left girlhood behind, Ralf kept revising upwards his estimation of her beauty. Were it not for her nature, he might have allowed himself to become trapped by it, like a beetle that has stumbled into a pot of face-powder, hopelessly doomed to unrequited love. He rather liked the idea. But her manner towards him made it impossible and at home he contented himself with musing upon Mary Ibbott, whose looks, while inferior, were also to his taste.

Her conceit was not; but, even had he adored her, she was, for now at least, unattainable in precisely the opposite way. As the daughter of cottars she was a cottar herself and the property of the manor. Her future husband, if a freeman, would have to buy her release.

Ralf insisted on giving nearly all his wages to his father, to hasten the day when he got his licence back and could start up again on his own. Their plan of working together was now a settled thing. Once officially articled to his father, Ralf could hope to enter the guild seven years later. In defiance of what had happened they would take premises nowhere but Alincester, become the foremost company; and refuse all work for the diocese. His mother would be restored to her rightful place and Imogen would have more than a chance of choosing among eligible freemen. Ralf thought that she too, although still only fifteen, was already beautiful. Perhaps in time she would even surpass Eloise de Maepe: if not by the perfect symmetry of her features, or her spun-gold hair, or her sea-

grey eyes, then certainly by the English sweetness of her temper. It was impossible to dislike her. She could only be envied, and that without her knowledge.

Ralf's protectiveness grew ever fiercer. He could not bear the idea of her growing up among ploughboys and cowherds. That was another reason why he made himself work so hard. A year ago, at sixteen, he had begun single-handedly to deliver finished shallops along the coast. After each delivery he hurried back to Rushton on foot, eager for the next commission, or to help wherever he was wanted.

By now he was an apprentice in all but name. If the guild found out there would be trouble, but his father was so well liked that not one of the guildsmen or apprentices said anything. Ralf used tools almost without restriction, was left alone to build jigs or fasten cramps, had the run of the woodyard, and sometimes worked for hours unsupervised. In the evenings, with his father, he talked over whatever he had done that was new or interesting. He was forbidden to make notes for fear of the guild, but even the guild could not prevent him from committing things to memory.

His wages went up again. Master Brocq offered a senior apprenticeship. Linsell urged Ralf to take it. He refused. By his calculations, no more than two years now separated his father from his licence.

The twenty-fifth of March, Lady Day, commemorating the Annunciation of the Virgin Mary, fell this year on a Thursday. Second only to Christmas, the holiday was marked everywhere with celebrations. By permission of Master Brocq, Ralf and his father set out on the Wednesday afternoon in time to reach Mape before nightfall. They were not due to return until Monday.

Having changed his clothes and eaten, Ralf took a package he had brought from Rushton and went to Father Pickard's door.

'For me?' the priest said, once they were inside and he had been handed his Lady Day gift. 'You shouldn't be spending your money on me. I know how hard you work for it.' He placed the package on the table, untied the ribbon and unfolded the linen covering.

On top, tied with two white ribbons, lay a vellum scroll on which Ralf had inscribed Chapter Seven of St Matthew, in English. It had taken him many evenings to complete. He had illuminated the initial letter of the first, seventh, thirteenth and twenty-first verses as skilfully as he knew how, in crimson, green and blue. Each was formed into a bird: nuthatch, swallow, stilt, shelduck. The same colours appeared in the design along the borders, which incorporated a continuous scene of Mape, of the church and churchyard, the yew, the village green, the staith, the fishmonger's dray, the reed-cutting, the ploughing, the harvest, the Long Barn and Hall.

As he unrolled the vellum and held it towards the lamp, the beginnings of tears appeared in Father Pickard's eyes.

Ralf said, 'I want to thank you. For being so patient and kind. For everything.'

Father Pickard blinked and looked down at the package. 'And something else. What is this?'

'Paper.'

There were two quires, of the best Ancona stock: a week's wages for Ralf.

'Paper? But why? Why should you —'

'Towards all the parchment you've given me.'

‘Upon my word, Ralf. Upon my word.’ He sat down at the table in a daze. ‘Please. Be seated. You must excuse me if I’m … if …’ He shook his head. ‘I’m … You see, no one has … to the best of my knowledge, no one has ever given me anything. Like this, I mean.’ He shook his head again and with one hand raised the vellum. ‘Your work is very fine. You should consider becoming a scribe.’

This was a conversation they had had before. ‘I like the work I do, Father. I like it better than anything.’

‘They’re treating you well, at that yard?’

‘Yes.’

‘It’s a solid trade. Necessary. Noble in its way. I don’t forget our Lord was the son of a carpenter. Even so, Ralf …’ He gave a rueful smile. ‘I cannot persuade you. But of this, perhaps I can. Please call me by that carpenter’s name. It is my name also. Joseph.’

9

The following afternoon was sunny. Ralf and Godric went for a walk. From the Angmer road they turned into a narrow lane which led gently uphill and through the poplar plantation.

Godric’s peregrine was at Leckbourne. He was allowed to keep his horse there, too. Some of the boys even had dogs; the Abbot and a number of the monks, Godric had said, were enthusiastic hunters. He had also told Ralf something about his studies. Otherwise, he divulged little.

A change had come over him after starting at the abbey. He was no longer so open, nor quite so eager for Ralf’s company, and on occasion their days at Mape would

coincide without much more of a meeting than in the churchyard after mass.

They were both older now and Godric was mixing with noblemen's sons, but there was something else at work. Ralf could not understand what.

Despite all this, Godric was still his best friend. Ralf confided everything in him: his plans for the future, what happened at the yard, and even the early revelations of the apprentices concerning what men did with women. Godric had known no more of the mechanics than Ralf himself. They had been equally shocked and only half disbelieving of the apprentices' boasts.

That had been more than three years ago. Since then the subject had not been mentioned. Every passing month drew Godric closer to his ordination. At eighteen, he was already almost a priest.

The poplar plantation occupied about eighty acres to the east and north of the village. The trees provided poles and fenceposts for the manor, or were sold to a merchant. The timber was easily worked, stable, and durable.

At a glance Ralf, taught by his father, could now tell every sort of tree, and with little more than a glance he could value it for its wood. As he and Godric descended towards the village, he described what poplar was used for and explained why the trees were spaced as they were and why the lower branches had been lopped. Godric seemed to be listening. He was interested in everything to do with the management of his father's land, just as if he himself, and not his eldest brother, were going to inherit it.

The celandines and windflowers had fully opened. Fresh shoots of nettle, dog's mercury and arum were pushing

forth, and the goat-willows by the river were thick with grey catkins.

It was possible to make a shortcut to the village by crossing on a precarious and irregular line of stepping-stones, formed by old masonry in the stream-bed. Hundreds of years ago, it was said, there had been a mill on this spot. Remnants of the race, a few mossy blocks of stone much overgrown with ferns, could just be made out on the far bank.

'Do you remember when I fell in?' Ralf said, once they had gained safety.

'I do.' Godric halted and looked back. 'Where would the mill-house have been, then?'

'By the race.'

'So it would.' Godric seemed reluctant to leave.

'What is it?'

'Mr Caffyn says he's heard a rumour about the milling charge. It might be increased again this autumn, even though wheat's still going down.'

He set off once more, Ralf beside him.

At Lady Day, accounts were settled and rents became due. It marked not just the Incarnation but the beginning of the secular year. The steward's ledgers had been made up, Godric said, and the profits of the manor calculated.

'I shouldn't be telling you this, and keep it quiet, but the figures could be better. I was thinking how it might be if my father could rebuild that mill.'

'Why doesn't he?'

Godric explained about the Molarius, the licence and the tithe.

'That doesn't seem right,' Ralf said.

'It's the law. Anyway, the money goes to the Church.'

‘What about a windmill?’

‘The same.’

‘But the push-mill’s not like that.’

‘No.’

They reached the village.

‘See you later, then,’ Godric said.

Three times a year, at Michaelmas, Christmas and Lady Day, there were public celebrations at the Hall. At Michaelmas a feast was held in the Long Barn to which were invited all of Mape’s two hundred inhabitants, freeborn and tied. After that there would be a procession followed by a concert. The Christmas celebrations were just as carefree, and included a Nativity play at the church. In this, seven years ago, Ralf had been coerced into taking the part of a shepherd, with two lines to speak, both of which he had delivered wrongly.

If Lady Day fell during Lent there was no feast after mass or merry-making of any kind. Instead an evening recital was staged in the Long Barn. The words of the Magnificat were spoken; there would be plain singing, and perhaps a dreary performance on the rebeck, psaltery or flute by visiting musicians or, even worse, by amateurs from the manor. While attendance was not compulsory, absence without good reason was frowned upon, and this year, as last, Ralf had been unable to think of a way to escape.

When he and his family, summoned by the church bell, got to the Long Barn, nearly half the village had gathered and the business of seating was beginning. Ralf had reached the age at which he felt uncomfortable to be seen sitting with his sister and parents. Having already noticed Godric on the far side, he made his way there.

Yet more people were arriving and finding places, sitting on the clean straw the baron had caused to be laid out. He and his family and retainers would be seated in greater dignity, on cloth-covered bales set against the side wall, at the front of the audience.

At the back, beyond the open doorway, the afternoon was turning to dusk; the barn was lit by twenty or thirty tallow lamps set high on the eave-beams.

Ralf sat down on the bale next to Godric. They chatted while the barn filled. Ralf watched the space round his family being taken up. There was still room nearer the front and he noticed a vacancy beside Mary Ibbott, who was sitting cross-legged and, leaning away from him, talking to another girl.

He thought about plucking up the courage to join her and was on the point of doing so when the baron and his family appeared.

Ralf stood aside while they and the chief retainers took their seats. He had been noticed by the steward and the clerk, by Godric's brother Henry and the baroness, and by the baron himself, but Eloise had all but ignored him. Seated with her hands in her lap, she was now staring ahead, above the audience, above Mary Ibbott, and seemed lost in study of the featureless and unprepossessing wall opposite.

Her dark-green robe was one he had never seen before, with a brooch above the left breast, silver, like the tiny crucifix she wore always at her neck. A pair of dark-green slippers peeped out below her skirt. The style of her hair was also new. It had been formed into a single loose plait, long and very thick, with a chaplet of white anemones.

Ralf opened his hand to Godric in silent farewell. The space next to Mary Ibbott was still free.

Ralf's trepidation was eased by the complacent look she gave him as he sat down. 'Hello, Mary.'

'Hello yourself.'

'Looking forward to the music?'

She pulled a face.

As they talked, Ralf decided she was even prettier than he had thought: prettier, more vital and feminine. The lamplight was needlessly flattering. Her eyes made free with his, she smiled and enlisted the opinions of her friend, and it dawned on Ralf that she was flirting with him; or he with her. The sensation was far from disagreeable. He was glad he had been brave enough to make his way here. He relished the prospect of sitting beside her for the evening, close enough to touch.

But, as the recital went on, he was also conscious, in the edge of his vision, of another girl. The calm she maintained was invariable and superior. The upright way she carried herself, the tranquil disposition of her limbs, the remembered gentleness of her speech, the mild exactitude of her manners: all these made stern reproof of his dalliance with a serf. The Mademoiselle was of the purest stock. Her father's illustrious ancestor, Geoffroy de Maepe, had wielded a sword alongside the Conqueror himself, hacking down the oafish, nameless, tow-haired Saxons who figured somewhere in Ralf's past.

Her eyes were her sword. The smith who had forged it had brought the edge to such sharpness that it sliced with a whisper and moved on, before the victim could feel pain or know that he had lost an arm, his legs, or even his head. She belonged to the opulent south; he to the north. Her

people had a history of empire. His had nothing but memories of savagery: tribal wars, huts on fire, defeat at Norman hands.

Even as he stole glimpses of Mary, Ralf wondered whether he might after all stumble into that pot of powder. The lamplight was falling not just on Mary Ibbott. The Seigneur's daughter had never looked so lovely.

But no. If he were going to fall in, he would have done so long ago. He was susceptible only to her disdain. Mary might not be a noblewoman, but at least she seemed to like him.

After the baron's closing speech, when people started rising to stand about gossiping with their neighbours, Mary, still seated, said quietly, 'Can we go outside? I want to ask you something.'

Ralf did not see why her question, whatever it was, should not be posed in here, but the mystery was surely connected with the swell of her bodice and the radiance in her eyes, and he was more than content to thread his way through the crowd and follow her out through the small side door.

The night was cold and windless, with starlight enough to allow them, as the mystery grew, to find their way along the edge of the barn to the furthest and most remote corner. Once they had turned it, Mary leaned her back against the wall.

'I've seen you watching me, Ralf Grigg.'

'What do you mean?'

'I don't mind. You're the best-looking man in the village. You know you are.'

Ralf knew no such thing; nor had he ever been called a man before. Even coming from Mary Ibbott, such flattery

was more heady than the knowledge that their presence here, alone together in the darkness yet only yards from everyone else, was both illicit and dangerous.

'What's your question?' he said, half knowing the answer.

'Don't be stupid.'

She raised her face to his and Ralf understood that she wanted to be kissed, perhaps as much as, all evening, he had wanted to kiss her. He thought of the apprentices at Rushton and wished that he knew what to do, what kissing was like, and then he discovered that he was already finding out. The softness of her lips belonged to some new realm of sensation, unknown and unguessed at, but this was only the beginning. The pressure of her arms round his neck gave him licence to take her by the waist; and when, presently, he realised that her tongue was seeking contact with his own, he overcame his surprise and granted it. The last shreds of his shyness were discarded. He no longer needed to conceal the extent of his arousal and pulled her even closer.

'You can do me if you want,' she whispered, when they broke for air. 'Let's go in the field.'

Ralf's reaction was delayed. At first he thought he had misheard. He could not believe that she was so easy, and that she must have already, as the apprentices would say, done it, more than once, with another village boy – or boys. How many? He could not comprehend his own ignorance, the gulf in his understanding. What went on at Mape? What went on during the week, when he wasn't here?

It would have to be confessed, what he was doing. And this was not just impure thought, fleeting and venial, but

deadly sin. Before he could take communion again he would have to tell Father Pickard through the grill.

Her embrace deepened. She was unaware of his qualms; her mouth had again found his. He knew this was wrong but her power was too great. Easy or not, he wanted her. All his speculations and yearnings about girls had taken shape in the yielding, irresistible reality of her flesh. The confessional grill was far away. He would go with her into the field, on the ground, anywhere.

His indistinct preview of a grassy verge, chalky soil, flints, was augmented by an awareness of rustling and a quiet snapping of old hogweed stems. So lost, so drunk was he that for a moment he did not even understand the significance of the grasp on his shoulder that dragged him aside.

'Get your stinking hands off her!'

Aholiab Peake. That was his name. The voice. Ralf could scarcely see.

'I leave you alone and look what happens.'

'He made me,' Ralf heard her say.

Aholiab was a year older than Ralf, bigger, a vagueness, his face barely visible. He worked in the fields, was belligerent, lived down by the coast road with his ugly father. Without warning, the vagueness changed shape.

The blow arrived: unexpected, outrageous, brutal. Ralf felt as if his cheek, his teeth, had been stoved in. Then the pain began.

'Don't mark his face,' another voice said. 'Hit him in the gut.'

Ralf's elbows had been seized. The second voice belonged to John Hollins, Aholiab's invariable companion, even older and bigger. After the first vicious punch had

been driven into Ralf's stomach, as he grasped at his breath, he heard Aholiab speaking again.

'Next time you feel like prodding someone, tap that sister of yours. If you don't mind waiting your turn.'

Ralf's flaring, uncontainable rage was yet contained, held fast with superhuman strength. A harder punch landed, and a third, and then a fourth. The last left him unable to breathe at all. His legs gave way. He found himself on his knees and elbows, his face against the ground, among the texture and smell of raw earth, moss, last year's hogweed and the newly emerged leaves of dogs' mercury. He was expecting to be kicked but nothing else happened. They had gone away, all three of them.

His breath came back. He remained crouching there, paralysed, eyes shut, and remembered that Aholiab Peake was the very first person he had seen on that far-off evening when he had arrived with Imogen's chin on his shoulder and her sleepy arms round his chest. He remembered also having twice seen Aholiab and Mary together, on the green and again after church, and he wondered who in the Long Barn had directed Aholiab and John Hollins outside. Mary's friend? Was there such a thing as a friend? As for Mary, Ralf now half recalled a lesson Father Pickard had given in church, from God's laws in Exodus. It must have been meant for the young people of the village, though Ralf had not known it at the time. He had not imagined that it applied to him. 'If a man entice a maid who is not betrothed, and lie with her, he shall surely endow her to be his wife.' That word, *wife*, made awesome by its permanence, belonged to the sacrament of marriage. What had Ralf been thinking of? Maid or not, even to muse upon Mary Ibbott had been blasphemous: there had

been not the least idea of making her his wife. She was vain and shallow and, he now knew, worse. He could even accept as a penance the cowardly beating he had received.

But not what they had said about Imogen. She did not belong in the same world as Aholiab Peake. Through carnal weakness Ralf had allowed her name, as his sister, to be tainted and spoken aloud. He had failed in his duty to keep her high above such filth.

Up there, protected by their own discernment and chastity, dwelt the good people, the faithful, constant and wise. He thought of his parents, of Jacob and Father Pickard. Crouching in the weeds like a beast, Ralf saw how far he had fallen from their erroneous view of him. He belonged down here, not up there, not with Father Pickard, or the baron, or Godric; or, most chaste and discerning of them all, Godric's younger sister.

In the shameful darkness, still doubled up with pain, Ralf saw her as if for the first time. She was so far above Mary Ibbott that even to compare them was depraved.

The lightning hit him then, more catastrophic than any physical blow, so bright and searing that its impact came in the form of ready-made words, a complete and perfect sentence, burnt deep into his mind. *I love her.* At their earliest meeting, when Godric had introduced them, he had known it. Or even before. She resided in the predestination of his friendship with her brother. That was where he had known Godric before: in her. In Eloise. Her name was breath, it was life itself.

What had she thought of him this evening? Why had he done it? Because she had been watching. Why else, when sitting with Godric on the bale, had he wanted to join Mary Ibbott? Because he had known Eloise was coming.

He had known where she would be seated and where her gaze must fall.

What had been behind it? What had he wanted to prove? That another could find him acceptable, even if she did not?

No wonder she viewed him with contempt. She was too mild, like her brother, like their brown-eyed father. Ralf deserved far worse. He was unworthy to be seen by her at all.

Clutching his belly and eager to doubt, he struggled to get up. This must not be true, he told himself.

This must not be true. *This must not be true.* He raised his face to the firmament.

She was infinitely distant, unreachable. She would never be his. The only one, the one formed by God to be his ideal: she could never be his. And even if a daughter of France could notice someone like him, even if she were not already bargained away in marriage, even then he had lost her, irrevocably, tonight.

He could not believe that only an hour ago he had viewed as amusing the idea of falling in love with her. There was nothing amusing about pain, or despair, or the certainty that his life would for ever be a lop-sided, empty, and crippled thing.

Fending off with one hand the supporting side of the barn, Ralf began his solitary and agonising progress back to his grandfather's house.

* * *

Ralf's old room was now for the exclusive use of his sister. When he was at Mape he slept in the parlour, which meant

he could not retire until everyone else had done so. More than that, he no longer had a retreat.

His father questioned him at length about his swollen face, his disappearance from the barn and the manner of his return. While Ralf admitted that, yes, he had been in a fight, he did not want to divulge any more.

'Was it about that girl?'

His mother supplied the name. 'Mary Ibbott.'

His father asked the question again. 'Was it about her?'

Ralf remained sullen.

'Answer your father!'

'Yes. It was about her.' Ralf looked from one to the other of his parents and down again at the floor. Jacob, seated in the corner, was saying nothing at all. Imogen too was watching. Ralf glanced at her. His isolation was complete.

'Who hit you?' his father said.

'I won't say.'

'Another boy?'

'I won't say.'

'Is it settled with him?'

No. It wasn't. The sudden constriction in Ralf's eyesight, his tightly shut lips and clenched fists, the quick breathing through his nostrils, all these, even if he had not already been burning with hatred, told him it wasn't. John Hollins or not, anyone else or not, however many of them lined up against him, he was not going to let this pass. He was going to kill Aholiab Peake. Not for what he had done, but for what, in those few quiet, insinuating words, he had said.

'I said, is it settled with him?'

Ralf mulishly shook his head, as if refusing to reply.

'What's that supposed to mean?'

In the end, his father, disappointed and hurt, gave up. Ralf spent the rest of the evening in a silence broken only by his monosyllabic replies to unavoidable questions. He did not know what distressed him more: the destruction of his easy relations with his father or his mother's disapproval. Behind everything, dominating his pain, was Eloise.

The growing contusion of his face was a welcome distraction. So was the state of his abdomen, about which his parents knew nothing. When, unusually early, they all went to bed and left him to his own devices, he examined himself by the feeble glow of the rush-lamp and probed the damage that had been done. With a groan he lowered himself on his cot and stared into the darkness, remembering the fall of her dark-green robe and its scalloped cuffs, her brooch, her hair with its virginal chaplet, her face. He would never forget the way she had looked tonight.

He remembered the attention she had given to the performers. There had been no pride in that. If the tuneless organistrum had irked her, if the singing had been dull, if the evening had dragged for her as much as it had for the rest of the audience, she had given no sign. Unlike Ralf, she had joined wholeheartedly in the applause. With more than the politeness of good breeding, a smile on her lips, she had spoken an approving word to Godric; and when, still clapping, she had bent closer to catch his reply, the lamplight had glinted on the narrow chain at her neck.

For some reason Ralf thought of the vellum he had given Father Pickard – Ralf could never refer to, still less address, him by any other name. Parting on Wednesday, he had said as much.

St Matthew. It was Godric who had brought Ralf closer to the Sermon on the Mount and Father Pickard who had let him commit the smoothly polished verses to memory. Ralf had tried to let them guide or at least influence him, with little success. Christ's teaching was too difficult and too beautiful to be followed.

Ego autem dico vobis non resistere malo. *On the contrary, I tell you not to resist evil.* Sed si quis te percusserit in dextera maxilla tua praebe illi et alteram. *But whosoever shall strike you on your right cheek, offer him the other.*

This was the most beautiful idea of all. As he again became fully conscious of the throbbing of his own, left, cheek, Ralf was even tempted to smile. What was Aholiab Peake, but a poor, benighted thing? Was not Mary Ibbott punishment enough for him? He was as far below Imogen as Ralf was below Eloise.

Ralf painfully sat up, turned and put his feet on the cool earth of the floor. The creaking overhead, as his parents moved about their room while preparing for bed, had not yet ceased. Intermittently he had heard them talking in low tones, perhaps about him.

He stood up and felt his way to the stair-foot door, opened it and started to climb. The risers were so steep and the treads so narrow that the single flight of stairs was little more than a ladder.

Rushlight was showing only at the edges of the right-hand door, his parents'. He was about to knock when he realised for the first time that they were not just his parents, but people too. Two nights a week: that was all they usually had.

Then he heard the cupboard door being shut. One of them, at least, was still out of bed. Ralf knocked.

'I've come to say I'm sorry,' he said, when his father had brought him into the room. 'And that it's settled between me and him.'

'There won't be any more fighting?'

'No.'

'Promise?'

'I promise.'

'What about Mary?'

'She's not for me. She never was.'

Ralf's mother, sitting up in bed, her hair loose, awarded him a slow smile of forgiveness.

'It's all over, then,' Ralf's father said, and in his eyes there was forgiveness too. 'Forgotten. Now go back to bed.'

10

Ralf spent part of Monday morning making a removable tiller for a fourteen-foot shallop. He selected the pole himself, seasoned ash with a slight S-curve, and spokeshaved it to a regular circumference, comfortable to the hand. On the turning-table he made a spherical boss for the inboard end, its socket fitting so snugly that a trace of fish-glue and six blows of the mallet set it in place for life. All that remained was to shape the tenon at the other end.

Around him, at benches and boat-cradles, nine or ten others were busy. More came and went. There was the usual workshop talk, banter, occasional laughter, but Ralf's thoughts were elsewhere.

His hopes of seeing Eloise at church had been dashed. On Friday, Godric had happened to say, she had gone to

Alincester with her mother and Aunt Béatrice and would not be returning until this morning.

Since Thursday Ralf had, more than once, thought of trying to invoke supernatural aid in winning her favour. Prayer was supposed to be the resort of the desperate, but he was not in the habit of it. He also felt that praying for personal gain was against the rules and unlikely to yield results, especially in light of his neglect.

To make Eloise smile at him would be a miracle beyond any power above or below. He could not be the only one to worship her. Every adult male in the village must share his plight; and beyond this ineligible, irrelevant rabble, in high places to which Ralf would never have access, dwelt the noblemen among whom she had already found her match. Godric had said something about it, weeks ago. Ralf could no longer remember the details. They did not matter, and it was better that he did not know.

Soon she would be gone. All he could do for now was try for a glimpse of her at church, and dream, and yearn, and sigh.

Other thoughts obsessed him too: of Mary and the darkness, his first glimpse of what women meant. So distant was Eloise, so impossible, that in the extremity of his suffering he had caught himself wondering what it would be like to kiss her instead, to hold her close while she held him, to hear her breathe his name. Such torture could not be endured.

Concluding that, by now, she would already be nearing home and that another six days must be got through, Ralf repositioned the tiller in his bench clamp and set to work with his plain one-inch firmer. The tenon needed to be

tapered to fit the corresponding mortise in the rudder-stem, which he had finished before the holiday.

A hesitation in the firmer told him it needed sharpening. He set his boxed whetstone in the vice, dribbled on a few drops of whale oil and honed the chisel's blade enough to raise a perceptible burr on the other side, which he now removed with four or five strokes on the stone. Half a minute with the leather strop completed the process: when he held the firmer up and looked at it endways on, the edge of its blade had become invisible.

The tiller was to protrude an inch and a half beyond the rudder-stem and be drilled to accept an ashwood cotter, round in cross-section, that he had made himself. If he pared away too much wood, if he got the tenon wrong, he would have to make another tiller, for this rudder-stem, at least. The boat, one of three for Lord Angmer's manor, was nearly finished and was due to be collected on Friday. Ralf could not afford a mistake.

Forcing himself to pay attention, he monitored his progress with frequent applications of his jaw-gauge. He repeatedly offered up the rudder-stem to the tenon, took it away, went on, offered for the last time, finished each of the four planes with strokes of the sharkskin; and the joint fitted. With his marking-knife he scribed the position of the sternward edge of the stem.

He removed the stem and replaced his chisel in the rack. Taking up the cotter, he checked its diameter against the wings of the centre-bit which he now locked into his brace. Holding the brace vertically, as he had been taught, he drilled the hole through the tenon. Finally he smoothed away the swarf. The cotter needed no more than a firm

push. After one more check the assembly was complete, and with its completion came a moment of pleasure.

He loved the precision of which he found himself daily more capable. Working in three dimensions was better than working in two, better even than the joy of getting a drawing right.

The tiller had been easy. He preferred the intense mental and physical absorption of a really difficult job, like chining boards with a jack-plane or helping the craftsmen with a keel and ribbing. He revelled in his growing skill, his technical knowledge, even his youth, and as he walked across the flagstone floor of the shop he felt his shoulders square.

This morning he had earned his pay by creating an object which yesterday had not existed. Not only was it new and, having been made to the master's specifications, the best and most modern of its kind, but it was also good to look at, was capable of many years' hard and safe service, and might help to bring in, over its lifetime, hundreds of tons of food. More than all this, he had taken another step towards working with his father in their own venture.

The moment was subsumed; his mind and feelings were back on the Alincester road.

The next job was the rudder-blade. Ralf had already passed into the sunshine and was making his way to the woodyard. His father was there, choosing larch. The business with Aholiab Peake had indeed, apparently, been forgotten. All that remained was Ralf's black eye, the subject of comment and speculation that now, like the aching in his bruised abdomen, had thankfully subsided.

The day was warm. At Linsell's suggestion Ralf took his food and beer outside when the noon break came and joined him, together with several others, sitting by the slipway on the building-mould of a cog. The ship, looming behind them, broad in the beam and round-bottomed, was nearly finished: only the decking and the superstructure remained to be assembled.

Ralf took a bite of cheese. Spring haze filmed the sky, investing the air with an oddly forward perspective. Half in reverie and taking no part in the talk, he looked across two hundred yards of brown water at an unladen lighter, heading out to one of the vessels at anchor. Beyond it, on the far side of the channel, stood the wool warehouse, where even now carts were arriving from the downs. Slate-roofed, with tall doors and its own quay, this was the largest building in Rushton. From there a ninety-foot barque, the *Ooievaar*, bound for Rotterdam, had earlier been poled and rowed into the channel. The pilot's office behind the warehouse could not be seen from here, nor the harbourmaster's.

'There it is, Ralf,' his father said. 'There's your answer.'

The answer to what? Eloise? Could his father read his mind?

Linsell was gesturing with his bread at the surface of the slipway below them. Slopping against the cobbles, the tide was leaving behind, as it ebbed, its usual coating of refuse and scum. 'The answer to the milling licence,' he said. 'Or whatever you said it's called.'

'I don't understand.'

'Use the tide to drive your wheel.'

They had set off for Rushton this morning as usual, long before first light. Crossing the white-railed bridge by the

pond, Ralf had recalled his walk with Godric and their conversation about the ruined mill. For the next hundred yards or so he had told his father what Godric had said; leaving out, however, Godric's words about the latest assessment of the manor's profits.

His father had known no more than that milling was controlled by the diocese. The subject seemed not to have interested him and their talk had quickly moved on. But now it seemed that, after all, he had been listening.

'Trap the flood with a bund,' he continued. 'Towards low water, open a sluice. Should give you hours of milling, twice each day.' He took another mouthful. 'Couldn't be simpler. Mape's the ideal place for it. No licence needed, so you could charge whatever you like. Undercut the clergy.'

For a few seconds, as he fully understood, Ralf's incredulous smile prevented him from speaking.

'Mind you,' Linsell said, 'someone's bound to have thought of it already. There's got to be a law.'

'Why?'

'It's such an obvious thing.'

'I've never heard of it.'

'Brother Diccon,' Linsell said, to the man sitting next to him. 'Have you ever heard of it?'

'Heard of what?'

'A mill driven by the tide.'

'I can't say I have, Brother Linsell.' Diccon leaned forward and addressed the whole group, which included some of the most experienced marine woodsmiths on the coast: none had ever encountered such a mill. Mills on rivers they had seen aplenty, but never on the sea. The idea was new, completely new, so new that perhaps not even the Church and all its lawyers had foreseen it.

Ralf's admiration of his father's inventiveness gave way to the thought that such a mill might really work. It really might be practical. And if it were practical, if it were built, it would save the baron money. At a distance, Ralf liked the baron. He was grateful for his kindnesses and he liked him also for his laconic remarks, his generosity, his indulgence of Godric.

It was only then that Ralf again connected the baron with his youngest child. Here was a way, if not to impress her, then to bring himself to her notice, her favourable notice. He thought no further ahead than that. To earn a smile, that was all he wanted.

'We've got to tell the baron,' he said.

'Are you serious?'

'Yes. It'll work, I know it will.'

'And who is to build it?'

With this there opened another vista, more exciting even than the first.

'Who is to build it?' Ralf said. 'We are, of course.'

* * *

Tuesday evening came at last and with it the appointed hour. No more time remained for Eloise's mother or Aunt Béatrice to change their minds. For a week now they had been undecided. By Wednesday the bliaut had been settled as the cloth of gold, with a plunging neckline to reveal the shirt of pale yellow silk, all beneath a gauzy Persian surcoat edged with pearls and clasped at the waist with a golden cross. There had been increasing uncertainty about the barbette, fillet, coif and veil, leading, on Thursday morning, to panic and the necessity of a journey the next

day to Alincester, where her mother's own cutter had travelled from London to work long into Saturday night on a new and even more extravagant gown: a bliaut in silk crepe and samite, black, droop-sleeved, laced and pleated to emphasise the figure, over a white silk shirt with an ogee neck. The silk surcoat, also black, had been embroidered with silver flowers like those on the new fillet. Even the shoes, black silk trimmed with silver, were new. Then, this morning, all that had been rejected. They had gone back to the gold.

There was now to be no headdress. Her plaits had been coiled into a chignon held by her grandmother's crespine, a caul of fine gold wire studded with jewels where the wires intersected.

Her hands, her wrists, the nape of her neck, her perfume, even her bath: all had been supervised, and now no time remained.

She had to be ready. The word had come. He was waiting.

Holding up the folds of her surcoat and bliaut, Eloise followed her aunt downstairs. Outside the dayroom they paused.

'You look dazzling,' Aunt Béatrice whispered, surveying her own triumph. 'You'll enchant him.'

Eloise did not speak. Her dread was too great, her throat too dry.

Her aunt's gesture said, 'Shall we go in?'

He was already standing, perhaps too nervous himself to sit, and made his bow a little too soon and a little too deeply. Despite all her resolutions, Eloise coloured as her aunt spoke the words of introduction. She had not yet dared to look at his face.

They sat down. Just as if the answers were not already known, her aunt proceeded with the expected enquiries, in French, about his family and his journey here with his uncle. His replies were equally expected. The timbre of his voice was not displeasing. His French was poor and Eloise guessed that he was rarely called upon to speak anything but English.

She raised her eyes to see what sort of man was to be her husband. Lowering them immediately, she struggled to contain her agitation. She had been led to believe that he was twenty-five, but he seemed older. Not that his age should count against him. Some of the candidates her father had considered had been thirty-five or even more. Nor could she take exception to his figure or face. He seemed an amiable, normal young man, if a little wan. There was nothing wrong with him. His single fault was known only to herself.

His name was Robert Ingram and he was the eldest son of the Duke of Kent. The negotiations had been going on for the best part of two years. Eloise did not know the proposed size of the dowry, but it was obviously greater than her father could afford. Hence the delay. Nonetheless a preliminary agreement must have been reached.

Eloise had no say in the matter. The politics of the match were not her concern. Her duty was to her father. She had to please this young man, and then her duty would be to him.

The Kents were among the most anglicised of the ducal families. They were immensely rich. Their commanding castle, above the cliffs at Dover, would be her home. She would eventually become its mistress, but most of the year she and this man would be at court, in London and

elsewhere. She would be expected to produce sons. Such was her future.

Sir Robert showed no sign of the Norman blood that Eloise felt in herself. She was not a pure Norman: her forebears had intermarried with the Franks, but enough remained for her to know the pull of the sea and the mad-eyed honour of the north. The first Norman, the great-great-great grandfather of the Conqueror, had been a Viking named Rollo. He had sailed up the Seine to lay siege to Paris and from its terrorised king had exacted lands in north-western France. With other Norsemen as fierce and ruthless as himself, Rollo had established his own kingdom. Its dynamism and rule by blood-feud had overcome the whole of France, and then, in 1066, England too.

The Viking gods and sagas still resonated in the Norman mind. Stories of demented bravery, long ships, epic voyages and Valhalla were still told, if only in the nursery. Below it all lay the mystic sea. The sea. Eloise could live nowhere but by the sea. That, at least, would continue.

She glanced again at Robert Ingram.

'Isn't it so, Eloise?' said Aunt Béatrice, switching to English and finally bringing her into the conversation.

'Yes, Aunt,' Eloise said. 'Riding is the most agreeable of all exercises.'

'My niece is an accomplished horsewoman,' Aunt Béatrice said. 'She had her own palfrey at the age of ten.'

Robert Ingram's eyes, meeting Eloise's for the first time, betrayed that he had a sense of humour, but not a trace of irony appeared in the reply he made to her chaperone.

What would Eloise say about him to her mother? It hardly mattered. She could not object to his only fault, the inescapable fact that he was not somebody else.

The exchanges continued.

'We have very good hunting here,' Aunt Béatrice told him. 'The King himself has honoured us with his presence.'

'The prowess of His Grace is everywhere known.'

'Indeed it is.'

He turned to Eloise. 'May I ask, mademoiselle, if you think that gentlemen spend too much time in pursuit of game?'

'I have heard it complained of, sir. Some ladies, I understand, are not sorry for it.'

While her aunt looked on in consternation, he dissected her impudent reply with an amused nod. His question had been just as impudent: she had decided to return like with like, to see what he was made of. There were other ways to be brave than laying siege to Paris.

Although he now retreated to safer, platitudinous, ground, she saw that she had pleased him. His smile spoke of surprise as well as approval. Eloise, blushing again, smiled back and felt her heart sink. She was discharging her duty in exemplary fashion.

It would be worse later, at the dinner. She would need all her courage then. She must learn to detach her thoughts from their customary course. There could be no more comfort there. Not that there ever had been, nor even hope. She must give those habits up; and with them him.

The wound he had inflicted last week in the Long Barn was the natural prelude to this tête-à-tête. She could not blame him. It was absurd to imagine that he had the least inkling of the way she felt: all her ingenuity had been expended in making sure that he had none.

The stratagem had started years ago, as soon as she had recognised him; as soon as she had understood what had

happened to her. She had wished to shield herself, but more than that she had wished to shield him. His family's troubles did not need to be made worse by her selfishness.

Even so, she feared she had come close to disaster. The prime source of information was guarded by a fearsome intelligence: in her hunger for every scrap of news she must have alerted Godric's suspicions.

The second source was her own eyesight. She had watched him growing into the independence she had first seen five summers ago. He even eschewed the current fashion and kept his blond hair short.

She knew a Viking when she saw one. He, his father and sister, if not his mother, belonged to the same tall, beautiful and clean-limbed breed from which the house of Rollo had sprung.

Outward beauty meant little. His came from within. From the first she had noted his loving solicitude for his sister. Eloise wished she could befriend her, and not just to be closer to him. His resolute masculinity showed in the way he was prepared to work, first in the manor and now at the boatyard. When she had heard that he was to be going there, Eloise had pictured him not among crab-boats but galleys, exercising the old craft, the Nordic fusion with the sea. Once, from horseback, she had seen him at the helm, approaching the staith. At the instinctive moment, the sun on his face, he had dropped the sail and brought the vessel neatly in. He was not merely quick and capable, but he could read and write, which she could not, and had gone on dauntlessly with his Latin. His drawings, some others of which she had managed to peruse, revealed a magic that could not be put into words. From what Godric had said, he cared little for them once they were finished

and was wont to throw them away. She would have given anything to have had just one of her own. Now and then when the house was quiet and when Godric was at Leckbourne, she would sit in his chamber and look through the eleven pages that comprised his collection.

On Godric's account also she loved him. She had never been close enough to her brother to understand his pain. Whatever its source, it was coming back, but in a different and darker form. He hated his life.

Which of the two, brother or sister, was more unhappy? Which of the two would be quicker to renounce nobility and live in any other way? Freedom to love: that was all she wanted. She would give up Dover Castle without a moment's thought.

'Yes, Aunt,' she said, rising. This part of the ordeal was coming to an end.

The next castellan, her keeper, bowed again, with chivalrous ease. He did not seem disappointed by his new acquisition. 'Mademoiselle,' he said, and turned to Aunt Béatrice. 'Madame. Until later.'

With that he returned to the parlour to find his uncle.

Eloise, behind her aunt, climbed the ornate stairway to face her mother.

11

Ralf had never before spoken so directly to Mr Caffyn, the steward, the most senior of the baron's retainers, and had never before set foot in this, his sanctum. A large table occupied the centre of the room; cupboards and overloaded shelves lined three walls. A desk and block-seat for the reeve stood by the door, and the single wide window, now

with shutters fixed, and overlooking the stable yard, lit during the day the steward's writing slope where the ledgers were maintained. The manor could, did, run smoothly for weeks in the absence of its lord. From this office the steward manipulated the workforce of serfs, balanced the flow of rents and quits and scutage, and exercised loose but constant control of every one of his master's eleven thousand acres.

The steward was as fluent in Latin as Ralf was in English. His voice, like his deep-set eyes under a prominent brow, gave an impression of authority and intelligence. Otherwise he was unprepossessing. His squat body sat clumsily in the saddle. His large, pale head, made paler by its remaining fringe of chestnut hair, seemed to be supported directly, without a neck, by shoulders which, from years of sitting, had become hunched. But, as Ralf now observed, his hands were remarkably well-formed.

Mr Caffyn put aside the third drawing and, holding it closer to the lamp, examined, with a bland, impartial expression, the next.

'Who did these?' he said to Linsell.

'My boy. He drew them. All of them. That's why I wanted him to be here.'

The steward's forefinger traced the proposed line of the bund. 'We're talking about a lot of earth.'

'We don't know how much, sir. We still need to find the volume of the pen. The bigger the pen, the more power you'll have. Up to a point.'

Ralf detected, on Mr Caffyn's clean-shaven face, the faintest of faint smiles. 'How much calculation have you done?'

‘Some. Ralf went to the harbourmaster’s, for the tide heights. The lowest neap at Rushton is twelve foot one. The highest spring is sixteen foot two. They say it’ll be much the same here.’

‘At what point in the rising tide would the wheel stop turning?’

‘Rotation would stop altogether once water had reached the axle.’

‘So how long would you be milling in each tide? In each period of twelve and a half hours?’

‘We think five hours.’

‘Ten hours a day, six days a week?’

‘Yes. All year round.’

‘Interesting. More than that. But I’m worried about this bund. It’s a major undertaking. The bund has to be the same height as the existing dike, of course.’

‘That’s right.’

The obvious site for the mill was at the end of the eastern dike. There, on the far side of the Severals, the dike turned at an oblique angle, following the beach, and ran on, reducing as it went, until it disappeared into rising ground. Linsell’s idea had been to use the angle of the turn for two sides of a triangular pen, or millpond. The bund, or embankment, forming the third side, could be constructed partly from spoil taken from the pen-bed.

‘A hundred and forty yards, you say.’

‘About that. For an acre pen. An acre might be too much, or too little.’

‘You’re the engineer, Master Grigg. Make a better guess than that.’

‘I’m scarcely an engineer.’

Mr Caffyn tapped the first drawing, a sectional view of the mill showing its sea-gates, sluice and wheel. 'This is the work of an engineer.'

'As I say, Ralf did it.'

'Then you tell me, Ralf,' Mr Caffyn said, his smile now unmistakable. 'How big a pen do we want?'

'Quite big, sir.'

Linsell said, 'I'm told the consumption at Finmere is about ninety thousand gallons an hour. They've got an overshot wheel. Ours would be undershot, which is less efficient. Then again, our wheel would be a good bit smaller. I've talked to some people. They're not milling engineers, but they say two hundred thousand would do it. Over a five hour shift you'd need a million. That comes out at about six thousand cubic yards.' Ralf watched his father extricate the last parchment, the one with all the calculations. They were beyond Ralf's understanding: even his father had struggled in places and needed help from Diccon. 'If the lowest neap gives you a four-foot head, the pen surface has to be about an acre. That's why we say we need a hundred-and-forty-yard bund. But the consumption might be different, and without the survey we don't know the angle of the turn or what head of water we'll get.'

The steward took the page of calculations and studied it. 'I can see you've been giving this a great deal of thought.'

If Linsell had been giving it a great deal of thought, Ralf had been giving it more. The mill had already come to obsess him. Night after night of febrile imaginings had left him unable to sleep. The more he thought about the mill the more seductive the idea became and the more it took hold. The more it took hold the more closely identified it became with Eloise: the mill with Eloise, Eloise with the

mill, until the two were one and it seemed in his fever that this was to be his declaration, his offering, his way to reach her. The avuncular harbourmaster had explained in detail how the tides followed the moon. The moon, ever changing, cold, remote, rising in the east over the Point, climbing above a sparkling sea and setting over the marshes, the moon drew the tides: and it was to her rhythm that the sea-gates would open and let the water gush in; her force alone that later in the cycle would thunder from the sluice to drive the wheel, the gears, the whole pulsating machinery of the mill. Thus captured, the goddess moon would grind the sun-grown corn, the manor would grow fat, and Ralf would find favour, renown, wealth: and her. Half awake or in his dreams, all obstacles had already been ground away. He had seen, from the beginning, how the mill could release his father and himself from Rushton. They could start work together immediately, just as soon as the mill was sanctioned, just as soon as advance payment could be made to pay debts and get the licence back; and Ralf's father would be a master again, Ralf's mother a master's wife, and Ralf's sister a master's daughter no longer exposed to the lewd and outrageous sons of serfs. The mill was everything.

Today, on returning from Rushton, his father had gone straight to the Hall to arrange the appointment with Mr Caffyn upon which it all hinged. Something in Linsell's manner must have moved him to grant this most unusual and urgent request, to make time for an out-of-hours meeting on a Saturday evening, when normally he was free to put concern from his mind and stay at home with his family. With no trace of annoyance he had lit the lamp and

listened patiently to Linsell's opening exposition. Then he had been shown the roll of drawings.

The steward sat down, his back to the lamp, and indicated the reeve's seat. 'Please, Master Grigg.'

Ralf leaned against the edge of the table.

'The mill-house,' Mr Caffyn said, addressing Linsell. 'How much would it cost? Roughly.'

'Depends how it's made.'

'What would you recommend?'

'Box-frame construction, with a ventilated basement to keep everything dry above. Finish it in tarred weatherboard like that net-shed down by the staith. Thatched roof. Decent footings and sills. I'd suggest green oak throughout and let it season in place. German for the floors and weatherboard. Their sawn stuff is cheap at the moment. Half a dozen windows, shutters, doors. All that might cost about fifteen pounds, I'd say. Fifteen more for the sea-gates, penstock and machinery. Five for the screen. Thirty-five or forty all in. Very roughly.'

'Materials and labour?'

'Labour included, yes.'

'What about the pen?'

'With a hundred and forty yards of bund, it might come out at, I don't know, sixty pounds. Something like that. Less if you use the manor's labour.'

'Quite. But every man we put to digging has to come off something else.'

'We understand that, sir.'

'In all, you're saying the mill might cost a hundred pounds. Not counting an access track.' For a moment Mr Caffyn regarded Linsell without speaking. 'Would you really be able to build it?'

‘Yes.’

‘You have the necessary knowledge for the earthworks?’

‘I can get it. I know someone.’

‘What would you say if I were to put this out to tender?’

‘That’s your prerogative, sir. We’ve given you the idea. Now it’s yours.’

Mr Caffyn looked again at the drawings. ‘You’ve built houses before?’

‘Dwelling houses, in Alincester.’

‘How many?’

‘Thirty-eight.’

‘Can I see them?’

‘I’ll give you a list.’

‘And the machinery. What do you know about it?’

‘The marine work, the penstock and all that, we know. I worked on the Broad Pond, on the culverts.’

‘Really? In Alincester?’

‘Yes.’

‘For the bishop?’

‘Under Master Hampden.’

‘Are you talking about John Hampden? At the cathedral?’

‘I was his apprentice, on a long indenture. Fourteen years.’

‘Do forgive me, Master Grigg, I’d almost forgotten.’

‘As for the gears and stones, we’ll find out. Get someone in if need be.’

‘Now, there’s this question of your licence. May I ask how much is outstanding?’

‘Three pounds twelve.’

‘And you’d need this sum in advance, over and above the tender price?’

‘Yes, sir. But my tender would reflect that. I’d want no more than to eat while the contract lasted.’

‘How much notice would you need to cost this properly?’

‘Two months, perhaps three.’

Mr Caffyn turned in his seat and leafed through the drawings. ‘I have to say that on legal grounds your scheme is unlikely to succeed. Nonetheless, I shall lay it before His Lordship.’

‘Thank you, sir.’

‘You’re wasted in that boatyard, Master Grigg.’

‘I shan’t be there for ever.’

‘Your plan is?’

‘To go back to the city and open another shop. With Ralf here.’

‘I wish you well with it.’

Ralf did not realise that the interview had ended, but his father was already on his feet.

‘When will you need the drawings back?’

‘Keep them as long as you want.’

‘I shan’t delay in letting you know His Lordship’s response. Should it be favourable, I’ll ask you for that list of houses.’

* * *

What became the staith-track began at the village green, skirted the Hall, crossed the river, and for a quarter of a mile led downwards between grazing on one side and arable on the other. At the bottom, near the sheds and landing-stage, shingle had been spread on the track to keep it passable in winter, and here it had also been widened so

that carts had space to manoeuvre. From this widening, a footpath ran behind the sheds and followed the eastern dike all the way to the Severals.

The afternoon was sunny, and though the wind felt keen and there was still mud underfoot, spring had indubitably arrived. The cool white stars of stitchwort had shone here and there in the staith-track verge; some of the thorn bushes were in leaf; and Ralf had already heard two blackcaps singing. He and Imogen had just seen the flicking wings and white rump of a wheatear, which, having thrice moved ahead when disturbed, now reproachfully flew out over the foreshore and looped back behind them to regain its original place. It had had the dike to itself: hardly anyone came here on Sundays.

The path soon left the top of the dike and continued among the trees of the windbreak. To the left, under its canopy of skylark song, the big arable field eventually yielded to scrub. As the scrub became wetter the hawthorns, willows and brambles gave way more and more to reeds, and then to rushes, mud and the open water of the lagoons themselves. By now the path had regained the top of the dike.

'This is the place,' Ralf said, becoming aware of the wind in his ears, varying from second to second, the inconstant wind that made Mape's music of wildness and isolation: and in all the manor nowhere was more wild or isolated than this. He looked up at the spring sky, and out across the ruffled estuary to the long, low, mysterious line of the Point. Behind him the reed-scrub and lagoons spread for a quarter of a mile to a greening bank of scrubby woodland, and after that rose the mass of oak forest, framed by the

downs, that climbed to the edge of Mape Manor and on into the next.

This was indeed the place: the place for the mill. The elbow where the dike turned was fifty yards off. Beyond it, beyond the end of the Point, the sea showed dark-blue. High water this morning had come at about three o'clock. Now, as the tide again neared its flood, much of the seaward slope was hidden by lapping waves.

'We're a long way from the village,' Imogen said.

'I know.' The cost of a track was yet another uncertainty. 'But it's got to be out here or we won't get enough water.'

The dike was built of earth, faced on its outer slope with imported granite. The boulders, largest near the base, had been packed with flint and lime cement. Three ill-defined zones, merging with one another, divided the slope. The boulders at the bottom were largely bare. Further up, for another five or six feet, salt-plants, now submerged, showed the twice-daily presence of the sea. The remaining ten or twelve feet of slope were clothed with orache and sea meadow-grass to which clung lines of dried seaweed. Although the path at the summit and the grassy inland slope were littered with wrack, shells, and even storm-driven shingle, it seemed that the tide normally came no nearer than about four feet from the top.

The reclaimed ground behind the dike was higher than the foreshore, but if it were dug out to provide the earth for the bund, at neap tides they would easily achieve a four-foot head of water in the pen.

Earlier, Ralf had paced out a distance of one hundred and forty yards so that they would have a clear idea of what it looked like. Most of the area to be enclosed was covered by reeds and scrub, but part was occupied by the edge of the

nearest lagoon. In all, it seemed a possible site for a millpond.

'I think it might work,' he said.

'O Ralf, I so hope it does.'

Imogen was now nearly as excited about the project as Ralf himself. If it went ahead the family would be reunited and their return to the city brought that much nearer.

On the way back they discussed yet again, at length, all but one of the other implications of the mill; all but the most important to Ralf. But, since last night, his feelings on that subject had changed.

This morning's sight of Eloise in church, so eagerly anticipated, had served only to make him more confused. For one thing, she was not as he had remembered. She looked almost plain, and Ralf began to understand that the Eloise of his memory was an idol he himself had assembled. She was more complicated and mutable than that. She was alive: she led an inner life which had nothing to do with him, in which he figured not at all. During the sermon he saw her raise her eyes to the altar, to the rood above, and contemplate the figure on the cross. Her expression, if such it could be called, was unreadable; her pensive gaze soon subsided to the floor, where it largely remained. Not once did she look in Ralf's direction, neither during the service nor afterwards in the churchyard, where, because Godric was back at the abbey, there was no excuse for Ralf to obtrude himself on the baron's family. And why should she have looked his way? What was he to her?

In the open air, in the April sunshine, she was beautiful again, achingly so. As Ralf passed under the tiled roof of

the lich-gate and left her behind, he was beset by a pain which could have had its origin nowhere but in his heart.

This disease, this madness, this lack of sleep could not go on. Arriving home after church, he had resolved to cure himself and act more sensibly. He would put her from his mind. Nothing connected her with the mill, except her father. The mill was an ambition in itself, to be pursued for practical reasons. If he continued to indulge himself in this infatuation with the baron's daughter, with his best friend's sister, with this young woman he hardly knew, he would only succeed in making himself ill.

Imogen therefore caught him off guard when, walking back along the staith-track, she said, from nowhere, 'Have you got a sweetheart?'

He shook his head.

'Not Mary?'

'Not even her.'

'She's going with Aholiab, anyway.'

'I know.'

'Is he the one who hit you?'

'Never you mind.'

Imogen gave him one of her serious looks and linked her arm with his. 'Do you love anyone?'

'You.'

'Don't be silly, Ralf. You know what I mean.'

He said nothing.

'I think you're in love. That's why you mope about like you do. That's why you're not eating.'

'I don't mope about,' he said, trying to quell his alarm. He had supposed himself opaque. If Imogen had noticed, then what about his parents? His mother? 'I ate all my dinner.'

‘No you didn’t.’

They took a few steps more and Imogen said, ‘Who is she? A girl in Rushton, I’ll bet. Is she pretty?’

Her persistence should have annoyed him, but he now discovered that it had the opposite effect.

‘Is she pretty?’

‘Very,’ he said, unable to stop himself.

To have spoken at last, to have acknowledged her existence, afforded inexpressible relief.

‘Does she love you?’

‘No. She doesn’t even like me.’

‘She must be mad. What’s the matter with her?’

‘Nothing. Nothing’s the matter with her. That’s the trouble.’

‘Does she know how you feel?’

‘No.’

‘Tell her, Ralf. You’ve got to tell her. I’d want to know, I —’

‘I don’t want to talk about it.’

To his great surprise, Imogen said, after a moment, ‘All right,’ and gave his arm a squeeze of sympathy. The love he had always felt for her suddenly intensified. In his absence she had become far more grown-up and understanding than he had given her credit for.

Walking with her for a few yards of companionable silence, reflecting on her warmth and Eloise’s lack of it, a logical inconsistency snagged at his mind. Was Eloise really as he supposed? He thought of her wistful gaze this morning in church, of her unaffected behaviour at the recital on Lady Day: of the smile with which she had spoken to Godric and bent her head to catch his reply. She was Godric’s sister, just as Imogen was Ralf’s. Could Eloise

really be so different from her brother? There now came to Ralf's memory more incidents, many more, in which he could have misconstrued her conduct towards everyone except himself. Why did she treat him as she did? As far as he knew, he had never given her grounds for resentment. Even had he insulted or injured her, she would surely treat him with at least the civility due to one of her brother's friends, however low born.

Speaking of her had made him realise how far he was from being cured. Perhaps he did not want to be well. Perhaps he did not want to be parted from his transcending sense of predestination: for he could never rid himself of the conviction that by some cruel quirk she was meant for him. All his suffering arose from the fact that, plainly, he was not meant for her.

On Thursday a handsome girl in the marketplace had shot him an unmistakable glance, not just of approval but of invitation. Flustered, walking on, he had recalled Mary Ibbott's flattery in the starlight and wondered if there might be something in it.

Now dimly taking shape in the mists of his inexperience, Ralf could not help discerning another reason why Eloise might so pointedly and assiduously be making it her business to ignore him.

'Are you all right?' Imogen said.

'I've just had … I've just thought of something.'

'About what?'

'That girl.'

'And?'

'What you said just now, about telling her. Do you really think I should?'

'Of course. How can she be sure, otherwise?'

‘Girls don’t mind it, then, being told?’

When she smiled like that, Imogen was more than beautiful. ‘You may be my big brother, Ralf, but, honestly, sometimes I think you don’t know anything at all.’

12

Gervase had always tried to maintain good relations with his neighbours, but he believed that Lord Angmer, who held the manor to the east, was also a friend. They had known each other since boyhood and were of similar dispositions. Both belonged to the circle at court that opposed further war with France. Into this circle Gervase had already brought one son-in-law, the Earl of Warwick. If he could also recruit the Kents, or even neutralise them, the risk of war over Gascony would be reduced and with it the danger that England herself might be overrun.

The dowry acceptable to the Kents had become stuck at two hundred and fifty marks. As it was, they had all but compromised themselves: a family of their status could not be seen to settle for less. Indeed, they had almost withdrawn. Gervase had received word at Westminster that Robert Ingram had fallen head-over-heels for Eloise. This, presumably, was the only thing that had kept them talking.

In addition to the dowry Gervase would have to find a hundred marks for the royal sanction. He did not have three hundred and fifty marks. He still owed the Treasury three hundred and eighty of succession relief and revenues for the manor were continuing to fall. There was every chance that the title would revert to the Crown when he died and his eldest would be unable to succeed.

Sometimes, lying awake in the early hours, Gervase had thought death the only escape from his predicament. Since succeeding to his title the gradient of his life had done nothing but increase. His slippery uphill course had become vertical, more than vertical, overhanging. He was beset not just by debt and all the trivia of the manor but by double-dealing at court. The sovereign to whom he had devoted himself was likely as not to throw away the whole kingdom for the sake of a few Gascon vineyards.

When Gervase had first seen Master Grigg's novel proposal for a mill, he had reacted with little more than amusement. Later, reconsidering, he had asked the opinion of his clerk. Stephen had expressed the steward's, and Gervase's own, original view: that such a structure was bound to be legally classed as a molendinium aquaticum, a watermill, and thus subject to all the restrictions of a molendinium sacrum.

Nevertheless Gervase had told him to visit the cathedral library and examine the diocesan rolls as they pertained to milling law. Stephen had returned from Alincester with surprising news. A molendinium aquaticum was specifically defined as being driven by a millstream, 'rivus qui molam agit'. Each potential or actual rivus in the diocese was named and listed according to its source and point of discharge and the maximum number of mills it would be permitted to support. The point of discharge of Gervase's river was named as 'among marshes near the road from Angmer to Rushton' in 'the manorial holding of Maepe, Maipe or Mape', which itself was identified elsewhere in the rolls as 'those lands granted by William, by the grace of God king of the English, to his most constant and faithful knight, Sir Geoffroy Alain de Maepe,

on the ninth day of December in the Year of Our Lord 1069', this identification being cross-referenced with Mape's entry in the Domesday Book.

Stephen Tysoe had no pretensions to being a lawyer, but when Gervase had asked him, 'Does this mean the diocese would have no control over a tide mill?', he had answered, 'In my opinion, yes.'

According to Walter, the mill itself would cost about a hundred and fifty marks and an access track thirty or forty more. For the outlay of one hundred and ninety marks, the manor would be able, in perpetuity, to grind its own corn. It could grind the corn of other manors without reference to the scale of charges set by the Molarius. Nor could the Molarius meddle with all the other industry of which the ingenious Master Grigg had promised his mill, with suitable additions, would be capable: such as sawing and turning wood, cutting and moulding stone, tanning leather, or even driving the bellows for a forge or glassworks.

When, several years ago, Gervase had allowed the Griggs to come and live with old Farlow, he had failed to ask for rent for several ill-defined reasons. Farlow was an exceptional and conscientious worker. Gervase had liked his wife and at her funeral had felt himself touched by her loss. He had also admired their daughter, Anna, an only child, who was not only comely but sensible and intelligent. He had been pleased to grant her freedom for the nominal sum of three and sixpence. The wedding and feast had been a rare occasion of happiness in Mape's dull calendar, and Gervase had followed with interest the subsequent fortunes of the family. The Acklin affair, of which he had heard independent account, had struck him

as monstrously unjust. Linsell Grigg's parents were dead: the family had had nowhere to turn but Mape.

Against the advice of his steward, Gervase had allowed them to live here free of rent. How strangely the world was ordered! That sentimental act had now been repaid a hundredfold. The tide mill, if legal, if built, if as functional as its architect claimed, would transform the manor. Gervase's debts would evaporate. His grant of land would be kept in the family, passed on to his eldest son, as was meet; and, of more pressing importance, impinging on the security and welfare of the whole country, the Kents would have their dowry and the wedding could proceed.

It was too good to be true, the answer to all his prayers. But before he could ask Grigg to submit a document of tender the legal position needed to be confirmed. A London lawyer named Chevalley was widely regarded as the foremost lay authority on ecclesiastical law. He was also expensive, very expensive.

Mape was not the only manor on the coast. If a tide mill were legal in Mape, there was no reason why Lord Angmer should not build one also; no reason why he and many other coastal barons should not share in the new prosperity which, independent of the dead hand of the Church, might help restore the ground lost since 1066 by the baronage and its centre, the king.

In his short note to Lord Angmer, proposing a visit, Gervase had made no mention of the mill. The note had been answered by return, with equal brevity and friendliness, with the result that Gervase had ridden here this morning to take a private lunch. Angmer had listened, looked at the drawings, listened further, and finally, having been asked whether he himself would consider building

such a mill, had regretfully said that, at present, on financial grounds, he would not. The real reason for the visit – to get Angmer to help with the cost of instructing Chevalley – thus remained undisclosed.

Afterwards Angmer suggested an hour of two of sport. At Gervase's request they rode out alone, to the ill-concealed displeasure of Angmer's austringer, who would be unable to supervise his master's treatment of Asug, the largest of his three goshawks.

This was the size of a buzzard, though heavier, more deep-chested and powerful. All birds of prey were highly strung, existing at a pitch which no human could understand, but Gervase had never seen a gos so close to lunacy that could yet be managed. When first he was subjected to Asug's baleful orange glare, her twinned eyes directed at his, he actually felt fear. Her thick, long, yellow, coarsely scaly shanks ended in crushing yellow feet whose dark talons made those of a peregrine look blunt. The uniform ashy-brown of her mantle, back and upper wings, the fine ashy-brown barring of her breast and underwings, the dark zoning of her tail, her dark crown and cheeks, the pale stripe above each eye merging behind her head to heighten the sternness of her gaze: all were exactly right, a virtuoso study in restraint. She had been taken as an eyas in the Rhineland two years previously.

From Angmer Hall the two barons rode at a walk through the fields while the heathen Asug, her head swivelling this way and that, irises blazing, bridled with sulphurous rage at the passing serfs. Coming to the woods and entering a ride, she recovered herself sufficiently to settle her head. Then, in lusty anticipation of the act to come, she roused and sleeked every feather in her plumage.

With that her clamping grasp on the glove seemed to tighten: in her impatience she wanted to puncture the leather and draw her keeper's blood.

She was in perfect yarak, hunting fettle. Gervase was not normally given to envy. Exceptions could be made.

The sun-dappled ride ended at a horse-gate. Gervase leaned down to unlatch it and closed it after them. Ahead lay an expanse of grazing a couple of furlongs across, sloping up towards more woodland. Most of the black bullocks had gathered on the far side.

Asug had seen something.

'Where is it?' Angmer said.

'I don't know. Quick, she's set!'

Angmer raised his arm, released the jesses, and the harpy opened her wings to reclaim her element. No more than eighteen inches above the grass, racing her shadow, gathering speed, superb, she flew along the edge of the wood, straight for whatever invisible outrage it was that had raised her spleen.

It saw her coming, but too late. Cover, safety, a hole, were one second away: far too far. The assassin swerved, intercepted and, in a skidding flurry of arrested momentum, pounced. Her pinions briefly closed before she took flight again. More laboured now, the head of the dangling rabbit gripped by one foot, the goshawk proceeded with rowing wings along the two-hundred-yard return to the horses.

'My God, Frederic, but she's wonderful.'

'The King wants her.'

'I'm sure he does.'

'He can have my wife first.'

'There are limits to fealty.'

‘Quite,’ Angmer said, unable to prevent himself from flinching as Asug reached for the glove. She was not even breathing heavily. Only the subdued light in her eyes hinted at what she had just done. With his unprotected hand, Angmer took the rabbit from her grasp and gave it to his friend.

‘Would you, Gervase? One kidney. Any more and I’ll be in trouble with Fairfax.’

That was the name of his austringer. Gervase dismounted and accepted the knife that Angmer now withdrew from a sheath at his belt. The rabbit, a large buck, had probably died of terror even before the stoop, but in any case it could have felt no more than momentary distress: its skull had been crushed. Opening the flank, Gervase removed a kidney which Angmer cautiously presented and was wolfed down in an instant. Having wiped his bloody fingers on the grass and deposited the rabbit in the game-net at Angmer’s saddle, Gervase remounted.

The hunt was over. As they returned along the woodland ride, Angmer said, ‘You wished to continue our talk.’

‘Only to ask you to reconsider.’

‘About your tide mill?’

‘Yes. I’d prefer mine not to be the only one.’

‘I’m sorry, Gervase. I have another reason for declining, besides the cost.’

Gervase waited.

‘My dear fellow, do you have any idea of what you’re up against? Not just the diocese. Not even the archbishops. But the Pope. I’d rather be a rabbit and take my chances with Asug.’

‘Does the Crown count for nothing?’

‘The Church has better lawyers.’

‘They wrote the word on mills. They can’t change it retrospectively.’

‘My friend, I am loath to give advice for the simple reason that no one ever takes any notice.’

‘But?’

‘I beseech you, don’t get caught between Rome and Westminster. They’ll eat you alive.’

* * *

Lord Angmer’s unexpected defeatism left Gervase feeling depressed. Such defeatism was also misplaced. Last year the King had made a treaty with the Pope. On the promise of the Sicilian crown for his younger son he had agreed to finance the papal wars in Sicily. Since then the importunity of the English Church, even of Bishop William, had been much moderated. The political climate could not be more propitious for a minor, localised dispute, even assuming the Church would have a case to bring, which, apparently, it did not. On the way back to his own hall, Gervase was more and more minded to take the next step and seek an opinion from Edward Chevalley.

Gervase had asked for and been granted Lord Angmer’s confidentiality. The idea for a tide-driven mill was a stroke of genius. There was a danger that if it got out too soon, the Church would have a chance to write pre-emptive legislation. It would be disastrous if that happened before his mill was finished and working. He decided, as he rode, to abandon his notion of seeking the support of other coastal barons. He would take all the risk himself to be sure of the project. Rather that than endure interference or

treachery; rather that than lose the one chance he might have to restore his family's fortunes. Besides, if the others were unable to build their mills, it would increase the profits of his own.

In the stable yard he found Eloise, who, having returned from a ride with her Aunt Mildred, had remained behind while the groom examined her mount's left forefoot, which was showing a trace of lameness.

'She's only trodden on a stone, Miss. The sole is bruised, but not punctured.'

'Let her pasture for two or three days.'

'Yes, Miss.'

She waited for her father, so that they could walk together to the house.

'I'm worried about you, Daughter.'

'There's no need.'

'Do you dislike Robert Ingram?'

'No, sir.'

'Some of the happiest marriages are between strangers. Love that grows is always the best. He is an honourable young man and esteems you highly.'

'Yes, Papa.'

'Will you take a turn with me in the garden?'

The afternoon was still sunny, even warm. They came to the meditation maze, neatly clipped lines of knee-high box, and without mistake followed its flagstone pathway to the bench in the middle.

'Do you understand the reason for your betrothal?'

'Not really.'

'Fifty years ago we lost Normandy to the French. Only Gascony remained, thanks to the Archbishop of Bordeaux. Do you know where Gascony is?'

‘I’m sorry, I don’t.’

‘You mustn’t apologise, Eloise. There’s no reason why you should know. It’s a wine-growing region in the south-west. The best reds come from there; we sometimes have Gascon red ourselves. In 1230 the King tried and failed to get our territories back. The expedition caused unimaginable suffering. It led to a revolt of the barons that threatened the crown of England itself. There was nearly civil war. Then, ten years ago, the Earl of Leicester was sent to Gascony as its governor. Now, this Leicester is a Frenchman. Since he gained the King’s favour, far too many influential foreigners have come over here. He is cruel and autocratic. His mistreatment of the Gascons caused an uprising that the King himself had to suppress. Feeling against him is still running high. There is every chance the French will move to take Gascony away from us. The King has pledged himself to defend it and will not hesitate to go to war. If that happens, thousands of men will die. The Treasury will be emptied. Taxes will increase. There will be hunger in the land, and then an English civil war. Chaos. We will in turn be invaded by the French, and they will probably win.’

Eloise’s eyes had widened.

‘It cannot be allowed to happen. The King must be protected. If the Gascons want to be French, let them. Your brother-in-law once sided with Leicester. Thanks to Adela, he has changed his mind.’

‘And the Kents?’

‘They’re close to the King and can influence him.’

‘I had no idea.’

‘I would not have you unhappy for the world. But Eloise, we are none of us free. Only God is free.’ He took her hand. ‘My dearest child.’

She said, ‘Why should the Earl of Leicester behave like that?’

Gervase did not answer at once. He was too surprised. She had unerringly put her finger on the crux of the matter. In secret, there was speculation that Leicester was a traitor. ‘Nobody knows.’

‘Is it not strange? Why does the King tolerate it?’

‘That, my sweet, no one dares to ask him.’

In recent weeks and months Gervase had conceived a growing respect for his daughter’s discretion. She would be eighteen at Christmas, after all, and could have been married three years ago, but it was hard for him to forget that she was no longer a child. He now saw that she was developing into someone whose counsel might be valuable.

He had tried to discuss the mill with his wife, but Margaret had neither understood the implications nor wished to say anything to contradict. Except for Lord Angmer, he had as yet been unable to talk the project over with anyone but Stephen and Walter.

‘Eloise,’ he said, gave her an outline of the idea, and told her that it had been put forward by Master Grigg. ‘The woodsmith.’

‘I know whom you mean.’

‘He worked on the cathedral. Do you remember the rood screen?’

‘Did he carve it?’

‘Some of it.’

‘Really?’

‘And this is the man who would work for us.’ Gervase reached into his pouch. ‘I’ve got the drawings here.’ He and she each moved aside to create a place where the parchments could be unrolled. ‘His son did these.’

‘Godric’s friend. Ralf.’

‘That’s the fellow. Mr Caffyn’s most impressed. Says they’re of engineering quality.’

‘Godric speaks well of him, I know.’

‘These gates are where the sea comes into the pond.’

‘When the tide rises?’

‘That’s it. At high tide they shut automatically, under pressure. This is the sluice, or penstock, as Master Grigg calls it. I suppose that’s the proper term.’

Having been shown the most important features of the design, she said, ‘It seems very clever, but why not just use the river?’

‘Ah, but the cleverest part is this,’ he said, and explained the hold exercised by the Church on conventional milling. He also explained his present quandary, and the uncertain future of the manor.

‘Are you asking me what I think you should do, Papa?’

‘Well, yes. Yes I am.’

‘How much will Mr Chevalley charge for his opinion?’

‘I don’t know. A lot. Ten marks. Perhaps twelve.’

‘If he says the law is on our side, will you build the mill?’

He smiled. ‘That’s it. That’s the decision. The question is, can I afford not to? Your dowry may depend on it. I may as well tell you. The Kents want two hundred and fifty marks. And the King wants a hundred for the royal sanction. I simply don’t have the money, and I don’t know how long I can keep them talking. The only way to raise it is to

borrow. If I had the expectation of the mill, I could have whatever I needed.'

'So if you don't build the mill —'

'Your betrothal might not happen. No, I can tell you now, it won't happen.'

'Then what?'

'You can marry whom you please.'

She hesitated. 'I meant about Gascony.'

'Who can say?'

'You think there'll be war.'

'There might be war whether you marry Robert Ingram or not.'

'But if I do marry him?'

'It will help. I hadn't realised until this afternoon how much.'

Her faint flush reminded him just what a delectable girl he and Margaret had produced. The Kents should be paying him.

When she next spoke her voice sounded husky. She was struggling with and had all but overcome some strong emotion, no doubt to do with Ingram. 'If you don't instruct Mr Chevalley,' she said, 'you'll always wonder what might have happened. Whether the mill would have worked.'

'You're right,' Gervase said, and rolled up the drawings. He was pleased. Her conclusion coincided with his; and perhaps she liked the witty and personable Sir Robert, if not the idea of being duchess to her sister's countess, rather more than she was prepared to let on. If she liked him half as much as he liked her, the marriage would be one of boundless joy. 'I'll take your advice, Eloise. What's ten marks in the scheme of things? Let's go in, and I'll dictate a letter straight away.'

PART TWO

1

Chevalley's opinion arrived towards the end of May. The document itself needed Stephen's eye for Latin, but the covering letter was plain enough.

In the second and third weeks of June Gervase was required to attend the King at Westminster. The morning after his arrival was fine: he walked rather than rode the mile from his London house, along the north bank of the Thames to Chevalley's chambers in Turnley Row.

Gervase had decided to settle the bill, twelve marks, in person, and at the same time seek clarification and reassurance. Notes had been sent earlier in the month and a meeting arranged.

Turnley Row fronted the riverside way, below and beyond which the broad, brown waters of the King's Reach made their stately passage eastwards. The Thames this morning, lit by hazy sun, had the appearance of bronze. On the far side, a quarter of a mile away, lay the marshes of the south bank, and beyond these rose the fields, farmsteads and fort of Southwark.

Chevalley's doorway was the fifth along, marked with a wooden signboard showing a prancing white unicorn. Gervase mounted the two stone steps and stood under the jutty. The iron knocker brought an elderly porter; Gervase was shown into an over-furnished anteroom whose single window overlooked a courtyard at the rear. He barely had time to sit down before Chevalley himself appeared.

He was younger than Gervase had expected, about thirty-five, clean-shaven, dark and lean; his civilities were correct, but his manner friendly. His private office was large and lavishly appointed. The tapestry behind his desk depicted a black griffin and a white unicorn, rampant on a field of colourful flowers and briars among which wound grey serpents and salamanders, in allegory, perhaps, of his calling.

'Is there something in my opinion that you find unclear?'

'No, Mr Chevalley. By no means. It's admirable. But I was coming to town anyway.'

'And you want to discuss the matter?'

'Yes, and to pay your fee.'

'Would that all my clients were like Your Lordship.' He rang a silver handbell: a clerk appeared. 'Prepare a receipt for Lord de Maepe.' As Gervase opened his pouch, Chevalley held up a hand. 'Later, my lord. Please.' The clerk departed. 'Is there something specific you wish to talk about?'

'If the bishop – rather, I should say, when the bishop gets wind of it, what is likely to happen?'

'You have a priest in your manor, of course.'

'Joseph Pickard.'

'Does he know about your plans?'

'Possibly.'

'Then we must assume he has already written to Alincester. How long will the mill take to build?'

'About a year. That's the latest estimate.'

'Good enough. It will take them at least twice that to change the law. They'll need the Vatican.'

'What for?'

‘The definitions apply everywhere. It is no simple matter to rewrite universal law without introducing new loopholes such as the one you have found.’ The lawyer smiled, revealing discoloured teeth which were at once, self-consciously, concealed. ‘I must confess I find it entertaining. Is it your idea?’

‘I have a carpenter in my manor. He thought of it.’

Chevalley’s pleasant expression showed he was waiting for the next question.

‘You’re quite certain the Church will have no case under existing law?’

‘One can never be certain of anything where the law is concerned. If you recall, I make this reservation in my letter.’

‘Yes, but the precedents, everything you have investigated?’

‘I found nothing that would let the diocese bring an effective suit. Their thoroughness has been their undoing.’

‘If you were acting for Bishop William, how would you try to stop me?’

‘I don’t know that I could.’

‘But if he insisted that you tried?’

‘Well, I suppose I’d lodge a de primo plaint with the Archbishop of Canterbury, on the grounds that your mill was sacred and that you were refusing to pay for a licence.’

‘What is a de primo plaint?’

‘One based on first principles. The Church lays claim to the power of wind and rain because it is divine. I would argue that seawater begins as rain. The force of seawater is therefore divine also. If he were any good, my opponent would quote the opening of Genesis and say that the seas came before the rain. “The Spirit of God moved upon the

face of the waters". I would have no rebutter. Nevertheless, the archbishops in their wisdom would find other theological grounds to let them rule in my favour. Noah's Flood, perhaps, or something similarly abstruse. They do not care to be deprived of revenue.'

'So I would lose?'

'In that court, most likely. You would then appeal to the King. On de postero grounds – that is, on the basis of existing law – you would win. I assure you that the diocese are well aware of this. No case of any kind will be brought. Instead they will petition Rome to make all haste to change the law. Your mill and any other like it, built before the law changes, will remain exempt.'

'You're certain?'

'As I say, my lord, one can never be certain. Cases are heard by men, and men are fallible. With the sole exception of His Grace, every judge and nearly every lawyer in the royal courts is a cleric. Nominally at least. But a millstream is a millstream. A tide mill doesn't have one. It follows that a tide mill is outside the existing definitions. On what legal basis can they seek to interfere with it?' Chevalley sat back. 'Even if the bishop won his hypothetical case, what is the worst that would happen? You would have a mill in your manor, just as some other barons have mills in theirs. It would not be illegal; you would not have to pull it down, so you are not even risking the cost of construction, except insofar as yours may be more expensive to build than a conventional mill. If you lost the case you would have to pay the costs and your mill would not be as profitable in the long term as you presently hope. That is all. But there will be no case because there is no intelligent case to bring, and the Bishop of Alincester is nothing if not intelligent.'

‘Have you met him?’

‘Once, when I was on the staff of the bishop of St Albans.’ Observing Gervase’s reaction, he said, ‘Yes, I was a cleric. I trained at Leckbourne.’

‘My son is there.’

‘I hope he likes it better than I did.’

Gervase made no reply.

‘I was ordained at twenty-one. At twenty-five I met the lady who is now my wife.’

‘I see.’

‘With the greatest respect, my lord, I don’t think you do. I was excommunicated.’

‘Indeed!’

‘It’s all right: you may talk to me today without fear. I’m back in the fold.’

Gervase wanted to ask more, but his politeness would not let him. He saw now where Chevalley had gained his expertise. The legal training at Leckbourne was said to be second to none. Godric, however, was not studying law, but theology.

‘I have nothing against William of Briouze,’ Chevalley said later, when he was showing his client out. ‘In my view he is a very great man, and much maligned.’

2

On the nineteenth of June, two days after his eighteenth birthday, Ralf and his father left Rushton for the last time. The previous Saturday they had been told by the steward that the baron wished to proceed. Having been kept informed, Master Brocq had waived his right to notice, and had even given father and son a bonus on their departure.

The steward advanced Linsell twelve marks. Using a notary in Rushton to settle his debts, he applied on the same day to the Worshipful Company of Woodsmiths for the return of his licence.

Ralf had spent every spare moment since the beginning of April on the tender document, but after supper on Saturday he went to the Hall to see Godric, who would be at home until Tuesday.

Godric suggested a stroll. Since Ralf had already that day walked seven miles from Rushton, they ventured only as far as the church dike. Sitting on the grassy slope in the warm evening sunshine, Ralf answered all Godric's questions about the mill. Godric wanted to visit the site and they arranged to meet again the following afternoon.

Mass had become for Ralf a weekly ordeal, bad enough if Eloise were not present, but worse if she were. Two months ago and more he had decided that he must heed Imogen's advice and declare himself, whatever grotesque, humiliating and terminal consequences that might bring down on his head. To remain silent was impossible. But there was never a chance to speak to Eloise, still less to be alone with her, and even if there were a chance, what could he say? How could he begin? 'Mademoiselle, I know we have exchanged no more than a hundred words in the last five years, but —' But what? In desperation he thought of writing, but she could not read. To whom would fall the job of reading his letter aloud? Godric? The clerk? The baron himself?

Together with her Aunts Mildred and Matilde, she disappeared from the churchyard soon after the service, leaving Godric and his paternal Aunt Béatrice as the sole representatives of the family, for the baron and his lady

were still away. When the none-bell sounded and Ralf again went to the west door of the Hall, he was expecting to find Godric ready to leave on their walk along the eastern dike. Instead he was shown inside by the doorward's boy and left standing in the middle of the great hall.

The lower half of the sphere-trussed wall at the far end was screened by tapestry hangings, behind which was the passage joining the parlour and dayroom. In front of these hangings, almost as wide as the room and covered in a linen cloth, ran the high table where the baron and his family and most important guests ate their meals. Under the sunny window to the left of the table stood an oak form, carved with bulls and swans and bearing a pot of roses and fennel leaves, and near this, against the wall, was a shoulder-high oak cupboard on which pewter dishes were displayed. To the right of the table, the hangings were hooked back to give access to the staircase.

Gazing around him at the costly furnishings, at the high, smoke-blackened roof trusses and crown posts, Ralf's apprehension, if possible, grew. He both wanted and did not want to see Eloise. Where was she? In the parlour? The dayroom? Upstairs? Where were the aunts? He could hear no voices, no activity other than the doorward's boy climbing the stairs towards the upper chambers, where he supposed Godric must be.

To escape the line of sight, Ralf started to move towards the window, but then Godric's descending feet sounded on the staircase and a moment later he appeared.

'It's a long walk in this weather,' he said, as he led the way, not to the north door but through the service passage,

past the buttery, and out into the heat and smell of the stable yard. 'I thought we might ride.'

'What?' Ralf said in alarm. 'I don't know how.'

'Then it's about time you learned.'

Ralf's protestations were brushed aside and he was introduced to Hennet, a small grey mare, who was standing in one of the twelve stalls, her head looking over the lower half of the door.

'You can stroke her muzzle if you want,' Godric said. 'She likes that.' He stepped into the stables and returned with a few small carrots. 'Go on, Ralf. She won't bite you.'

Ralf was surprised by the gentleness with which Hennet took the carrot, and found himself becoming charmed.

'She wants another. That's it. What do you think? Do you want to try? She's very docile. Safer than walking, not to mention easier.'

The groom was elsewhere, even though he worked on Sundays if wanted. Godric fitted a headstall and led Hennet out on the cobbles. 'Hold on to her for a minute.' While Ralf took note of Hennet's calm brown eye, her pale mane and fringe and eyelashes, while he marvelled that such a noble and powerful animal as a horse should allow him to restrain her with nothing more than a slight grip on a leather halter, Godric went back to the tackroom. He emerged with a deep saddle studded along its edges with brass, set it on her back, and proceeded to fasten the straps.

Once Hennet was ready he brought out his own horse, a black stallion which even Ralf could see was a thoroughbred. While Godric was adjusting the saddle, Hennet moved her head a little, showing the white of her eye as she looked behind; and Ralf turned to see Eloise entering the yard. Since church she had changed into a

blue, lightweight dress, embroidered along the neckline with small lozenges and gathered at the waist with a narrow, small-buckled belt.

She seemed put out, on the point of retreating, but she had been seen and could not very well leave without speaking. 'Oh, it's you, Godric. Good afternoon, Ralf.'

'Good afternoon, mademoiselle.'

'I wondered who was out here.' With a swift, summarising glance she took in Hennet's readiness and docility and the even greater docility of Hennet's keeper.

'I'm teaching Ralf to ride,' Godric said, continuing with his work. Having checked the girth-straps, he stood up and contemplated his sister. 'We're going to the site for the mill. Would you like to come?'

'I won't, thank you all the same.'

'Why ever not? You're interested in the mill. We talked about it long enough last night. Let Ralf show you where it'll be.'

'Godric, I don't think —'

'I wish you two could be friends.'

The remark caught her, and Ralf, by surprise. For an instant they looked at each other, and Ralf detected in her dark eyes a fleeting, repressed incandescence: of resentment, or anger, perhaps with Godric. 'Surely we are not enemies,' she said, calmly enough, and forced a smile which, however, was not directed at Ralf.

'Well, then, why not come? What's keeping you here?'

'Nothing, I suppose.'

Knowing that she would refuse, Ralf took no notice of this retort: it failed to register. The idea that she might accompany him and Godric on their ride to the eastern dike, that he might spend an afternoon in her company,

that he might have an opportunity to be with her, to talk to her, to look at her, was so preposterous that he thought this softening of her expression, this faint smile, presaged her final refusal and her departure from the yard; and then, as he watched, she turned and the smile broadened and was, for a moment, bestowed upon him.

As if at a great distance, Ralf heard her say something about her aunts, and about changing her footwear; Godric answered with a question about her palfrey, which seemed not to be here, but grazing. She returned to the house. Godric hitched Hennet and his own mount to a rail, and he and Ralf went to the paddock in quest of hers, a blazed chestnut mare with white on the forelegs and on one hind leg.

Ralf did his best to act normally. He was not even sure what had been said or whether she really had agreed to come; but obviously she had, else why was Godric fixing a halter round the neck of her horse?

He was sure of one thing, and of one thing only.

Eloise had smiled at him.

* * *

When she reappeared she had changed not just her slippers for calf-boots, but her dress for a summer riding-habit in cream linen, belted, with three-quarter sleeves. Her plaits, formerly coiled into a net at the nape of her neck, were now hanging to her waist. At close quarters, Ralf saw that the sun had lightened a strand or two of her hair and taken the winter paleness from her forearms, face and neck. He absorbed these and other details one by one, anxious not to give the impression that he regarded her

proximity as anything out of the ordinary, but when she bent to help Godric with the final fitting of her saddle, he was able for a few seconds to admire her without restraint.

He still treasured his memory of her in the Long Barn, last March. Before this afternoon, he had imagined that she could never be more beautiful than that. Basking now in the afterglow of her smile, watching her competent adjustment of the straps and buckles, he saw that he had been wrong.

She stood by while Godric, holding Hennet's bridle, positioned the mare next to the block and told Ralf how to climb into the saddle. 'Feet back a bit in the stirrups. Keep them there. It's dangerous to put them in too far. Think what might happen if you fell off. You'd be dragged.'

'Right,' Ralf said. The saddle enclosed him, rising before and behind. Despite his unaccustomed height from the ground, he felt reasonably secure.

'Take the reins.'

Ralf did so, and realised that nothing now prevented Hennet from bolting, from doing whatever she wanted, but she remained still, merely tossing her head to dislodge a persistent fly.

With an easy expertise, Eloise placed her foot in the stirrup, grasped the pommel, and raised herself up to sit sidesaddle. Godric too mounted.

'Ready, Ralf?'

'Yes, I think so.'

Eloise duly started forward. At the open gateway to the yard she turned to look back; then drew in her horse while Godric issued further instructions. 'Just dig her in the ribs,' he said. 'She knows what to do. Hennet, come on!'

Ralf had already twice dug Hennet in the ribs and did so once more, with the same result. He saw Eloise watching him and returned her amused expression with one that spoke of good-natured frustration, at which she smiled again, this time for him alone. With that, Hennet decided to put one hoof in front of another and was bearing Ralf forward.

By the time they had reached the village green and turned down the staith-track, Ralf felt more confident that he would not fall off. Godric had checked the girth-straps again and Hennet had taken charge of him completely. She seemed to answer only to Godric, who, as the width and surface of the track allowed, rode alongside with such exhortations as, 'Bit higher with the reins. Not too much.' Then he said, 'Shall we try a trot?'

As Ralf learned to let his body follow through, as the muscles of his legs learned how to respond to the stirrups, Godric cried, 'Better, Ralf. Good!'

All this was happening in a dream of disbelief; but every time he looked ahead there was Eloise, sometimes nearer, sometimes further away, splashed with light through foliage or out in full sun, riding so easily and so well, so elegantly, that she and her chestnut palfrey might have been formed solely to fulfil this midsummer eve and make some ancient prophecy come true. She was drawing him on, towards a phantom mill that as yet existed only as part of this same dream.

She was interested in the mill: this much he had learned. Last night she had discussed it at length. Ralf had informed Godric, and Godric had informed her. They must have spoken of him, used his name, while Godric imparted some or all of what Ralf had said about the earthworks, the

proofing, the piling, the culvert and sea-gates, the various designs for the wheel. How much of this had she retained? And afterwards, lying in darkness, had she thought about the mill then? Had she thought about him? Did she know the mill was for her, and for her alone?

Surely not. But why, suddenly, was she so different? Above all, why had she agreed to come?

The dream opened out into the two-hundred-acre field, deserted now but for crows. There were poppies among the wheat, and camomile and scarlet pimpernel along the wide track that made long and short zigzags past the field-strips, turning its way to the path under the windbreak and the eastern dike. Well before the first furrow had ended, she dropped back and the three horses proceeded at a walk, side by side, Ralf in the middle, Godric on the left.

Godric broke the silence. 'You're in my sister's debt, you know. She persuaded my father to go ahead with your mill.'

'Hardly that,' she said.

'I had it from Papa. He said he was wavering.'

'He never wavers, Godric, and well you know it.'

Ralf tried to absorb this new revelation, to make it fit. What had happened to her? Or had something happened to him? He knew he ought to say something. Only thus could he establish this conversation as normal; only thus could he make himself accept that her contempt for him had melted away. He knew he ought to speak, but did not know how. Then Godric, his friend, came to his rescue.

'Do you like teasing your sister as much as I like teasing mine?'

Ralf said, 'How far do you go?'

'To the limit. Always.'

‘Shame on you.’

Godric laughed. ‘For Heaven’s sake, Ralf, that’s what sisters are for.’

‘I always treat mine with the utmost respect.’

‘Good for you,’ said Eloise, smiling at Ralf’s straight face, while Godric renewed his laughter. ‘What a paragon you must be.’

‘I claim no virtue. I’ve learned the cost of teasing her.’

‘Oh?’

‘It’s too terrible to relate.’

He had never heard her laugh before. ‘I must take lessons,’ she said, still smiling, and her eyes engaged his, with no significance for her; but for him, for one without hope or remedy, for whom the whole time since the stable yard had been a continuous miracle of light, those dark eyes were too much to bear and he looked away.

Everything in the torrid, dike-shielded heat of the field had become unusually distinct and particular. Time itself had slowed. Independent of the Ralf who was talking and listening, his inner self tried to make sense of the afternoon. Nothing fitted except the certainty he had been carrying consciously since the Long Barn and unconsciously since his first visit to the Hall, since his first meeting with Godric, or even since the world began.

He loved her. The rest was nebulous, like the mill.

* * *

Eloise had known perfectly well who had been in the stable yard. She had not only seen Ralf coming to the Hall but had heard Godric going down to greet him. She had heard them talking indoors and out, and suddenly her

embroidery, her aunts, her whole arid life, had become intolerable. Between the summer heat and the knowledge that Ralf was only yards away, she had been pulled irresistibly outside.

She was supposed to want Robert Ingram, what others wanted, on her behalf but mainly on theirs. Ever obedient, born and trained to it, she was guided always by duty: to her parents, the baronage and her country. Now that her father had revealed the desperate politics of the match her duty weighed so heavily that sometimes, in the safety of her bed, she could stand it no more and gave way to tears. The loneliness she had known all her life had become absolute. Her prayers were met with disapproving silence, as if God himself had ordained the union. It would happen. The extortionate price demanded of her father would be found.

The mill would produce it. And it was she who had ensured, finally, that the mill would be built. Her father had asked her advice. As she had answered, she had thought that her duty was speaking, and it was, but at the same time she had known that the mill meant Master Grigg, and Master Grigg meant Ralf. The mill would bring him back to the manor and keep him here, at least while, bit by bit, he was helping to construct her dowry.

Seeing him in the yard, she had come to her senses and almost managed to get away unscathed. Then Godric had trapped her in conversation. She had been made to stand there, succumbing to the physical presence of the shy and very beautiful young man whose sweetness had infused her soul. At Godric's lacerating remark, wishing they could be friends, she had found herself looking into Ralf's eyes: and had been unable to resist further.

So she had consented, and in excitement had changed her clothes, wondering what might please him and win him to her cause. Even then she had known she was being weak and unfair, and that for the sake of everyone she should go back to the dayroom and send out her excuses with the doorward's boy. Her answer to herself had been to remove her crespine and let her braids swing free.

Never before had she felt like this. Sobriety and control had governed every moment of her life. Recklessness was something new. If only for one hour before her captivity began, she wanted to be with Ralf.

His manner towards her was wary, and well it might be, given her usage of him. That he seemed not to detest her was a measure of his good nature. Before leaving the yard she had tried to convey apology in her looks, but he had remained unmoved and, constrained both by the narrowness of the staith-track and her own doubts, she had let Bella walk ahead while Godric rode with Ralf or brought up the rear. Once they were in the field there had been no choice but to overcome the fluttering in her stomach and rejoin them. She had been too nervous to speak first; Godric had provided a way in, and she had perceived the beginnings of forgiveness among Ralf's replies, almost confirmed when he had made her laugh. But still he was avoiding her eye, from shyness, resentment, or both. Was he only being agreeable to her for her brother's sake?

The path beside the dike, having left behind the shade of the windbreak trees and the arable field, narrowed among the scrub ahead. The horses would have to walk in line. Increasingly unsure of herself, even regretting her decision to come, Eloise at the critical moment surged forward so

that she led the way and could be alone. She needed to collect herself.

What on earth had she been hoping to achieve? What had she expected? Her feelings for him were a flimsy scaffold of presumption, raised on the childish but overwhelming fantasy, conceived at the age of twelve, that he, and he alone, was destined for her. She had felt that she had known him already, even at their first meeting; that she had been waiting for him to return to her and resume what had been left unfinished. Somehow the sea was involved. They had dwelt together on some northern shore, now no more than the dimmest memory, and had been wrenched apart. How, she knew not, nor when, nor why. She only sensed that she had known him at another time, and he had known her, and whatever it was between them continued and had yet to be made perfect.

She had seized on every characteristic fitting her fantasy and discarded the rest. His Nordic complexion, his surname, his father, his sister: all these sprang from the pagan forerunners of Rollo, those supposed dwellers by the sea. He was artistic and practical, intelligent and hard-working, like the men who had assembled Rollo's fleet; but he was also gentle and reserved, quite unlike the ones who had sailed it up the Seine.

In reality, what was he?

Eloise had never imagined that she could be jealous of Mary Ibbott. Since Lady Day she had been vigilant, but had discovered nothing to confirm her fears, and had even seen signs of mutual dislike, as last week, in the churchyard. Besides Mary there seemed to be no one else, in the manor, at least; and now that he was permanently here, Rushton was no longer a threat.

‘O God,’ she breathed, realising the madness of these thoughts, just as if there were no Earl of Leicester, no Gascony, no Dover, just as if Ralf were free to pay his addresses and she to receive or decline them.

She should not have come. She would go back, claim a headache: and indeed the sun was extremely hot, the air behind the dike thick and still, smelling of marsh-gas and rotting seaweed, and Bella’s hoofs were sinking ever deeper into the black, half dry mud of the trail.

Eloise turned and looked behind, and was forming the first word of her excuse when Godric cried, ‘Better get off here, Eloise! The path goes up the bank in a minute.’ To Ralf he said, ‘Hennet will stop when my sister does. Don’t try to dismount on your own. I’ll help you.’

But it was Eloise who, having slipped to the ground ahead of Godric, took hold of Hennet’s bridle and let Ralf climb down in safety.

‘Thank you,’ he said. ‘You’re very kind.’

‘Not at all.’

‘You’ve done really well,’ Godric told him. ‘We’ll make a horseman of you yet.’

‘I just sat there.’ He smiled again; and she, included, wondered if he was not being merely agreeable, but might like her a little for her own sake.

They tethered the horses to the bushes and her chance to feign a headache was lost. She saw that it was far better to act rationally and give rise to no speculation on Godric’s part. Besides, what harm could it do to walk with the two of them along the dike? She truly wanted to know about the mill. More than this, she felt an urge to get to the top, to feel the breeze on her face and look out over the harbour mouth to the dunes of the point that bore her family name

and, where they ended, to let her eye rest upon the anonymous, and inexhaustible, comfort of the sea.

3

The previous evening, after telling Godric about the latest specification for the mill, Ralf had, at his request, given him on the way back the original and now largely obsolete drawings. The new ones were bigger and more detailed, made on paper rather than parchment, and to go with them were many pages of calculations and costings.

Now that the required volume of the pen was known, the easiest part had been estimating the cost of the bund. Its length was to be a hundred and twenty yards and its mean height twenty-six feet, giving a volume of four thousand five hundred cubic yards and a weight of nearly ten thousand tons. One man was reckoned to dig five tons of soil a day. Using a workforce of twenty men, it would take a hundred days for the digging alone: a hundred and forty to include barrowing, placement and proofing. At a daily wage per man of a penny-farthing, the labour came out at just over fourteen pounds eleven shillings.

The usual daily wage for a labourer was one silver penny. By paying a premium, Linsell would be able to attract workers from outside the manor as well as serfs from within. If Mr Caffyn wished to contribute fief-days to the digging, his payment on account would be reduced by a penny-farthing for each one worked.

To the labour had to be added the cost of mortar, packing-stone and the thousand tons of imported rock that would make the three sides of the pen erosion-proof. The existing dike had been proofed with Cornish granite. At

sixpence a ton, barge-delivered, Kentish ragstone was currently the cheapest suitable rock. Together with the mortar and flint rubble for packing, the load would cost thirty-two pounds. Linsell's adviser was a man named Ryle in Southampton, who would supervise the earthworks for a fee of thirty shillings, bringing the total to forty-eight pounds. Adding a tenth for contingencies brought the estimated cost of the pen to fifty-two pounds sixteen shillings.

By letter Ryle had introduced Linsell to a milling engineer in London, Josiah Parfett. Having agreed the terms under which he would be consulted if the project were to be authorised, Parfett had recommended a wheel-size and a figure for water consumption of two hundred thousand gallons an hour.

Ralf had helped his father to make a survey of the site. This had established that a head of nearly five feet of water could be achieved at the lowest neap tide. The area of the pen followed from this and from Parfett's figure. The survey had also provided the angle of the turn in the dike, and this determined the shortest length of bund needed to complete the triangle.

Last night Godric had professed himself fascinated. He knew little more of mathematics than Ralf himself, whose prior experience had only been of the addition, subtraction and simple geometry used in bench carpentry. Linsell's knowledge derived from Master Hampden and the masons who had raised the cathedral. Having glimpsed its potential, Ralf now burned to have it for himself and to go much further, to know what Diccon and Parfett knew. Mathematics was like Latin, the future Latin, purer and

more important, the language of engineering, and Ralf daily badgered his father for lessons.

Walking the narrow path along the top of the dike, the lady, as etiquette required, was protected before and behind by the gentlemen. Godric had taken up the rear, leaving Ralf to guide a way through the encroaching grasses and the stems and foliage of yarrow, alexanders, curled dock, and sea-aster.

It was a quarter of a mile from the horses to the site. Godric did most of the talking, now and then imparting information about the mill, referring sometimes to Ralf, who could then legitimately turn and look at Eloise when he replied, or even stop walking altogether – as he did when, far out over the lagoons, he noticed the lazy and magnificent flight of a large, dark-brown, cream-headed bird of prey.

'Marsh harrier!' he exclaimed, pointing. 'Can you see it?'

'Yes,' she said, after a moment, taking the line of his arm, standing closer than she had ever done before. 'Yes, now I can.'

'It's a hen. Or a young one.'

'How do you know?'

'The males are quite different. Grey on the wings.'

'You must have marvellous eyesight,' she said. 'I shouldn't have seen it on my own.'

The bird dropped into the reeds and was lost. Ralf, no longer distracted by the harrier, realised that he and Eloise had just had a conversation, natural and unforced; that she had paid him a compliment, not only accepting but glad of his company; and he realised for the first time, standing beside her like this, how well-suited they were in height and build. 'They nest out here,' he said, more hesitantly.

‘And in the Great Marsh. There used to be two or three pairs, in all. Probably still are.’

‘We found some chicks once, years ago,’ Godric said. ‘By the Long Cut. In the big reed-bed. Do you remember, Ralf?’ To Eloise, he said, ‘Ralf knows all the birds and flowers.’

‘Some,’ Ralf said. ‘Not all.’

‘More than I do, anyway.’

They continued pushing their way through the vegetation. Ralf’s sense of unreality grew. The impossible had happened. They were together. He could hear her voice, replying to Godric, expressing pleasure, speaking about the harrier, saying this was the first she had seen. Was this the same girl he had once known, haughty, disregarding, and cold? He remembered the suspicion that had struck him after talking of her to Imogen and his turmoil increased. What if – what if she felt for him even a little of what he felt for her?

The tide was nearly out. Planted in the mud at the base of the dike, his father had left a graduated pole fitted with a sliding cork collar, for measuring high tides. As the pole approached, Eloise asked him its purpose.

‘So this is the place, then,’ she said, when he had explained.

‘We’ve passed the point where the bund starts. It cuts across to there.’

‘Across the lagoon?’

‘That’s going to be the hardest part.’

‘Why does the dike go so far out? Why should it protect the lagoons? You’d think they’d have finished it further back.’

‘No one knows. Some say this corner used to be farmland too. I suppose it flooded so often they just gave up.’

‘How old is the dike? Is it Saxon?’

‘I’m sorry, I’ve no idea.’

Godric said, ‘The Domesday Book might tell us. But I think it’s even older. In my grandfather’s time they found Roman coins near the staith. Pottery, too.’

This recollection seemed to put Eloise in mind of something. Ralf had a vision of the coins and sherds, forgotten at the back of a cupboard, all that remained of the far more comprehensive invasion before the Normans’. He found his eyes drawn to hers, and hers to his. Each instantly looked away, she from politeness, he from embarrassment. The silence threatened to become obvious until Godric said, ‘Where’s the mill-house going?’

Ralf could scarcely breathe. He said, ‘Pretty much where we’re standing.’

‘What a fool I am, Ralf! I didn’t bring the drawings.’

‘It doesn’t matter.’

‘I particularly wanted … you can see everything just the way it’ll be … I’ll fetch them.’

‘Where are they?’

‘In my saddlebag.’

‘They’re out of date,’ Ralf said, lamely, aware that he risked being left with Eloise, and she without a chaperone; but, knowing that once Godric got an idea in his head nothing could dissuade him, he added, ‘If you really want them, let me go.’

‘Certainly not. It’s my fault. Would you like to see the plans, Eloise?’

She did not look at Ralf and clearly thought him so harmless that she did not see the inherent impropriety of her brother's suggestion. 'If it's no trouble.'

'There we are,' Godric said. 'The lady commands.'

Ralf said, 'Please, Godric. We don't need them.'

'Nonsense. Sit and rest. I'll be back in no time.' With that he started along the path and hurried away.

Eloise spoke first, when he was twenty yards off. 'I must say, a rest would be welcome.'

'Where would you like to sit?'

'Facing the harbour, I think.'

More time was taken up in enquiries about the dirtiness of the grass, its dryness, and whether it was suitable for the linen material of her garment, all of which were answered with such small consequence that Ralf, having selected the cleanest place, could no longer delay the moment when she sat down and he was compelled to sit beside her, on her left, the gap between them the maximum consistent with the pretence that to him it was of no significance.

She looked across to the dunes, turned her cheek a little towards him, and for a moment gazed at the sea before turning further and issuing a well-bred smile. 'Godric is so impulsive,' she said.

'He's always been the same.'

'Tell me, Ralf, how long will it take to build the mill?'

'About a year,' he said, grateful for the neutral turn her words had taken, trying to ignore the sensation produced by hearing her speak his name for the second time today, for the second time ever. 'A year or so, if all goes to plan.'

'It will be a great asset to the manor.'

'If it works.'

'There's no doubt of that, is there?'

‘Not really. But it’s something new.’

They had been brought to this state smoothly and inexplicably, as if by some power which also commanded Godric, or with which he was in league. It occurred to Ralf that he had forgotten the plans on purpose, even though that made no sense at all, the more so since she was already affianced, or promised, or contracted, to another, to whatever future it was that her father had arranged. She was forbidden, she should have been chaperoned, but here she was, sitting beside him in the afternoon sun, whose light, as she moved, struck and turned to gold the minute silver cross at her throat.

She was asking more questions, ostensibly about the mill. Ralf answered. Their conversation was assuming a brittle, glassy quality, more unreal than ever, nothing to do with the words spoken, slowly converging on the point where Ralf would become consumed by certainty.

He was ever mindful of what Imogen had said, about girls being told. It would take Godric no more than ten minutes to bring the plans. Of these ten minutes Ralf had already squandered six or seven, and was no nearer, no further along, had not the slightest idea how to begin. Tell her he must. He wanted to blurt it out, but was unable to. There came a pause in their meaningless exchanges.

He would never have this chance again. ‘My sister …’ he said, but could not continue.

Did she look surprised? No. Quietly, intimately, she asked, ‘What about your sister?’

Tell her, tell her, his inner voice commanded, in Imogen’s words, over and over again. *You’ve got to tell her.* ‘She said girls … girls … she … She’s interested in the mill, too.’

‘I’m sure she is.’

‘What I’m saying is, not many girls would be.’

‘Why not?’

‘Oh, I don’t know. They just wouldn’t.’

‘Her name is Imogen, isn’t it?’

‘Yes.’

‘I’d be pleased to know her better. Do you think she’d like to learn to ride? You’ve made such good progress today.’

‘To ride?’

‘Her father is a master craftsman.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Ralf said, in stultified confusion, dismayed, sunk by his own cowardice. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘Miss Grigg will soon be a lady. A lady must know how to ride. She could have Hennet. I’d like to teach her.’ She drew breath. ‘Please don’t look like that. I assure you, I have nothing better to do.’

‘I didn’t mean … I —’

‘You’re thinking, “What does she do with herself?” I’ll tell you. Good works in the manor, visiting the sick. With my aunts. We arrange the flowers in the church. Then there’s my embroidery. Otherwise, my time is my own.’

‘Please, mademoiselle, forgive me, I intended no disrespect.’

‘You can call me “Eloise”, if you like. The other’s a bit formal, don’t you think? Among friends. I’m sure we’re friends, despite what Godric said.’

‘Yes, of course.’ Ralf could no more bring himself to call her by that name than utter the words his cowardice had left so far behind. ‘I don’t know what he meant.’

She did not dignify his falsehood with agreement, with one of her own, and Ralf regretted his lie. They both knew

what Godric had meant. She was perfect. Perfect for him. She said, 'So it's settled, then.'

'What is?'

'Miss Grigg. You'll ask her to come?'

'I will.'

'Shall we say tomorrow, at the afternoon sequent? If that's convenient to her.'

A minute later it was over. Godric returned, brandishing the scrolls. During the subsequent examination of the drawings, the pointing out, the discussion, her impartial behaviour left Ralf feeling more confused than ever. He was once again no more than her brother's lowly friend. She was what she had always been, the daughter of Lord de Maepe, his father's new employer.

Ralf was thankful that he had not given way to his delusion. Had he tried to take advantage of her vulnerability, she would have been mortified and insulted to the extent that the baron would have heard of it; and then what would have happened to the pending project and his own father's licence and livelihood? What would have happened with Godric?

The return ride brought Ralf's suffering to new depths. Her smile was worse than anything that had gone before. He would no longer have the protection of her disdain. He was condemned to love her through a mask of friendliness.

And he had accepted her message to Imogen, to bring her to Eloise, with whom, out of his earshot, she might in all innocence betray an unguarded remark. Because of this he would have to be circumspect even with his own dearest confidante. He was now, in effect, alone.

That evening the message was duly delivered, and was with pleasure and surprise received. While the rest of the

family prepared for bed, Ralf took the rushlight to the kitchen table. He knew he would be unable to sleep and wanted to divert his mind by poring over designs for the drive-train.

The figures that this morning had made sense, the diameters and patterns of the pitwheel, the wallower, the spurwheel and pinions, the shaft speeds and multipliers, tonight meant nothing. He was stuck, tangled, in the afternoon, reliving it yet again, trying to understand. His conclusion veered from one pole to another, like her own inconsistency. He was sure that she had no regard for him and he was sure that she did. Her words and manner had told him one thing, her eyes and the tone of her voice another. She had known what he had been trying to stammer out. She had wanted to hear, and had even tried to encourage him. But if he had said it, that would have been the end. The mill was at its most precarious stage. He and his father had given up Rushton and taken money from the steward, but the tender had yet to be submitted or the contract signed. Even now there was a chance that the baron would back out or find someone else.

Ralf could no longer think. The mathematics of Eloise would defeat a far greater mind than his.

Elbow on the table, forehead in hand, exhausted, he stared sightlessly at the papers while, bit by bit, midnight approached and the tallowed rush burned towards its base.

4

On the way to or from London, Gervase often broke his journey at Alincester, especially if Margaret were with him. He could not afford to keep a house of his own for

this purpose and stayed at an inn. The best in the city was the Spread Eagle, in Eastgate, near the cathedral school. The chambers above the street were too noisy for his liking, but at the back they overlooked the inn's pretty garden, which sloped down to the river.

The water, fast-flowing and clean, dropping over a low weir, produced a roar which, attenuated by thirty yards of air and foliage, a pair of heavy drapes, and the curtains of the four-poster, he found most soothing.

He was listening to it now. As the dawn slowly grew he could also hear the loud quacking of the ducks whose antics he and Margaret had watched yesterday morning after the service.

They had attended First Mass, which had been conducted by none other than the suffragan of Alincester, Bishop Septimus. Afterwards Septimus had made a point of greeting them, enquiring by name after each of the children and fully living up to his reputation for geniality. During their talk he had invited the de Maepes to a noonday reception at the bishop's palace. The visit of a Roman prelate was to be honoured.

Gervase had decided to attend. The great Receiving Hall had been packed with people, lay as well as clergy. As he had expected, Bishop William had dominated the proceedings, intimidatingly tall, stout, splendidly arrayed, his liver-spotted pate concealed by a purple silk biretta. Gervase had not avoided him; neither had he sought him out, and he was still not sure who had initiated their eventual encounter.

Cardinal Pellegrini had been introduced. The ensuing conversation had been brief and insubstantial. It was the bishop's bearing that had given Gervase pause. Nothing

could evade those watery blue eyes: Gervase had felt himself being simultaneously assessed and cautioned. Then William, spying a more useful introduction for his chooser of popes, had moved on, his guest in tow.

'Margaret. Are you awake?'

No answer. She was still sleeping, oblivious. She imagined that all was well. She had not understood the import of anything he had told her.

He loved his wife. Her strengths had sustained him, and the whole family, through some difficult times. At court she was popular with the other women of her age. As a girl she had been ravishing. Thirty years ago, when the King had been twenty and she seventeen, she had for three months been his mistress, a severe test for the newlyweds, but one that had earned them both permanent favour. Gervase owed his present influence and connections largely to her. His manor was small and poor; without Margaret he would have had no more voice than Angmer.

But however much he loved her, sometimes Gervase wished she had more understanding of the world they occupied, where intrigue meant more than money, and money meant more than everything else.

This was midsummer's day. The quarterly figures were awaiting him at home. He knew what they would tell him.

The decline in prices would not go on for ever. They always rose again, sooner or later. But could he hold out till then?

Even as he framed this thought, Gervase knew it to be nonsense. He had to hold out. That meant he had to build the mill, despite the unease he felt. He could no more abandon his dependants and part with Mape than he could cut off his own head. It was his home, with every meaning

the word implied. He adored the place, its landscape and idiosyncrasies, its curmudgeonly serfs, and so did Margaret. So did Eloise. Could he deprive the great lady of the pleasure of returning, now and then, to her ancestral home?

And away from the land that carried their name, without the constant reminder of his family's history, what would they be and how could they live?

Since yesterday his unease about the mill had been given form. Technically there was nothing wrong with it. Walter had sought independent advice. The looming, unpleasant presence of Bishop William was all that threatened its future. Gervase remembered the wiry white eyebrows, the hairs in his nostrils and ears, the scraped and powdered jowls, the fulsome phrases with which he had recommended the baron and his wife to His Eminence.

Cant, hypocrisy: he spoke just the same language as Gervase himself, at court. The pursuit of power obsessed them both. There was a single difference between them. One made homage to a temporal king; the other paid lip-service to the king above. Somewhere along the way, that celestial king had been forgotten.

The cathedral was astounding. As recently as yesterday morning, Gervase had viewed it as represented: the supreme act of worship. Now, lying in this half familiar bed, he was not so sure. In all its extravagance, its pilgrim-trapping reliquaries, what had happened to the meek? What had happened to the Saviour? Where was he?

Gervase would spend more time with his Bible. Compared with the splendour of the suffragan's mass, Joseph Pickard's homespun homilies were closer to the truth. Then he recalled William's suspicious stare, and

Chevalley's warning, and he surmised that Joseph had already written to the diocese about the mill. A village priest was no better than any of them, the bishops, the abbots and cardinals, or the pontiff himself, who was nothing but a warmonger hiding behind the cross, behind the very crucifixion. To wage war from Golgotha, in Christ's name: was there blasphemy worse than that?

'Can't you sleep?' Margaret said.

He looked at her.

'Oh, Gervase.'

'I'm all right. Just a bit worried.'

'About Eloise?'

'Yes. And other things.'

'Come to me.'

After they had made love, he fell asleep on her breast, and as he slept he dreamt a jumbled dream of Mape, of mud and the marshes, of Godric as a child, of childhood's end, and of Godric's strange and serious, his angelic, childhood friend.

* * *

There was something wrong with Hubert, the doorward's boy. He looked quite normal but he was simple-minded. He was a foundling, and much the same age as Eloise. She always tried to be kind to him, even though it made no difference to Hubert. He liked it when the big bronze dolphin hit the plate on the west door, for then he had a purpose; and he liked it even better when it was time to run across to the church tower and ring the sequent. No one had to tell him when to go. He just knew. He never bothered with the hourglass. His timekeeping was so

uncanny that her father had once borrowed the instrument from the church in order to measure him. As the last grains of sand had trickled down, so the bell had chimed its two sets of three.

Hubert hated Sundays, because then the priest rang the bell at peculiar times which obviously grated on his sense of what was right. Now that Monday had returned, Hubert was happy again.

She pitied him with all her heart. His mechanical life was unbearably sad, but after yesterday, after last night and this morning, she wished she could be him.

From the dayroom, she heard him coming in from outside. There were voices in the buttery and a clashing of pots, followed by silence. Hubert, she knew, had resumed his seat in the porch.

Eloise was alone in the room. She went yet again to the window and looked along the shingle path.

The afternoon was but lightly overcast, humid, with one of those June skies more like July's, intermittently brighter as the cloud thinned. The rain she had prayed for had not materialised.

She felt as nervous and guilty as if Ralf himself were coming. Why had she done it? Why had she invited his sister?

She had sensed it first when they had seen the harrier. Later, once they had arrived at the site, her amazement and dread had been so great, so suffocating, that she had found it increasingly difficult to speak. At that point she had believed, as far as it was possible without being told, that he had recognised her too.

When Godric, in breach of every rule of propriety, had suggested leaving them alone, she had been seized by

terror, heightened by her own folly in not having turned back when she had had the chance. Yet she had wanted Godric to go. She had wanted him to vanish. Ralf's feeble objections, the way they were couched, had not helped. He must have seen how agitated she was. He must have been alerted by the nonsensical prattling of the questions she kept posing. But, as the minutes had passed and she had perceived the strength of his own agitation, as he had struggled to utter something or other that obviously was of the greatest importance to them both, she had yearned to take his hand and tell him she was longing to hear whatever it was he was trying to say. Then his courage had failed him and, deflated, he had collapsed. He had looked so wretched that she had started talking nonsense again, about his sister, whom for some reason he had mentioned, and for whose acquaintance Eloise had long held a desire. But there on the dike, in the sunshine and heat, overlooking the mudflats and the harbour channel, Eloise had seen her only as a substitute for Ralf. Quite improperly, without an introduction, Eloise in her distraction had asked her, through him, to the Hall; and he, also improperly, had accepted on her behalf, and Eloise had found that she had undertaken to teach his sister to ride.

When Godric, cheerily waving the plans, had reappeared, it was as though she had been drenched with freezing water. She had forgotten about her brother. In that golden interlude he had simply ceased to exist.

It was then that she had understood. Godric had been testing them. That was why he had invited her in the first place. His suspicions ran far deeper than she had imagined. He had always been too clever for her, too clever for

anyone. ‘I wish you two could be friends.’ Why else should he have said it?

So she had immediately withdrawn from Ralf, as she would have had to anyway. He, bewildered, had become so offhand that, by the time they had got back to the Hall, she had doubted everything, and now she did not know.

She had spent last night in a tumult of uncertainty and remorse: for her weakness in consenting to the ride and for her cruelty to Ralf, assuming he felt anything for her, which she no longer thought he could. She had been affected by the heat. It had duped her into believing her own longings were reciprocated. He and she had been talking at cross purposes. Her conviction had been a mirage, like the trembling air above the reeds, the fluid through which that slothful bird, barely visible, had made its way.

At table last night Godric had insisted on talking about the mill, and during it all she had endured the sharpness of his eyes, but that meant he was still not sure. Ralf had clearly told him nothing and that in turn confirmed there was nothing to tell, for she had never known such a friendship as theirs.

In the dawn she had thought more on her duty to her father and had been ashamed to see that it had been his absence that had led to her delinquency. Drained by then of tears, she had resolved to put Ralf behind her; for this lifetime, at least.

Why, then, had she been thinking of him ever since? Yesterday, surely, had not been a mirage. Just as Hubert knew the time, Ralf knew her.

When the heavy oak boards of the west door resounded to a double knock, summoning Hubert from his stool,

Eloise jumped with surprise. She had forgotten to keep her vigil at the window and had sunk into a chair.

Hubert tapped on the dayroom door.

'Please, Miss. Mr and Miss Grigg.'

'Did you say "Mr Grigg"?'

'Yes, Miss.'

'Tell them I'll be out directly.'

Trying to compose herself, she heard Godric coming down the stairs and just managed to get into the hall before him.

After the initial greetings, Ralf said, 'Eloise, may I present my sister, Miss Imogen Grigg? Imogen, this is the Honourable Mademoiselle, Eloise de Maepe.'

'How do you do,' Eloise said, at which Imogen curtsied. 'Please, I'd rather you didn't. And do call me "Eloise". May I call you "Imogen"?'

'Yes, I'd like that.'

'We're very formal today,' Godric said, in amusement, but at Ralf's 'Eloise' his eyes had searched her face.

Ralf told Godric, 'The ladies had not been introduced.'

'Hello there, Im. We're old friends.'

'Hello, Godric.'

'You're looking well. The prettiest girl in Sussex. With one fair rival, of course,' he said, grinning at Ralf. The grin was but slightly returned.

'Will you stay for refreshments, Ralf?' Eloise said, hoping – knowing – he would refuse.

'Thank you, no. I've got to get back.'

'What are you up to now?' Godric said.

'We're still investigating the wheel.'

'You can't work all the time. What about a walk later? The deerhounds need a run.'

Eloise could barely stand it. Her distress and fatigue were about to overwhelm her. She felt faint, as if she would swoon: but swoon she never would.

Godric was returning to the abbey tomorrow and would not be here again till the end of July, and then only for a few days. Without him there was no reason why she should have to see Ralf at all, except at church.

As if they had been alerted by Godric's words, dogs had begun to bark in the kennels and there was the sound of activity in the stable yard.

'Papa,' Godric said.

'I really must be going,' Ralf said.

'No – stay. I want him to know about the new drive.'

'You tell him. I'm sure he's got better things to do than talk to me.'

Godric would not be gainsaid. A few minutes later they were all four seated outdoors, overlooking the garden, waiting for her father and mother to take off their travelling clothes and wash. The pantry maid brought a tray of lemon-water and biscuits and placed it on the table.

'Don't stand, my children,' her father said, emerging from the house, her mother just behind.

'Do you know Ralf's sister, Papa?' Godric said, when they were sitting again.

'Imogen? That is your name?'

'Yes, my lord,' Imogen said. 'How do you do, my lord. How do you do, my lady,' she added, in response to a regal nod from Eloise's mother.

While the drinks were being poured Eloise looked away, between the stone dolphins guarding the shallow flight of steps down to the lawn. Jays were screeching in the churchyard limes. 'Dear God,' she thought. 'Let this be over

soon.' Why was Godric acting like this? Ralf was sitting one place away, divided from her by him. She said to her father, 'Did you have a good journey?'

'Tolerably so. We stayed at the Spread Eagle, and lunched today at Northam.'

'Is all well at court?' she said, to divide herself yet further from Ralf.

Her mother said, 'You may go, Elisabeth.'

The maid took her leave.

'Yes, Eloise. All is well. The King and Queen are in good spirits. However, Lord de Braux has broken his ankle.'

'O dear,' Godric said. 'Do we mind?'

Her father smiled. 'Now now, Godric.'

Eloise saw that Imogen was not hiding her astonishment, and liked her for it. They were indeed talking about the King, who once had dandled Godric on his knee; and about Queen Eleanor who, at Gloucester, had given Eloise on her sixth birthday a ribbon doll which, in its case, was still upstairs.

'There's a new design for the gears,' Godric informed his father, once he had broached the subject of the mill. 'Ralf can tell you better than I.'

With a self-assurance that surprised her, Ralf explained to her father what she already knew, that the original plan for the cogwheels had been superseded.

'The new design should be easier to build. It'll be more reliable, too, and more efficient. The improved efficiency means we can get away with a smaller pen.'

'Excellent, excellent!'

As Ralf spoke, talking about pinions and gear-ratios, Eloise was able to look at him without fear. In this company she saw the man he would become: for he was

not yet a man, any more than she was a woman, despite the trade in child brides of which she was a part. He would be strong, competent, loving. There was nothing of Robert Ingram about him, nothing flimsy. Someone would be getting him as a husband. Someone lucky. Eloise hoped she would deserve him.

'Ralf gave me the old plans,' Godric said. 'I'm going to take them to Leckbourne.'

'What for?'

'I do have one or two friends there, Papa.'

'I'd rather you didn't show them to anybody just yet. Especially in the Church.'

'May I ask why?'

'No. Just do as I say. In fact, give me the plans.'

Ralf was watching this exchange.

'I'm sorry, Godric. I didn't mean to snap. But don't take them out of the house. We may be facing opposition. There's no point in making their job easier.'

'You mean the diocese?' Godric said.

'I realise you have divided loyalties.'

'I am loyal only to you, Father.'

Imogen was looking lost, poor girl. Eloise would extricate her as soon as she could.

Ralf said, 'My lord, I have told Father Pickard about the mill. He asked me.'

'When?'

'A month ago. I'm sorry. I didn't think.'

'That's all right, Ralf. He was bound to hear.' He put his cup down. 'How much longer will the tender take?'

'I don't know, sir.'

'I want it finished as soon as possible. The mill has now become urgent. There are bound to be difficulties with the

construction. If we delay too long there's no point building it at all. What are we today? June the twenty-first. Tell your father I won't sign a contract beyond the end of July. Lammas Day. That's the limit.'

'I'll tell him, my lord, but we're having problems with the wheel.'

'Solve them.'

'We would like to visit some other mills. We have no excuse to do so. He wondered if you might give him a warrant.'

'Saying what?'

'The manor is thinking of changing its milling arrangements and you have authorised him to investigate. No need for an untruth.'

With a glance at Eloise's mother, her father smiled. 'I like the way his mind works. Or was it your idea, Ralf? Don't answer. You'll have the warrant tonight. Better than that, you can have Mr Caffyn. He'll go with you, wherever you want. Just don't waste any time.'

'Thank you very much, my lord. Mr Parfett won't work without a contract. He didn't even want to recommend the water consumption. Anyway, we want to use him as little as possible.'

'Parfett's the engineer,' he told Eloise's mother. He turned back to Ralf. 'Use him as much as you have to. Don't stint on fees.' He gave a relenting smile. 'But what need do we have of a Parfett? We have our own. Have you thought of pursuing that line of work? After the mill, I mean.'

'I want to work with my father, sir, in the city.'

'Engineering, Ralf. That's where the money is today. Roads, bridges, castles. Siege engines. Ships.'

‘I wouldn’t mind building ships.’

‘Civil or military?’

‘Civil, I suppose.’

‘Are you sure? I could give you some pointers to the Navy. Do you know how much gold is pouring into Portsmouth at this moment? There’s a veritable frenzy of building. Fortifications, warehouses, docks, the town, everything needful for the fleet. Two new warships this month alone. It’s the country’s defence. The French —’

Her mother interrupted. ‘For goodness’ sake, my liege, please don’t start on that.’ To Eloise she said, ‘I’ve had two weeks of the French and their plans, and that’s quite enough for anybody. Loathsome foreigners. Who the devil do they think they are?’

The party broke up. While Eloise’s brother and parents went into the house, Ralf disappeared from her sight, along the shingle walk; and she, despairing, accompanied his sister to the stable yard and the ever-patient Hennet.

5

The summer that year brought to the manor a spell of good growing-weather, which, especially now that her father had confided in her, Eloise was glad to see, for his sake if not her own. It seemed to rain mostly at night. The long days merged with one another; the ears of wheat and barley hardened and turned from green to brown; and over the marshes, at sunset, impending autumn was betrayed as early as the middle of July by lines of gulls following the beach to their roost at the end of the Point.

For Eloise the evenings were not a good time, alone with her aunts or parents or in the company of their guests, but the nights were worse.

Mornings were best, or afternoons, whenever Imogen came. Eloise had been taken by surprise. Even before the first riding-lesson had ended, she had found Imogen far more level-headed than she herself had been, eighteen months earlier. She was almost grown-up; and completely irresistible. Eloise did not know what she liked about her most: her irreverent views, her open and affectionate nature, her capacity for listening, or the way a whole afternoon would disappear in her company. Like her riding skill, their friendship graduated from walk to trot, to canter, to gallop, and Eloise soon moderated her admiration of Ralf's solicitude for his sister. Who could not love her?

Their talks comprehended every subject but the one that consumed the summer nights, and even that was eased by Imogen's daytime presence. Eloise regretted that she had not heeded her intuition and made a friend of her long before.

But Eloise, who had never had a friend, would not have known how to do that. Ralf had brought her Imogen. Before that day, her companions had been mere acquaintances, daughters of freemen and nobles. In two of the five families of tenants in the manor, and in the families of the senior retainers, there were girls with whom she got on quite well; their social station did not disqualify them, but the serfs were out of bounds.

Ralf and Imogen were the grandchildren of serfs. They lived in a tied cottage. Even though their father was a freeman, and a respected one, his indebtedness and waged

work had severely reduced his status, which was why, Eloise knew, some of those around her – especially Aunt Matilde – had disapproved of Godric's friendship with Ralf.

Now that Master Grigg had left Rushton his status had markedly risen, and even Aunt Matilde had smiled on Imogen, drawn her into conversation, and afterwards pronounced her delightful.

Imogen resembled Ralf in the regularity of her features and in the set and colour of her eyes. She was his feminine counterpart, her hair finer in texture and a paler blonde, her mouth less determined, her voice soft, her walk graceful; and whereas his hands were sturdy and practical, hers were slender and gentle. To look upon her, to hear her speaking artlessly of Ralf, gave Eloise pain which was also pleasure, complicated still further by the symmetry between this friendship and that of their brothers.

When out with Aunt Mildred or Aunt Béatrice – Aunt Matilde did not much care for riding – they might easily cover twenty miles. Eloise revisited her favourite places, seeing them anew, through Imogen's eyes. They ascended the sheep-walks on the downs and overlooked the grey sweep of the sea and the coastal plain of farmland and marsh. They rode through silent forests, along paths among towering bracken or across sunlit glades where the trees had been felled. She showed Imogen the cascades at Finmere Abbey and the hypnotically turning wheel of its mill. They visited Eyton, Fulches, Angmer, Ashentoft, and the yew-woods at Houghton; in woods of beech or ash they passed the camps of turners and charcoal-burners, and once, deep in the oaks, well back from the way, a hermitage, whose wild-haired occupant they saw near by, trying to hide behind a tree.

On days without an aunt, Eloise and Imogen were confined to the manor. Although she had lived in Mape for eight years, Imogen knew hardly any of it besides the village, the marshes and the staith. Eloise explained how pannage worked, how and why the pigs were moved around in the woods, and they visited the curing-house where the bacon and gammon were made and the pork salted and packed in barrels for sale or for the winter. The swineherd let Imogen cuddle his favoured runt, a tiny piglet with a ribbon for a collar, and Eloise too wished that she could carry it home for a pet.

She was able to show Imogen other places in the village: the dairy, the bakery and the threshing barn, the church tower and the chambers and offices at the Hall. Imogen got to know the garden and grounds, the maze, the physic garden, the nook, the espaliered pear-trees, the asparagus beds, and the rows of chrysanthemums and sweetpeas, for cut-flowers to put in the house or church.

Increasingly, as today, when Ralf had need of Hennet, they did not bother with the horses at all. Imogen had been amused by the way the groundsmen kept the lawn trimmed, confining two sheep in a hurdle, compelling them to eat grass when they would rather have eaten anything else, especially flowers. This morning the cycle had started again: the hurdle had been moved up to the edge of the rose-beds, just under the terrace with its dolphin steps.

The lawn ended forty yards from the house, at the fishpond, with a shrubbery behind. The pond was in the shape of a horseshoe, enclosing a stone bench. They peered here and there into the clear, dark water, searching among the lily-pads for a glimpse of a fish or even a frog or newt,

but saw only a water-beetle, clinging upside-down to a bubble of air.

Imogen now examined the sundial, which stood on a plinth before the bench.

'It's nearly in the middle,' she said. 'Noon. Can that be right?'

'I don't think so,' said Eloise. Remembering what her grandmother had told her, she said, 'Do you know the legend about sundials?'

She explained how St Augustine of Canterbury, the bringer of Christianity to the English and namesake of the more famous St Augustine of Hippo, was said to have learned of his own predestination and grace. In a Roman garden, passing a sundial, he had noticed that the shadow cast by the gnomon had not been obscured by his own. Even though he had stood where he ought to have blocked the sun, even though his own shadow had fallen across the dial, the gnomon's had continued to creep between the hours. Augustine, marvelling, had also been afraid; then God had spoken to him and told him his destiny. Since that time, a transparent shadow had always been taken as a sign of sainthood.

Imogen interposed herself between the sun and the dial. The gnomon's shadow disappeared.

'I'm not going to be a saint, then,' she said. 'That's a relief.'

Eloise, on prompting, demonstrated what she already knew: that she also was not to be canonised. They speculated as to who in the village might be put to the test, giggling as each suggested more and more ludicrous candidates. From the pond they returned to the terrace

and, without pausing in their conversation, sat down at the big outdoor table.

'Does he sign it himself?' Imogen said.

'O yes.'

'Will it have a seal and everything?'

'I suppose so.'

'How exciting! And without it you can't get married at all?'

'Not to anyone above a baron, or anyone who will inherit a greater title.'

Yesterday her father had told Eloise about the royal sanction. Mr Tysoe was drawing up the petition to the King. Next week, once the contract for the mill had been signed, the petition would be sent to the Clerk Royal. Her father had already written to the Dean of Westminster and had heard that the Abbey would be made available on a Saturday in the next October but one. That was to be her wedding-day.

The banns would be put up at Westminster and here in Mape, for three Sundays before the sanction was signed. After signature, only the King could terminate the betrothal, provided he had the agreement of both families. A royal sanction was revocable only on the death of one of the betrothed or the failure of the bride's family to pay the dowry. Deriving from the King's divinity, the sanction was itself divine. Violation was treasonable.

'So you'll be a duchess?' Imogen said. 'The Duchess of Kent?'

'Yes, it's likely, in time.'

'Can I be a bridesmaid?'

'I don't think so. I'm sure not. That's all protocol. You know. It's not like an ordinary wedding.'

‘Will the King be there? And the Queen?’

‘I expect so. The Kents are their friends.’

‘So is your father the baron. And the baroness.’

‘Yes, they’re friendly with my parents too.’

Imogen remained silent for a while. ‘I don’t think I’d like all that pomp,’ she said. ‘Westminster Abbey. I’d rather be married here.’

‘So would I. Then you could be a bridesmaid.’

‘Who else would you have?’

‘As a bridesmaid? From the village? Oh, Isolda, perhaps.’ This was the eldest daughter of her father’s prime tenant.

‘Have you heard that Bernard says he wants to marry me?’

‘Really?’ Eloise’s recollection of Isolda’s nineteen-year-old brother fitted ill with the idea of him on one knee.

‘I could never accept. His arms are hairy.’

Eloise laughed. ‘Everyone’s arms are hairy. Yours are. So are mine.’ She held out her left forearm to demonstrate.

Imogen’s fingers brushed the skin; she held out her own forearm and briefly laid it alongside for comparison. ‘Look. Ours are nice. His are – they’re obvious.’

‘Is it just his arms you don’t like?’

‘No.’

‘What else, then?’

‘I don’t love him,’ Imogen said, simply, as if this were all that mattered.

‘They’re a respectable family. He’d be a good provider.’

‘I’d rather be on my own.’

‘I don’t think that’s going to happen. From what I hear, all the boys are in love with you.’

Imogen wrinkled her nose.

‘Isn’t there anybody you like?’

‘Well, there is someone.’

‘Who?’

‘You won’t tell him?’

‘I won’t,’ Eloise said, her smile disappearing. Imogen was in earnest.

‘Promise? Promise on your rosary?’

‘I promise.’

‘Promise on all the holy saints?’

‘I promise on all the saints.’

‘And the Bible?’

‘That too.’

‘It’s Godric.’

Eloise could not have been more amazed.

‘I know he’s not handsome,’ Imogen explained. ‘Not in the ordinary way. And I know he’s going to be a priest, but I love him just the same. He’s so kind. He’s funny and brainy too. I always feel comfortable with Godric. Best of all I like his eyes. He understands things without being told.’

‘That he does,’ Eloise said, perceiving, as she considered the matter further, that Imogen, were it not for Leckbourne, could have made a worse choice; and that she would be the perfect cure for her brother’s seriousness and black moods. Yes, they were a couple: a couple in some ideal world, the world of her dreams. ‘How long have you felt like this?’

‘Years.’ She looked at Eloise. ‘It’s stupid, I know.’

‘I don’t think it’s stupid.’ The sympathy Eloise felt was so intense, so quickly aroused, so near, that she began to see just how badly she herself was afflicted. Could Imogen really be in the same case? Was that why they had so quickly become friends?

‘Is there any chance he won’t be a priest?’

Eloise put out a hand: Imogen automatically clutched it. ‘I’m sorry. The Church is his whole life.’

‘Do you think he likes me?’

‘You might be a bit young yet,’ Eloise said, softly, not reminding Imogen that Godric had called her the prettiest girl in the county; nor yet telling her that he had meant it only to give his sister pain.

‘I’m sixteen,’ Imogen said.

‘I know that.’

‘Bernard’s older than him.’

‘Ah, but he’s got hairy arms.’

Now they both laughed.

‘What about Sir Robert? Has he got hairy arms?’

‘I’ve never seen them.’

‘O Eloise, you might be making the most dreadful mistake.’

She no longer thought so. Her marriage was inevitable. Just as her older brothers were expected to don armour in defence of the Crown, just as her sister Adela had already sacrificed herself, so she had to yield her maidenhead and her body. Compared with the suffering and hardship a war would bring, what did her happiness amount to? It was a little thing, of no importance. She had already enjoyed far more comfort and privilege than all but a handful of people in England. And perhaps her father was right. Perhaps she would grow to love Robert Ingram. If not him, there would be children.

‘You won’t tell Godric what I said?’

‘I promise.’

‘I do love him, really. Ralf worships him, you know. He’d do anything for Godric.’

‘Yes.’ Eloise felt herself becoming wary. ‘Godric thinks the world of Ralf. He always has.’

‘Poor Ralf.’

‘Why do you say that?’

‘He can’t be in Rushton any more.’

‘What’s in Rushton?’

‘Some girl. He’s in love. He’s so moony it’s pitiful. He’s wasting away. They met in the spring, I’m sure, but he refuses to say anything about her. Except that she’s *very* pretty.’

Eloise thought yet again of the harrier, and of their time alone on the dike.

There was pathos as well as absurdity in her daydreams. They belonged to childhood. In the adult world there was no room for them. It was harsh, governed by hatred and self-interest. Her father wrestled with it every day. That was why he was building the mill, and that was why she had to marry Robert Ingram. Ralf was just a boy about whom she knew nothing. What could be more expected than that he should fall in love? She wished she had never met him. Then she would have been spared this sense of loss, this vacancy: this isolation.

Eloise managed to keep her voice level as she said, ‘He’ll get over it.’

‘I hope so. But it seems to be worse than ever. I say she’s in Rushton, but I don’t really know. She might be here.’

‘In Mape?’

‘I can’t think of anybody who arrived last spring. Can you?’

‘I thought he liked Mary Ibbott.’

‘Where did you hear that?’

‘I remember seeing them together at Lady Day. When we had the recital.’

‘It’s not her. I can vouch for that. She got him a black eye.’

‘Did she?’

‘Everyone was talking about it. Ralf wouldn’t say, but I think it was that brute, Aholiab Peake. He’s Mary’s latest. Or was. She’s got John Hollins on a string now. But this doesn’t solve our mystery. I’m dying to know who she is. He’s a dark one, Ralf. Men are like that,’ Imogen added authoritatively. ‘They never tell you what you want to hear.’

6

Ralf’s father had received a letter from Josiah Parfett providing answers to his technical questions. This had given them a basic knowledge, but nothing could replace inspection of working mills.

Linsell was fully occupied with the plans and the tender document, dealing with a maze of imponderables in the supply of timber, ashlar, fixings and mortar, and with sub-contractors who would, for a reasonable price, install the modest screen of piling needed. Iron railings and ladders, steel hooks, chains, hinges and pawls, the layshaft, spindle and bearings: all had to be fabricated somewhere, by someone, and delivered in sequence and on time.

The number of days remaining before the end of the month was diminishing with alarming speed, and still they had not finished the specification; still they did not know exactly how much the mill would cost. If they underestimated, Linsell would have to bear the loss. If they

overestimated, the baron might baulk at the expense and change his mind.

Linsell had spent one week in Rushton and another in Alincester, dealing with suppliers, and was due to return to Alincester soon. Otherwise he remained at Mape, working eighteen hours a day, while Ralf was delegated, spared, to undertake these excursions with the steward and find out everything he could about the process of grinding corn.

Grain was ground between a pair of flat, round stones, or molae, each with a hole in the centre and about four feet in diameter. The upper stone, the runner, or catillus, was attached to its drive-shaft or spindle by an inset metal crosspiece called a mace or rind. The runner rotated just above the fixed lower stone, the bedstone, or meta, also called the ligger.

Above the stones was the hopper, or infundibulum, which fed grain into the eye of the runner through a wooden chute, or slipper, called by some millers a shoe. The hopper was fed from a bin on the floor above by a closable cloth tube, the sock.

The stones were usually made of some form of quartzite. Derbyshire gritstone was cheap and easily available, but wore down quickly and left too much stone-dust in the flour. The material recommended by Mr Parfett was French burr, which was quarried only at La Ferté-sous-Jouarre, near Châlons-sur-Marne. Even when relations between England and France had been easier, burrstone had been expensive. Now the price had gone up even more. Ready-made stones, in various patterns and diameters, were available from yards on the Continent.

Making the stones was a skilled process. The quarried burr came in small and irregular lumps, a number of which

were required to make a single stone. The lumps were trimmed, bound with plaster of Paris and locked in place with a cooling iron hoop. A finished stone could weigh upwards of a ton.

The stones came in matched pairs. The working surfaces were chased into sections called 'harps', each comprising a pattern of raised faces, or lands, and grooves, or furrows. The furrows were cut radially, with further, tangential, furrows.

As the grain trickled from the shoe, it was fed by the central region of the furrows to the lands. The design of the harp was critical to regular distribution, and the gap between the stones had to be adjusted to tolerances that would have tested even Master Brocq. In this parchment-thin space, varying outward from the centre, the grinding took place.

The centrifugal motion of the runner drove the flour along the furrows to the circumference, where it showered into a circular chute, and thence into the open sack.

As Ralf's knowledge of mills and milling grew, he saw how an engineer could make nature, bountiful and uncomplaining, serve what once had been the sentence of mankind. Grinding corn was not just hard work, but time-consuming and unpleasant.

Like nearly every serf, Jacob kept a quern in his cottage. This comprised two heavy discs of gritstone, about a cubit in diameter. They were shaped so that one sat upon the other, concave and convex. An off-centre hole in the top stone allowed a wooden handle to be inserted, and a central hole allowed grain to be fed in by hand.

To save money, from necessity, Ralf's mother had used the quern to grind the family's flour. The scraping of the

stones had been one of the most familiar sounds of his early years at Mape. Indivisible from that sound was the memory of his weary mother kneeling on the kitchen floor, turning, turning, pushing back her straggling hair, her face aglow, turning the crude wooden handle so that her children might eat; and bound up in that memory was all the injustice of their plight, for Ralf, Jacob, and even Imogen too had taken their turn. Taking your turn: the sweaty handle of the quern was where that expression had begun.

And as Ralf's knowledge of mills and milling grew, so did his knowledge of the ecclesiastical manors. Whether attached to a religious house or run by a steward, almost every one had its mill, a place where mathematics, brought to life, did so easily that which had sapped so much of his mother's strength and youth. The profits, flowing like new flour along the furrows of the diocese, were collected by the Molarius for the panel at Alincester. It seemed somehow to Ralf that it was not the masons but his own mother, and many others like her, kneeling at querns, year after year, who had raised the cathedral and the bishop's palace. When he thought of all the mills that could have been built instead, Ralf became angry.

At the small mill he and Mr Caffyn had visited this morning, the pistor, or flour-miller, had spoken barely any English, and even then had been so taciturn that they had learned little of value.

'Let's hope for better luck here,' Mr Caffyn said, once they had dismounted. 'I don't think I could take another Norwegian.'

On their rides, during their long conversations, Ralf had come to like Mr Caffyn very much. Today they had climbed

the downs and descended into the Weald. Early in the afternoon the sky had clouded over, and now warm drizzle was falling.

The large and important mill at Priorsbourne stood where four roads met, wide roads churned by heavy wheels. Even now a wagon was being loaded, from the upper doorway, with freshly sawn, waney-edged boards. Two more wagons, ox-drawn, were waiting, one to deliver beech-trunks, the other to collect; the clang and whine of the circular saw had been audible long before the mill itself had appeared among the dense foliage of the surrounding alders.

The house was a modern, tall, square building in the local ironstone, roofed with slate, and much larger and more complicated than the one planned for Mape. The enterprise here, besides timber cutting and flour milling, included a blast furnace, today lying idle. The machines were worked by lay brothers and serfs from the priory manor, supervised by the monks.

Just below the priory itself, part of the Rother had been diverted into a leat a quarter of a mile long. The leat ran parallel to the river but at a lesser gradient, for it had been channelled along a rising embankment. At its end, about fifteen feet above the parent river, a wall of water, sliding over a stone lip, dropped slightly forward of the top of a large, double-width, overshot wheel.

The paddles of an overshot wheel were formed into compartments that contained the water as it fell. The weight of water made it far more efficient than an undershot wheel, whose paddles were merely submerged in the stream. The price to be paid was usually the

construction of a raised leat. In some places, like Finmere, a natural waterfall could be exploited.

The manor's grain had been milled at Finmere for as long as anyone could remember. The monks there did the milling themselves and were renowned for their expertise, though the work here at Priorsbourne was meant to be as good.

As he and Mr Caffyn walked towards the mill-house, Ralf made a study of the wheel. It had been built of oak, by the look of it, with eight spokes on each side, and made about ten revolutions a minute. The wheelshaft disappeared through a hole in the wall, behind which would be the frame supporting the gears. The gearing would take the speed up to a hundred and twenty at the rind or, for sawing, many times that. Below the wheel, spinning froth vanished into the brown waters of the tailrace, which rejoined the river some way down.

'Ready, Ralf?'

They climbed the stone steps to the open door and went inside. The smell of sawdust grew stronger. Ralf recognised the tang of hornbeam as well as beech.

A middle-aged monk, tonsured, wearing a grubby black habit, sandals on his feet, was descending the steep stairway straight ahead. 'Good day,' he said, over the noise of the saw. 'Who might you be?'

'My name is Walter Caffyn. This is my assistant.'

The monk introduced himself as Brother Nicholas. As he did so, above and behind him, the saw could be heard ceasing to bite, speeding up as resistance was lost. Someone shouted an instruction and there was the flat report of a sawn slab being dropped. 'How may I serve you?'

The saw re-engaged, so loudly that Mr Caffyn started. 'I am the steward of Lord de Maepe. His holding is on the coast. Mape.'

'I don't know it.' The monk frowned and gestured at a small room, a cubicle, beside the main door. 'Let's go in the office.'

Once they were inside, Mr Caffyn gave his usual preamble. 'My lord wishes to change his milling contract.'

Ralf looked around him, at the cramped desk, the inkstand, the heaps of parchments, loose or on spikes.

'Where does he mill at present?'

'Finmere.'

'And he wishes to change? That does surprise me.'

'Their work is satisfactory. However, the Abbot … my master … shall we say that Lord de Maepe and he …'

Brother Nicholas discreetly held up a palm. 'We're a good deal further from the coast.'

'But you're on the way to Alincester. That's where we market most of our flour.'

'We can arrange certification and carting, should your lord desire.'

Finmere was a Cistercian manor, this a Benedictine. When told that Mape also produced notable quantities of oak and poplar, Brother Nicholas became even friendlier. He made only cursory inspection of Mr Caffyn's warrant; the senior brother was summoned, and while he remained talking to Mr Caffyn, Brother Nicholas acceded to their prospective client's eccentric request and let his assistant look over the mill.

Brother Nicholas proved almost too garrulous. He was a clerk and knew little about the machinery, but continually extolled the thoroughness and skill of the pistor, who was a

layman, unfortunately absent today, since these few weeks before harvest were a slack time for flour. The summer and early autumn were the busiest period for felling and hence for sawing, of green timber at least: extraction of the trunks, even with the best trained horses, proved difficult when the ground was wet, and in the Weald, as everyone knew, the clay soils were inimical to the forester.

Ralf wished he would keep quiet. He was trying to store as much information in his mind as he could. All power from the wheelshaft was being sent to the saw. Ralf was specially interested in the gear-frame, which incorporated a belt-differential that allowed the power to be distributed to three layshafts, as required: for the saw, furnace bellows, or stones.

The stones were conventionally arranged but, at fifty-four inches across, the biggest he had seen. While Brother Nicholas talked, Ralf noticed the damsel – four wooden shafts, stationary now, projecting upwards from the top of the runner. The function of a damsel was to agitate the shoe to give a smooth flow of grain. It was named for the constant chattering it made, but Ralf reflected that it could with equal justice be called a nicholas.

Damsel, damosel, mademoiselle: that was the title of the one whom Imogen praised, to whom he felt his sister drawing him daily nearer. Her presence was everywhere, but especially here, in this round, white, lunar stone, silent now but waiting to turn. As it turned, its damsel, turning too, would regulate the flow of corn, from the fields to the bin-sock, from the bin-sock to the hopper, from the hopper to the shoe. Streaming at last into the gap between the stones, into the dark and infinitesimal space between the bedstone and the whirling runner above, the seed would

strike the lands and in an instant be transmuted into life-sustaining flour. Hers was the stone, hers the power and the mill: but she needed an engineer to make it run.

'Have you seen all you want, young sir?'

'No,' Ralf said, not listening.

'What else can I show you?'

Producing another and different sort of frown on the monk's smooth and celibate face, Ralf answered: 'Nothing.'

* * *

This byway, climbing through the woods, was so steep that it also made an ephemeral stream, half a mile long and presently dry. In the middle of the track, forming an irregular gutter, the soil had been washed away to reveal chalk, in some places smooth, in others broken to rubble. In depth and width the gutter varied from a few to several inches. The remaining surface, steep and slippery, made treacherous footing for the horses, not helped by the wet undergrowth and tree-boughs pressing in from either side.

Mr Caffyn was riding ahead. Like Ralf, he was concentrating hard. A moment's inattention could lead to a turned hoof, a broken pastern, disaster. They were still at least twelve miles from Mape, the drizzle had turned to rain, and they had no waterproofs. The change in the weather had taken them by surprise.

Ralf's disconnected thoughts, interrupted from second to second by the need to guide and reassure Hennet, had not yet left Priorsbourne. He had been much impressed by the saw. In winter, after heavy rain, the spindle speed could reach four thousand revolutions a minute. The huge crosscut blade made short work of even the densest

hardwood bole, a task that, in the pit at Rushton, might have taken a pair of sawyers the whole day and left them exhausted. First the trees were broken down into longitudinal slabs, plain slices cut through-and-through for maximum yield, or quarter-sawn for enhanced durability and a more decorative appearance. Then the slabs were converted, reduced to any required profile: post, beam, plank or board. The lumber ejected so rapidly by the mill was smoother and straighter than any that could be formed by hand. More than this, the ripping-fence ensured exact consistency in the thickness of every piece. Planing was reduced to an act of mere finishing, minimising waste of wood and work alike.

The monks, it seemed, had designed and built the saw, based on others elsewhere, in England and all over the continent. The Church was a parallel world, a network of ideas rising above the petty factions of kingship and nationality. It indiscriminately sucked into itself all learning, from whatever source, in Christendom or beyond. Scholars in Rome and Constantinople translated heathen writings into Latin and faithfully copied their illustrations. In the library at Leckbourne, Godric had said, there were books and treatises from Turkey, Arabia and the Indies, travellers' tales from the steppes, from Africa and the Silk Road, bestiaries of sea-monsters and dragons, and detailed accounts of earthquakes, volcanoes, pestilences, floods, shipwrecks.

The Church was a treasure-house and Latin was the key. Though he could no longer spare the time, Ralf was continuing with his lessons, but he was troubled by Father Pickard and would have preferred them to have ended. He did not like to think that the priest had pumped him for

information about the mill and sent the results to the bishop.

Ralf had grown to revere Father Pickard, who carried the secrets of the whole manor in his head. In the confessional he listened gravely and always gave a sage response. The formulaic *Hail Mary*s of Ralf's childhood were no more. Not that Ralf had much to confess: his worst crisis had been Mary Ibbott, and that he had resolved largely without the Father's intercession; though not without St Matthew, who had come to him through the Father's help.

Ralf's debt to Father Pickard, for his lessons and encouragement, made his perplexity harder to bear. Before the mill, the priest had been his model of kindness. Now, the letter that he must have sent to Alincester felt like an act of betrayal, and Ralf wondered whether the priest had any feeling for him at all.

This afternoon Ralf had found himself looking upon Brother Nicholas as the personification of the diocese, for, gradually, piece by piece assembling, an image of the bishop as the enemy had perfected itself in his mind. Bishop William would demolish the baron's hopes, if he could. For the sake of a few more stained-glass windows he would for ever keep the serfs tied to their querns. He opposed progress: yet it was from his Holy Mother Church that learning, mathematics, engineering, spread.

The track became less steep. The chalk gutter disappeared.

'Good girl,' Ralf told Hennet, leaning forward and patting her neck. Her ears turned backwards, as if to say, 'That was easy.'

Mr Caffyn twisted in his saddle. 'All right, Ralf?'

'Yes, sir!'

A little way on, the bridleway left the woods by means of a pulleyed gate. Before them spread the close-cropped grassland of the high downs, clustered with sheep, some of which scattered from the white, hoof-worn track as Ralf's horse caught up with the steward's.

Under the trees, Ralf had not realised quite how heavy the rain was becoming. He was already soaked to the skin and so was Mr Caffyn.

'Do you want to see any more mills after this?'

'I don't think so. Not yet, anyway. It was good today, though. I learned a lot. I'm sure we've got enough for the tender document.'

'How much longer?'

'It'll be ready by Lammas Day.'

'How appropriate,' said Mr Caffyn. Ralf, puzzled at first, suddenly saw what he meant. Lammas, or Loaf-mass, the first day of August, was an important marker in the rural calendar. This year it fell on a Sunday, which was more fitting still. The first ears of ripe corn were baked into a plaited and glazed loaf that formed the centrepiece of a service at the church. Lammas was said to be a pagan festival which, like others, had been adopted and adapted by the early Christians. It was both a first-fruits festival and a sacrifice to the gods, a propitiation for the harvest to come. Despite the rain trickling down his neck, Ralf smiled to think that this might be the day for the baron's signature on their contract.

He wondered whether, during the service, Father Pickard would mention the mill.

'Mr Caffyn,' he said.

'Yes, Ralf?'

'I don't know what to do about Father Pickard.'

Mr Caffyn already knew about the lessons. On their rides, Ralf had put questions to him on vocabulary and grammar, and they had, from time to time, as practice, conversed in Latin – haltingly, in Ralf's case. Now Ralf explained what the baron had first implied and subsequently made clear: his suspicion that Father Pickard was reporting progress to the diocese.

'What would you have him do?' Mr Caffyn said. 'He is loyal, that is all.'

'Do you like him?'

'He is one of the best men I know. You admire him, don't you?'

'Yes. More than that.'

'Ah, Ralf, I wish I were eighteen again. Life seemed so simple then. Work is work, and friends are friends. He will do what he has to do, and you will do what you have to do. That should be no reason for discord.'

'Should I tell him whatever he asks?'

'Why not? He'll find out anyway. You may as well save him some trouble. The mill is no secret. We're not breaking the law or doing anything wrong.'

This answer made Ralf feel easier. The sky was darker than ever, especially to the south-west. As he and Mr Caffyn broke into a trot, he could feel his kneeboots slowly filling with rain. His breeches, tunic and shirt were plastered to his body. But he didn't care. A curious sense of his own strength and capabilities had stolen upon him. There was nothing boastful about it: he was just himself, exposed to the weather, riding beside the steward, and yard by yard they were nearing Mape.

7

The rain blurred even further the distorting panes of the tight-shut window in Eloise's chamber. Her restricted view of the marshes, the green reeds and grazing, was distinguishable from the enclosing limes only by its relative lack of motion. Above it ran a fuzzy line of greyish fawn, the beach, and above that a blur of another grey, the sea, scarcely darker than the sky itself.

Water was pouring from the tiles of the roof and seeping through the casement, slowly puddling around the bowl of roses on the stone sill. Her room had become drained of all but a greenish, submarine light.

She did not know how long she had been standing here. Her mind was blank, except perhaps for the rain and Mape's gigantic, laden sky. The rain levelled everything, struck down blossoms, drove people indoors, reduced life to a smaller and more practical orbit. And as it cleansed, as it washed away, it brought its own temporary oblivion.

Slight movement made her look down at the roses. Crawling along a stem, making awkward detours to avoid the vicious hillock of each thorn, a ladybird was pursuing a private and determined course towards the recurved fence of sepals guarding the flower. Reaching it, baffled, it tried first one way and then another to get past, its irresolute black forelegs and antennae waving; at one point, exasperated, it opened its back and unfurled a tiny set of wings. She was certain it was going to fly. It changed its mind, closed its wing-cases and continued the struggle on foot, finally overcoming the obstacle by finding a sufficient gap between the offending sepal and its neighbour.

The softly veined pink of the petals might have been made for the scarlet of a ladybird. Not just any ladybird: this ladybird, this spot of cochineal at the fulcrum of the world. Its polished, round, red body, its stubby, gleaming black head, with two off-white dots like eyes, its segmented legs and minute, twin-clawed feet: all amounted to a complete, compact and inevitable whole, as perfect as the aimlessness of its route across the silky surface of the petal. The insect reached the petal's edge and came to a suspicious halt, as though it had overstepped its allotted place in creation and suddenly felt the loss of equilibrium.

What did it know of the rainstorm? Was it aware of the water streaming down the window? Did it know there were such things as the churchyard, the reed-beds, or the sea?

Without ceremony it opened its wings and flew. She lost sight of it for a second or two, but there it was again, on the glass.

She wondered whether she should open the window and set it free. Surely it would be kinder to wait till the rain had moved on.

She had not heard any noises from the stable yard or downstairs. The sound of feet in the passage was the first she knew of Godric's expected return from Leckbourne.

His door was ajar. She found him standing near his bed, rubbing at his hair with a linen towel. Seen against the watery light of his own window, he was almost a silhouette.

He noticed her. 'Hello, Eloise.'

His clothes were soaked. She said, 'Does Mama know you're back?'

'Yes. She's downstairs.'

‘I’ll leave you to it.’

‘Wait.’ He stopped drying his hair altogether. ‘I want to talk to you. Do you mind?’

‘Why should I mind?’

‘What are you doing now?’

‘Nothing.’

‘In your chamber, then. In a few minutes. If that’s convenient. I have to see Papa first.’

She sat waiting for him, curious but also not. She could not imagine what he might wish to say, what tidings he might be bringing in from the rain.

Downstairs, the work of the household was proceeding. This evening’s wine would by now be in the buttery. On the scrubbed surface of the kitchen table capons were being dressed, herbs chopped, vegetables sliced. She thought of the raindrops rebounding from the cobbles in the stable yard, the sickly-sweet smell of fermenting straw, the uneasy horses in the gloom. She thought of the kennels and the acrid air of the hawk mews, and of Mr Tysoe, pen in hand, at his slope. The steward’s office would be empty: the reeve would be at large in the manor, also getting soaked, perhaps, or sheltering at the staith. Mr Caffyn himself, wetter even than Godric had been, would as yet be no nearer Mape than the summit of the downs.

Eloise had become very still. She was not just waiting for Godric. It was her fate, the fate of all women, to be passive. But when it came, there was tentativeness in her brother’s knock. Rather than speak, she arose and opened the door herself.

‘I feel human again,’ Godric said. ‘It’s wonderful what dry clothes can do.’

‘You looked bedraggled.’

‘I was. The proverbial drowned rat.’

‘Do you think you’ve caught a cold?’

‘Who can tell?’

She resumed her chair and indicated that he should be seated on the cushioned chest. Instead he sat down on the rug, his back against the nearest bedpost, his knees raised to support his forearms. He seemed quite relaxed, as he usually did, but there was tension in his face and an initial reluctance to speak, broken as he looked up at her, into her eyes.

‘I want to say how sorry I am for the way I behaved. Last time I was home.’ His eyes had not left hers. ‘You know what I’m talking about, don’t you?’

‘I’m not sure that I do.’

‘Help me, Eloise. Please.’

‘Do you mean our outing? To the dike?’

‘I’m talking about Ralf.’

For an hour or more, since the rain had grown heavy, she had managed to forget about him and his girl, in Rushton, or wherever she was. ‘I don’t understand you.’

Godric persisted. ‘Something happened to me at the abbey. It made me act badly. I want to explain myself.’

But he began by talking not about Leckbourne but Mape, years ago. With growing incredulity she listened to his account of the way Ralf, aged twelve, had pulled him from the mud; and as she listened she could not help seeing this act as innate, coming directly down the centuries from Rollo and his lunatic comrades. Ralf was much more than she had supposed. Might he, also, be capable of sailing up the Seine?

‘Why didn’t you tell anyone?’

‘He asked me not to.’

‘Why?’

‘He thought we’d get into trouble for being in the saltings at high water. I thought so too. So we didn’t say.’

‘That’s … that’s typical. Typical of boys.’

‘It’s how we thought.’

‘But Papa would have been so grateful. The Griggs … Master Grigg … Papa would have paid his debts, I’m sure of it.’

‘He wouldn’t have accepted.’

‘You may be right.’

‘You know I am. He wouldn’t. And please don’t tell anyone about it, even now. I gave my word to Ralf.’

‘Why are you telling me, then?’

‘Because it changed my whole life, and you can never understand me unless you know.’

It was true. Eloise did not understand him.

He fell silent, staring down at the rug between his feet. The room had become even darker, the rain even more intense, drumming on the tiles above, striking the window with malevolent force.

Speaking quietly, without looking at her, he began to explain what he had felt while trapped in the mud: how he had felt betrayed by God, then half reconciled; and, after Ralf had pulled him out, guilty. This guilt had accompanied him ever since. It had poisoned all his relations with others. He had confessed his sin to Father Pickard, but to no avail. Only Ralf was immune to its effects.

He was still avoiding her eye. ‘I’ve known for a long time what you think of him. I used to watch you whenever he came into the room. I knew how difficult it was, but I always thought you could carry it off. You can be pretty magnificent, Eloise, did you know that?’

‘Godric, I think you’d better leave.’ The distress she had felt this morning, talking to Imogen about Rushton, had been no more than a shadowy precursor of this. ‘Please, Godric. For your sake, I must insist that you leave.’

‘Hear me out.’

Half sensing what was coming, she wanted him to stay as much as she wanted him to go, for she could feel the approach of the very thing she most desired.

‘You had him fooled, like everyone else,’ Godric was telling her. ‘Until the spring, about the time the idea came up for the mill. I noticed it first at Easter, when I happened to mention your name. The next day I watched him in church, watching you. He was careful, but not careful enough. That’s when I understood.’

Eloise was unable to think, or even absorb the full significance of what her horribly percipient brother was in the process of revealing to her.

He said, ‘Just before I came home last time, I had an argument with someone at the abbey. Not an argument, exactly, but it made me realise I have only one friend. When you came into the stable yard I felt left out. I needed to be sure. I suppose I was punishing all three of us.’

‘You are talking nonsense.’

He gave a faint, derisive, self-hating snort. She had never seen him like this before. He appeared to be in an agony of contrition. ‘I am so sorry, Eloise,’ he said. ‘What I did was unforgivable. I can’t even begin to say anything to Ralf, still less apologise to him.’

She understood clearly now. There was no girl in Rushton. The girl was in Mape. At the Hall. What Imogen had divulged came back to her, imbued with new meaning

and entirely consistent with what Godric, quite independently, was saying.

He was too intelligent for such clumsiness. There had to be a reason why he was disclosing what she had not known. The suspicion crossed her mind that during his absence he had delighted in devising this new and more thorough form of torture. Was he proposing himself as her confidant? Or, even less tolerable, her accomplice?

'Has the petition gone yet?'

'Godric,' she said. 'Just what do you take me for?'

He looked genuinely startled.

'In all but name I am betrothed to Sir Robert Ingram. Assuming your speculation about your friend has even a shred of truth, you would do well so to inform him. But I doubt there is truth in it. You are wronging him just as you are wronging me. He has neither said nor done anything to depart from perfect propriety. I own that at one time I acted coolly towards him. I had my reasons for that, none of which are your concern. I will thank you to keep your presumptions to yourself. Ralf may be low born, but he behaves like a gentleman.'

'And I do not?'

'You value your own acuity as much as you belittle mine.'

'Are you denying —?'

'How dare you?'

'Eloise, please, I —'

'Get out!'

The moment he had gone she sprang to the window as if to put behind her as much of the house as she could, or even to melt through the glass itself and flee into thin air. Despite all her efforts to preserve her appearance for the

dinner to come, hot tears began to flow. She was trembling with humiliation and shock and rage, cursing the heat that during their altercation she had felt rising to her cheeks. Now he would be convinced beyond doubt. Her reaction had guaranteed it. She had given herself away. She was as angry with herself as she was with Godric, and not just because of the stupidity of her reaction, for she now saw that she in her turn might have wronged him.

What if his contrition had been real? What if he had not known he was telling her anything new about Ralf? It must have cost him dear to come to her like that and lay himself open.

Eloise thought her heart would break. For the four months since Lady Day she had been pulled this way and that, struggling to keep control. Her mother, her three aunts, her father, Robert Ingram, the Earl of Leicester, the King himself, the whole panoply of state: all were ranged around her. Perhaps Godric too. The knowledge he had brought her only made matters worse. The certainty was frightening. It was alien to normal life, to tenderness or even friendship, to everything but raw compulsion.

She had felt it on the dike and had been trying to deny it ever since.

He was somewhere out there in the rain. More than her next breath itself, she wanted to be with him. The anguish of their physical separation had become so strong that she thought of running downstairs to Bella, but instead of Ralf alone, with Hennet, she would find, on some rainswept downland track, Ralf with the steward, the embodiment of her father's household.

Iron-willed, Eloise dried her tears. Godric's chamber was on the other side of the solar, overlooking not the

churchyard but the farm. Though she was afraid he might already have gone from it, his voice answered her knock.

She did not know what she was going to say to him, only that she could not leave matters as they stood, especially during an evening spent with him in the presence of her aunts and parents.

She opened the door to find him just behind it. He seemed surprised to see her and immediately started expressing regret for having spoken as he had; she cut him short. He observed that she had been crying. This seemed to bring him fresh torment and he tried again to apologise. Once more she interrupted, still unsure whether he could be trusted or whether, any more, she even liked him.

She let him shut the door behind them.

It was as if she were meeting her brother for the first time in years. She looked at the young man he had grown into: taller than herself, spare, narrow-chested, the very image of a scholar with his pale, anxious face, the features so little like her own. His wispy beard he kept shaved. His fine, dark hair, somewhat fluffy now from the drying it had received, had been brushed and tied into a short queue at the back of his head. At Leckbourne he studied theology, that most difficult and rarefied subject, and he was still passing through the sevenfold grounding laid down for boys who would in their turn become teachers, pastors or ecclesiarchs. The trivium comprised grammar, rhetoric, and logic. The quadrivium comprised music, arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy. Godric had learned things she would never understand. He spoke Latin and could read the gospel in the original Greek. He and his classmates engaged in formal disputation with the master, sometimes so rapid and savage that the whole room, master included,

burst out laughing. This Eloise knew because she had heard him telling her parents, at table or sitting in the parlour or garden; but in all the years he had been at the abbey, sister and brother had never once had a real conversation about his new life, or indeed, until today, about anything of significance.

They had always been strangers. Godric had always preferred his own company.

He said, 'Won't you sit down?'

His chamber was smaller than hers. Her wardrobe stretched across the whole of one wall and was crammed with clothes; she had a chest besides, with an upholstered top which, like the comfortable chair by her window, she herself had embroidered with coloured silks and wools. Her damask counterpane, richly patterned with ferns and fleurs-de-lis, covered a deep, wide and luxurious bed, flooded with light on sunny afternoons. Godric's window faced east and took the brunt of the winter chill. Instead of the pure air of the beach and sea, his room breathed the reek of the farmyard and stables. No rug, thick and tasselled, covered his floorboards. For his clothes and possessions he had only a press, without a door. This was not a bedchamber but a monkish cell, shaped to the life of one who asked for and expected nothing. Eloise thought of the hermitage she and Imogen had seen in the woods, and of its builder, the mad recluse imagining he could hide behind an arm-thick tree. She felt her heart overflowing. It could endure no more. She could not help herself, or even speak: still standing before him, she found herself looking into Godric's brown eyes and her tears could not be stopped.

He took her in his arms. It was such an instinctive thing to do that she was not at first surprised; nor, at first, did she know that she had given up the fight. It was over. Godric knew. With her face pressed into the clean, brown-twilled intimacy of his shoulder, she was beset by many sensations at once. She was afraid her tears would stain his tunic. She discovered that his body was warm and smelled vaguely masculine, of a musk like leather and horses. She was conscious of his soothing words, but did not heed them, for she was too young to have borne, for so long, such a burden alone. She had to have someone's trust. It could be attained only with risk, vast, precarious and terrible, the antithesis of all her courtly training, of everything to which she had always clung fast. And slowly she came to realise that, except for Imogen's careless and affectionate gestures, and for the incidental touch of dressmakers and maids, she had since early childhood had hardly any contact with another human being.

She wanted Godric to hold her more tightly. She wanted him to enfold her, to shut everything out and make up for all the years she had lost. But he was not Ralf: he was her brother. She sensed hesitancy in his embrace and the worst access of her weeping began to subside.

He rummaged in his press for a handkerchief and sat down with her on the edge of the bed. When her tears had ceased, he took her free hand in his. He waited, delicately, before saying, 'What do you want me to do?'

'Nothing. There's nothing to be done.' Having dabbed at her eyes for the last time, she crumpled the handkerchief into a ball of damp linen and gripped it as hard as she could. 'Except this. Never mention the subject again to anyone, even me.'

‘You have my word on it. Do you want me to break with Ralf?’

She shook her head. That was a sacrifice she could not ask, any more than she herself could think of driving Imogen away.

He said, ‘This is all my fault.’

‘It’s no one’s fault.’

‘If Letty hadn’t run off like that … if the tide hadn’t been coming in —’

‘Don’t. It happened. I’m glad he found you. I’m glad you’re here.’

He smiled at this. ‘I’m glad I’m here, too. Eloise, I haven’t been much of a brother to you. Can we start again?’

‘I think we just did.’

He raised her hand and kissed it. The gesture surprised her far more than his embrace. He said, ‘You’d better get changed.’

‘Yes. Dinner.’ She stood up to go. ‘Godric,’ she began, meaning to voice her thanks; but he interrupted.

‘Enough.’

Imogen was right about him. She knew him better than his own sister; so did Ralf. The scale, the generosity of Godric’s offer had dispelled her last trace of doubt.

He was smiling again, mischievously this time, and she felt herself returning his smile with one of her own: a wan smile like the first gleam of sunlight after an early spring storm.

‘What?’ she said. ‘What is it?’

He looked down, towards her wrist, and back at her. ‘My handkerchief.’

* * *

In her own room, Eloise went through the motions of dressing for dinner. She removed and put away her robe and chose another, more formal, which she laid out on the bed. Pulling her silk shift over her head with a single motion, she tossed it in the basket and poured water from the ewer into its wide, matching bowl. She refreshed her face, neck and arms and towelled herself dry. Choosing a bottle of perfume from the shelf, she opened its square-capped stopper and spilled a drop or two on her palms, which she then applied, as she always did, to her wrists, earlobes, neck and breasts.

The pressure of her hand on the sensitive skin brought her to herself: she had no recollection whatever of undressing or washing and saw with surprise that someone – herself, for she had no chamber-maid – had already laid out her new black bliaut, the one her mother had commissioned in March for the interview with Robert Ingram.

The dreamy fragrance of her perfume made her hand linger on her left breast. She touched the nipple, knowing that it was becoming erect; her fingers spread, opening to support the breast itself, then slid across her throat and lightly caressed her neck, tangling with the chain of her silver crucifix. In that moment she acknowledged the sensation that, since returning to her room, had inexorably been rising within her. Triumph. All else could be set aside. She refused any longer to think.

She put on a fresh shift and returned the bliaut, on its hanger, to its customary place. The profligate expense and the extravagant and calculating indecision that had

brought it into being were distasteful to her memory. In the costly softness of the material, the intricacy of the lace and the exquisite accuracy of the stitching, she saw all the wiles of her mother and aunt in their attempt, their successful attempt, to snare her suitor. In the event they had used not this but the cloth of gold. They had made her wear the colours of the sun, not the moon: yellow and gold, not silver and black. Dazzling: that was the word her aunt had used. Dazzled, gulled, cuckolded, he had duly been.

She would go through with it, of course, but she was not the sun, nor would ever be. She preferred the moon. Its rays drained the world of colour, bleached it, made it stark. Moonlight: the very word was pure and strange. Reflecting and opposing, the sailing moon illuminated or excluded, permitting no grey, condemning equivocation to a black as absolute as the samite of that deceitful robe. The moon's was the innocent light of a land where all would be simple, even Ralf. Ralf who loved her, for whom she had to wear no jewellery but her cross. He had told Imogen nothing, except that she was *very* pretty.

So: he was brave, as well. Were it not for him, her brother would be dead.

Eloise broke out of her reverie. Time was getting on. Her hair would pass muster. She put on a white, collarless shirt and her dark-green velvet robe, pulled a pair of matching slippers on her feet, and from the leather case selected the double-stranded silver necklace she had inherited from her paternal grandmother, the dowager baroness, with whose name, Héloïse, she had also been endowed.

As she was about to leave she remembered the ladybird. The rain was much abated. She would not be returning to

her room before nightfall. If the ladybird were to have a chance of finding safe haven in daylight, she had to release it now.

The windowpanes were vacant, the woodwork, the sill. She looked among the roses in the bowl and lifted the fronds of foliage to search among them, but the ladybird was not there. With an unaccountable sense of foreboding, she unlatched the casement and fastened the hook so that the creature, wherever it was, should have a narrow means of escape.

Finally, with a single, uneasy, backward glance at the rose-bowl, Eloise opened her door and made her way to the great hall, downstairs.

8

'So at Lammastide, as each day,' Father Pickard continued, raising his face so that his voice echoed from the roof-beams, 'we praise God for his everlasting bounty.' From his place by the altar, next to the Lammas loaf, he looked round the congregation. His eyes passed over Ralf and moved on. 'Every day we say the prayer, but how often do we stop to think what it means? "Give us this day our daily bread". In the Garden of Eden, God said to Adam, when he had eaten of the tree of knowledge, "Because you have eaten of that forbidden tree, the ground is cursed for your sake; in sorrow shall you eat of it, all the days of your life; thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to you; and you shall eat the herb of the field; in the sweat of your face shall you eat bread, till you return to the ground; for out of it you were taken: for dust you are, and to dust you shall return."'

Ralf was standing beside his grandfather. Strangely moved by these words, simplified for a simple congregation, Ralf remembered his own days in the harvest-fields, the dust and toil; and he thought of the gravel-hard grain, wrested from a year's labour and care, which could only be eaten when crushed and baked.

'God drove Adam out of the Garden, to work the ground from which he was made, and God placed angels east of the Garden, and a flaming sword that turned every way, lest Adam should try to go back, and eat of the tree of life.'

The priest turned to the Lammas loaf. Smaller than a normal loaf, it was so superbly made that it resembled a wooden sculpture, carved and varnished, perhaps, by a master smith. The honey-coloured twists of its surface were reflecting the light from the stained window, and were in turn reflected by the two great candlesticks of polished brass that stood on either side. The flame at the top of each tall white candle was burning steadily in the drowsily scented, motionless air of the church.

The loaf had been placed on a linen-covered tray occupying the central place on the altar-cloth, under the crucified figure of Christ. Betrayed, scourged, stripped, crowned with thorns, mocked, spat on, nailed to a wooden cross, raised up between thieves, and hanging now in all the sacred majesty of the Passion, he seemed to be gazing on the loaf as if it were the fount of mortal suffering.

What was a communion wafer, if not a piece of bread?

'But what man of us, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? If we then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to our children, how much more will our father in Heaven give good things to those who ask him? On this day we thank God for his precious gift of bread,

and we pray to him for his help with our harvest, in token whereof we make this offering.'

Ralf knew that, after the service, Father Pickard would keep the Lammas tradition. He would take the loaf home and, with butter and cheese and, no doubt, beer, he would pull it apart and eat it. Ralf did not see how this could be a sorrowful act. If bread was to be eaten in sorrow, and God loved his children, why did he feed it to them every day? And why should his children continually have to ask him for more?

Or did the 'bread' of the paternoster simply mean 'food'? But the Latin word was panis, bread. Not esca, or cibus, or cibaria, or edulia, or even alimenta, but panis. 'Panem nostrum quotidianum da nobis hodie': give us today our daily bread. The meaning was unequivocal.

Ralf recalled the reluctance with which Father Pickard had let him read the Vulgate, and as he did so a favourite verse from St Matthew came again to his mind. 'You have heard that it has been said, an eye for an eye.' This referred to words in the Old Testament, in the Book of Leviticus, but immediately after it Jesus had said, 'On the contrary, I tell you not to resist evil.' On the contrary. Autem. The word could mean 'however', or even 'moreover', but there, used repeatedly in that staggering lesson on the Mount, what else had it indicated but contradiction?

With his 'autem' Christ had separated himself from Moses, the New Testament from the Old.

The Bible was inconsistent. If the Old Testament had been superseded by the New, why was it still taught and quoted? Or if the Old Testament was valid, then the gospel was not. If Christ had taken the world's sins on himself, if he had been crucified so that we might live, why should we

continue to eat of his body; and why, east of Eden, should the cherubim and flaming sword still bar the way?

This was a doubt Ralf had had, in various forms, many times. It was plainly wrong, but today's sermon had brought it back. Was bread really a curse, to be eaten in sorrow? Would God disapprove of a mill as lessening his commandment? Did he love his children or not?

While Father Pickard went on preaching, Ralf thought about the stones at Priorsbourne, the saw, the differential, Brother Nicholas and his billspikes. The Church saw nothing wrong with all that. Why, then, should he?

'Let us give thanks to Almighty God.'

The congregation began to stir.

In the safety of that moment Ralf's gaze again turned. Her robe this morning was pure white, cut square at the neck. He was enslaved by the modest and elegant way she stood, walked, moved, carried herself. He ordered himself to look away but could not. A white barbette and fillet covered her head. Her veil was of the thinnest gauze.

He sensed that she might turn in his direction and averted his eyes.

He could not define the change in her demeanour. It was as subtle as her veil. He had not spoken to her for nearly six weeks, since midsummer's day, when they had all sat with the baron in his garden. He had been no nearer to her than a dozen yards; and yet, since Godric's last visit, something had unmistakably happened.

He supposed it had to do with her wedding. From Imogen he had heard details of the betrothal and the planned ceremony. She would be here another fourteen months, longer than he had expected: here to see the finished mill. He had imagined Imogen to be drawing her

closer but he had been mistaken. She was lost to him, more remote than she had ever been. Soon, in the autumn of next year, she would be immured in her high castle by the sea. She might as well have been there already, married, a wife, a mother-to-be.

It was not the Lammas loaf, but that girl in white, who was the fount of all his pain.

'Pater noster, qui es in caelis, sanctificetur nomen tuum.'

As the priest recited the familiar words, Ralf bowed his head and shut his eyes. Instead of the prayer, he could think only of her.

'Et ne nos inducas in tentationem: sed libera nos a malo. Amen.'

'Amen,' came the murmur, including Ralf's.

Father Pickard made the sign of the cross over the loaf. 'In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti. Amen.' He genuflected, crossed himself, dismissed the congregation, and proceeded to the west door, where he would stand, smiling and saying a word here and there, while everyone, once the baron and his daughter had departed, filed past.

* * *

The tender document had been finished and submitted to Mr Caffyn on Thursday. He had been given two identical copies, one for the client and the other for the contractor. Fifteen large plans were accompanied by thirty-two pages of detailed specifications for the mill.

Given the start date, the second of August, work had been scheduled to accommodate the winter months. Digging for the bund would start at once and continue as

the weather allowed. The pen did not in any case need to be finished till next summer.

What did need to be finished as soon as possible was the screen: a curved wall of wooden piling to be erected in front of the site for the mill-house and sea-gates. The screen would be joined at either side to the dike and initially made waterproof. Excavation of the dike could then begin. On the western side, foundations for the mill-house would be laid. Just east of the mill-house would be the culvert, in ashlar, and the wheel. East of that, for a run of twenty-seven feet, the dike would be replaced with an ashlar wall, fenestrated in two places to receive the paired sea-gates.

The shell of the mill-house itself would be built first. This would enable interior work to proceed during the winter; and, though a work-shed would be erected at the very start, the house would also provide Linsell with a site office.

Another shed was required here in the village, for storage and for somewhere to build those components, like the wheel, which were to be fabricated in sections and carted out to the site.

The steward had offered the use of a flint byre, at present empty but for rubbish. This would need fitting out as a workshop. When Linsell's tools, still in their packing-case from Rushton, were taken over there; when the packing-case was opened, when the crowbar raised the first splinter, then the project would truly have begun.

It was the manor's responsibility to build the access track. Work on this was urgent. Linsell had accepted a penalty clause for lateness, but he had also insisted on one from the manor for the track.

Once the mill and its pen were finished the waterproofing could be removed from the screen, though the piling itself would be retained as protection from heavy seas. As presently scheduled, the screen would be opened in the second half of June. Well before the thirty-first of July, completion day, the tide mill would, if all went to plan, be working in time to grind next year's harvest.

Yesterday, Saturday, Mr Caffyn had come to the cottage to tell Linsell that the tender document was acceptable to the manor, and to return the contractor's copy. The two men had sat at the kitchen table, initialling each page of the other's document. Ralf had watched the procedure with growing excitement, scarcely able to believe that, after so much work, the pact between his father and the baron was becoming ratified, formalised: sanctioned with the full weight and permanence of the law.

The contracts could have been signed yesterday too, but the baron, apparently amused by the coincidence, had wanted to sign on Lammas Day itself. Linsell was due at the Hall this afternoon.

Towards the end of the midday meal, the doorward's boy knocked at the open front door. Ralf rose to greet him, since his seat at the table was the nearest.

'Hello, Hubert,' he said. 'How are you?'

'Message from His Lordship,' Hubert said abruptly, his greenish eyes fixed on Ralf's chest. 'His Lordship requests the pleasure of seeing Master Grigg at the none-bell.'

'Yes, he knows already.'

'Also Mistress Grigg, Mr Grigg, Miss Grigg and Mr Farlow.'

'Are you sure of it, Hubert? He said all that?'

Ralf was joined by his mother.

‘Yes, Mr Grigg. His Lordship requests the pleasure of seeing Master Grigg at the none-bell. Also Mistress Grigg, Mr Grigg, Miss Grigg and Mr Farlow.’

Still staring at Ralf’s chest, Hubert stood awaiting the reply. Ralf gave his mother a questioning look: she returned it with one of her own. ‘Please thank His Lordship,’ she said, ‘and tell him we’ll be delighted to come.’

‘Yes, Mrs Grigg.’ With that he hurried along the path and, reaching the gap in the hedge, turned right.

Hubert never got a message wrong. There could be no doubt about it. The whole family had been invited to the Hall, perhaps merely to witness the signing, but, more likely, to get involved in some sort of celebration, not just with the baron but his family, too.

Ralf’s immediate and overwhelming reaction was that he did not want to go. In answer to his mother’s question, he could not tell her why. She told him that he had to attend. Besides, she had already accepted the invitation.

Jacob, however, refused every attempt at persuasion. In his threescore years and ten he had never once sat down with the Seigneur and he was not about to start now. Anna may have accepted on his behalf, but she should have consulted him first. She could make whatever excuses she wanted. He and Edwin and Cebert had been out night-fishing, and he intended to spend *his* Sunday afternoon far more profitably, and precisely as planned: fast asleep.

* * *

Eloise had tried to excuse herself, but her father’s expression had made her relent.

She had never seen him so excited or pleased. He was like a child with a new toy. The tender document was rarely out of his sight. His hand would steal to it and take it up, and he would again leaf through the pages, opening out the plans, turning them sideways if necessary to admire his mill. At first it would be equipped only to grind flour; then, when the profits started to accrue, other apparatus would be installed.

She also had looked at the document. She had studied Ralf's drawings, detailed, complex and imaginative, marked with tiny ciphers she could not understand. Nor could she understand his script. Its neatness exuded the same impersonal charm as his sketches. More than ever, she wished she could read.

By the time the Griggs arrived, Eloise felt ill with worry. She could no longer trust herself to sit or stand close by him or to engage him in polite conversation. Her need had become such that she knew she would give herself away. In church this morning, as last week, she had seen him watching her. Facing forward, from behind her veil she had seen him and confirmed, as if that were necessary, everything Godric had said. During today's paternoster, when her eyes should have been closed and fully downcast, she had also watched. She had seen the unhappy tension in his face, corresponding to her own; and from his tousled, blond and downturned head she had divined that her hopeless prayer and his were just the same.

The contracts had been set out on a table in the hall. Her father was given to whimsy such as this. Beside each contract lay a clean swan's-quill, ready for the central horn of ink. The men would sign standing up.

The two families gathered to watch. Eloise stood between Imogen and Mrs Grigg. Ralf was on her left, at the end, next to Henry and her mother.

Master Grigg took up his quill and dipped it. With cursive strokes he wrote his name while her father made his own signature: fluent, open, unfussy and generous, just like himself. The creaking of the two nibs made her think of ropes, of some heavy strain being taken. The creaking stopped. With the ink still wet, the two men exchanged copies to counter-sign.

She watched her father's hand as the creaking began again. He produced, she supposed, his forename, the possessive and the word *Maepe*. At that instant the other nib became still, was lifted from the page. The ropes had reached their limit. The drawbridge had been raised. The loudness of the silence, its effect in her heart, was like the clang of a portcullis. As surely as if the King himself had done it, her wedding licence had just been signed.

'Splendid!' her father cried, and warmly shook Master Grigg's hand. 'Next year's corn will be ground by the sea!'

The afternoon was sunny. A white cloth had been clipped to the big round table on the terrace. The canvas canopy over the doorway had been opened, and in its shade the table was now being spread with dishes and trays of sweetmeats, dainties and summer fruits. Flagons of mead and cider were placed among them. Eight chairs surrounded the table, pulled back to await the guests. One setting had been removed: Ralf's grandfather was indisposed.

As her father ushered everyone outside, Eloise tried to contrive that she should be seated neither next to nor directly opposite Ralf. From each family there were father

and mother, daughter and son. The sexes should have alternated, the parents on one side of the table, the young people on the other, making a congruence like two gearwheels, but Eloise, even more than the carelessness of the others in taking their seats, disturbed the pattern. She ended up with her back to the lawn, her father on her left and her mother on her right, beyond whom was Ralf. Next to Ralf sat Henry; next to him, facing Eloise, and with her back to the house, was Imogen, next to her father. Mrs Grigg had taken the final place, beside her husband.

Drinks were poured, toasts proposed. Eloise smiled, making herself look at Ralf without seeing him. She picked a tiny pastry from the nearest dish but could barely taste it.

The table slowly fragmented. Her father addressed himself mainly to Master Grigg and his wife, talking about the mill and the workshop to be made of the byre. In their part of the table, Imogen and Henry were talking. Their conversation included Ralf, though he said little.

Henry made infrequent visits home. As the second son, he would remain in the army and make his fortune there. He was a fine, tall young man, twenty-three, dark, broad-shouldered, and much better looking than Godric, or even Gervase, the eldest, who was also a knight in the king's service. As she watched him, Eloise saw his eyes lingering a little too often on Imogen, to whom he had only just been introduced. He was being unusually attentive and amusing. Eloise thought of Godric, who on Monday had gone back to the abbey, and guessed what was passing through Imogen's mind. Seen from here, across this table covered with good things, in the soothing shade of the canopy, Imogen outwent mere prettiness. Without trying, without

wanting to, she was making another conquest: this knight may already have been vanquished.

Vibrant young men such as Henry, and Gervase, would be the first to die at French hands. Eloise had once seen a joust, a mock and ornamental affair. No one had been hurt, but the hauberks and plate armour, the fork-head lances, the shields and morningstars, had all been real. Real clods and tufts of turf had been thrown up by the pounding chargers converging at a gallop in front of the King. She could well imagine the impact of an outstretched lance, a man unhorsed, weighed down by his armour, dispatched with a foreign sword.

Knights would die on the other side too, and not just knights, but footsoldiers in their thousands. In battle, in mud and filth, on castle walls and in sieges, men would be blinded, maimed, burnt, mutilated and starved. Mothers would be bereft of sons, wives of husbands, daughters of fathers. And for what? A treaty that might last a dozen years; or to pave the way to the loss of England.

Eloise suddenly felt deep shame. As if in agreement with her, the sun momentarily went in.

'Have you tried these?' her mother said, offering a plate of small puffs topped with cream and wild strawberries. 'They're delicious.'

Eloise took one.

'You're very quiet today, Eloise.'

'Am I, Mama? I don't mean to be.'

'Would you like to change places with me?'

Before she could reply, Eloise heard Henry speak her name. 'Did you hear, Eloise?'

'Hear what?'

'Imogen wants to put her brother to the test.'

Eloise's father, who had evidently been following the conversation, said, 'It's just as well Godric isn't here. Superstitious nonsense, he calls it. Quite right, too.' He looked at her. 'You know, the sundial thing.'

'A story my mother used to tell,' said Eloise's, and explained the legend to Master and Mrs Grigg.

'Go on, Ralf,' Imogen said. 'We simply have to know.'

'I say the man's a saint,' said Henry, clapping him on the back.

'There speaks the voice of inexperience,' said Master Grigg, at which even Ralf's mother laughed. The general clamour now was that his presumed sainthood should be put to the proof. Ralf, embarrassed and awkward, finally agreed. He pushed back his chair.

'Someone must adjudicate,' said Henry. 'Eloise, you're the nearest.'

Henry could equally well have gone, but she saw that he wanted Imogen to himself. Imogen's chair was hard by the open door to the house: she would have to squeeze past Henry or Master Grigg.

'Do go with him,' Eloise's mother said, still smiling. 'Show him where it is.'

They descended the flight of stone steps, between the lichen-spotted dolphins, came to the lawn, and started walking towards the pond. Ralf was on her left.

'I'm sorry about this,' he said.

'It's not your fault.'

'I didn't even want to come today.'

She did not answer, nor did she choose to acknowledge to herself the admission implicit in these words. Her feeling of terror and suffocation had returned; was growing.

‘There were two Augustines, then,’ he said.

‘Yes. Hundreds of years apart.’

‘Do you believe the legend?’

‘I want to. Do you?’

‘Believe it or want to?’

‘Either.’

‘Yes, I want to believe,’ he said. ‘Though not just in that.’

She was unsure of his meaning. They reached the western tip of the horseshoe-shaped pond. The sundial and its plinth were only moments away, but now the sun went in for the second time. Eloise looked up and saw a dark cloud, edged with brilliant light, slowly drifting east.

By unspoken agreement they sat down on the bench: it would be half a minute before the sun reappeared.

She heard him say, ‘I’ve been thinking about that marsh harrier.’

Her heart was pounding. She risked a glance. He was staring at the plinth. With his next breath he would let slip something they would wish unsaid. Beyond the sundial, surrounding them, the stagnant water of the pond was covered with lily-pads and waxy white blooms. Above these darted fluorescent blue damsel-flies, settling, flying again, singly or locked in pairs; below, unseen, carp and tench nosed between the stems or stirred the softness of the mud. A vivid vision came to her of the battlefield: men slain, or not yet dead; smoke, ruin.

‘Eloise —’

‘Don’t say it, Ralf, I beg you.’ As the sun reappeared the shadow of the plinth, the column, and the sundial itself strengthened on the network of slabs. She looked up, towards the house, and saw the others round the table. ‘We’d better get back.’

This could not go on. It was not fair to him, or even to her. She would have to set him straight but did not know how to begin. Having walked all the way in stunned silence, they regained the terrace.

'Well?' said Henry.

They had forgotten to look at the gnomon. Eloise was herself about to dissemble when Ralf said, as if nothing whatever had happened, 'Imogen's right, I'm afraid, Henry. Her brother's not cut out to be a saint.'

9

Now that he understood why she had ignored him for so long; now that he understood what had passed between them on the dike, in church today, and this afternoon at the Hall; now that he understood the pleading in her eyes as the baron's gathering had come to its end, Ralf was almost more perturbed by his own phlegmatic calm than the certainty that she, who was so beautiful, knew that she was loved and loved him in return.

It was not so much calm as compaction. His mind was flattened as though by a great weight. Sitting on the bench, or indeed on the dike, it should have been simple to have reached for her, but he had had no more freedom of movement than she. They were crushed by the leaden mass of her nobility. For all her father's condescension this afternoon, Ralf knew that he and his family would never be invited to share a table with the baron's friends. Even her aunts had stayed away, and the gathering had ended sooner than might have been predicted from its relaxed and intimate tone. Ralf's father had been aware of this. He

had said nothing, but Ralf by now knew him well enough to judge the words he did not say as much as those he did.

Her betrothal was part of the burden, indivisible from it, and at least as heavy as all the rest put together.

Neither pragmatism nor reason could help him. Trapped among the layers of his mind was his hoard of memories going back as far as their first meeting. Today, across the tablecloth, or walking on the lawn, or, most of all, sitting with her by the pond, he had captured many more. These could not be infinitely compressed, but every time his mind strove upwards the burden bore down with equal force.

To seek relief he threw himself into physical activity. His father protested that he should not be working on a Sunday and that, tomorrow, labourers would arrive. Ralf said what his father could not deny: the labourers would be better used at the site. Once Ralf had changed his clothes and gone to the farm for the loan of a handcart, Linsell began to help him.

Wrapped in one of Jacob's old sails, and placed as close as possible to the rear wall of the privy, the packing-case containing Linsell's tools had been standing in the garden since the end of June. It was exceedingly heavy.

'Leave it, Ralf. We'll do it tomorrow.'

'Just one lift and it's up.'

His father gave him a searching look. 'Are you all right, Son?'

'I want to get started. We've been waiting so long. Since Alincester.'

He said, 'I know what you mean,' and Ralf glimpsed the anger he had till now so successfully concealed. Ralf thought of the muddy road to Rushton, the comfortless room in the sawyer's house, his mother at the quern. A

surge of some powerful, nameless emotion, like gratitude, filled his breast.

Linsell held up a forefinger, enjoining him to further patience, turned, and went into the cottage. Watching him as he stepped inside, Ralf remembered their conversation in the morning darkness, last March, once they had crossed the white-railed bridge. He had told his father about the ruined mill and the Molarius, about the licence and the tithe. The money went to the Church, Godric had said: to Bishop William, to the diocesan panel and the beadle.

A moment later Linsell emerged with Jacob, who, a little while ago, had come downstairs from his bed.

'Don't strain yourself, Dad,' Linsell said, as the three of them crouched down, each to take a corner. 'Just drop it if it's too much.'

'What? I could lift this little thing on me own. Why didn't you two ninnies tell me you wanted it shifted?'

'Ready? Up!'

Pulling his fingers away at the last instant to prevent them from being trapped, Ralf saw the bed of the cart take the weight of the tools. The wheels bit into the gravelly soil of the path.

'Want a hand with shoving it?' Jacob said.

'We'll manage. Thanks.'

Jacob, the job done, nodded and went back inside.

* * *

The old byre allotted to them by Mr Caffyn stood in the pasture by the staith-track, a hundred yards east of the farmhouse and within sight of the Hall. It had once provided shelter for twenty cows, but in the days of the

fifth baron a new milking-parlour had been built adjoining the farmyard. Unlike the three in the marsh, this byre had fallen into disuse. It was used now only as a 'glory-hole', as the bailiff had termed it, showing Ralf and Linsell the wooden stalls, most of which were full of rubbish. 'Them partitions can all come out,' he had said. 'Do what you like.' Once a few tiles had been replaced, the roof would be sound, even if it did sag; and the big double doors needed only a new set of hinges, a bit of patching, and to be rehung. The rent was a halfpenny a week, deductible from the payments on account.

Among the clutter in the stalls were some serviceable or salvageable things that the manor wanted retained. The rest would be thrown on the farmyard midden or burned, either straight away or later, at the Hallowmas bonfire. Linsell had undertaken to sort the contents into four categories: obviously keep, obviously discard, keep for Hallowmas, and decide.

Having helped push the rumbling cart past the village green and Hall, two or three hundred feet down the staith-track, and through the pasture gate, he helped guide the packing-case to the dirty stone floor while Ralf raised the handles to tip the cart-bed. They had chosen the place where the roof-tiles above were most continuous.

'I'm not sorry to get this lot under cover,' Linsell said.

'Shall we open the case?'

'We've got no wrecking-bar.' He glanced negligently along the stalls. 'Got everything else, by the look of it. Why d'you think they kept all this stuff?'

Ralf shrugged. The understandable parsimony of the serfs had evidently infected the bailiff, who managed the farm.

‘We’ll open the tools first thing,’ said Linsell. ‘What about the barrow? Do they want it back tonight?’

‘I’ve got it for the week.’

‘Let’s go, then.’

‘I think I’ll stay on for a bit. Make a start.’

Linsell again subjected him to a searching look. ‘It’s the sabbath, Ralf. We shouldn’t really have moved the tools.’

‘I won’t be long. The vesper bell.’

His father grunted. ‘You’ll be in by dark, I know that.’

As soon as he had gone, Ralf was free to resume his thoughts of Eloise. He needed time alone. He still could not believe what had happened. But the next step, if there was one, was as tangled and complicated as the contents of this first stall. He tugged at a weathered batten of wood, tossed it towards the doorway, and extricated a bundle of worm-eaten bean-poles. Some broke as he pulled them out. Clambering over the pile, ascending nearer to the thickest cobwebs of this province in the kingdom of the spiders, Ralf began hurling out rusted buckets, pots, the broken head of a rake, a bent ploughshare, another, yet another, a bulky thing that turned out to be a mildewed scarecrow, a bundle of rotted rope. As he threw them, he directed long objects, such as this hoe, with a final, cantilevered push: sometimes, but more often not, trying to achieve accuracy in where they landed. The four indistinct heaps began to grow.

He was thinking of the horseshoe pond and the white lilies with their yellow stamens. Their flowering season was nearing its end. Many of the petals had fallen, leaving in place of the flower a single spherical green fruit.

There were water-lilies, both white and yellow, in the Great Marsh, in some of the purest freshwater rhines near

the road. The floating leaves, wavy at the edges, circular but for a single split, made platforms for dragonflies. The dragonflies belonged to the Seigneur, the leaves, the flowers and every fruit. His pond was a piece snipped from the marsh. It enclosed the stone bench just as the manor enclosed the Hall, just as he himself enclosed Eloise.

The first stall had emptied. There was no next step. She would be married next year. He should not have begun to say what he had. She had been right to stop him.

Ralf went to the heaps in the doorway and started going to and fro in the early evening sunshine, carrying the unwanted objects outside. Wood for the bonfire he stacked against the wall. The rest he formed into a pile. Some of the cattle were watching him incuriously. Most went on as before, tearing up grass and munching it. One raised its tail and expelled a loud, untidy stream of steaming urine.

He felt a midge on his neck and slapped it.

There was a glimpse of yellow, movement, on the other side of the hedge. Someone was passing along the staith-track. Eloise.

She reached the gateway and raised the latch. Keeping by the post to avoid the worst of the mud, she entered the field and resolutely crossed the remaining yards to the doorway of the byre.

He had brought this on himself.

She had changed her clothes yet again. This afternoon's pale-blue had given way to a yoked dress in fine linen, grey and yellow. Instead of slippers, there were calf-boots on her feet.

In a firm voice he had never heard before, she said, 'I must talk to you.'

He wanted to tell her that he already understood. Then, perhaps, he would be rid of the pain of seeing her like this. She could go straight back to the Hall and compromise herself no further; and he could deny the suspicion that he had been half hoping that she, alerted by the rumble of the cart, had come to a window and seen his father and himself going by, had subsequently seen his father leave, and had then watched him working or heard, while he had been throwing objects towards the door, the clattering he had made.

Were it not for the determination in her expression, he would have said she was extremely agitated. Without speaking, she walked past him and through the doorway. She, at least, did not want to be seen from the Hall.

Ralf followed.

She turned to face him, in front of the case of tools.

'I'm sorry,' he said.

'You know why I've come, then.'

'Yes.'

Her expression softened. 'You're a sweet boy, Ralf. Don't think I'm not flattered.'

Ralf wondered how a dog felt, once it had been whipped.

'I must obey my father. Has Imogen told you —?'

'I understand.'

'You don't. He once said to me, "None of us is free. Only God. Only God is free."'

Suddenly, he was tired. He became aware of the accumulated dust and grime on his hands and clothes. Probably there were cobwebs in his hair; or bits of straw. His delusions fell away. A few words of Latin did not make a gentleman. He was a rustic, a Saxon scarecrow, quite unchanged: a hauler of crab-pots and sweeper of sawdust.

Her face softened even more. She said, ‘Do you forgive me?’

Even now, some of the dust he had raised was still hanging in the shafts of sunshine let in by missing tiles. The wind had dropped, there was no movement in the air, and yet the motes were drifting as if there were.

He looked at her, into her eyes. Earlier, while working, he had wished for an invasion or earthquake, for any disaster that would overturn the order of things. Now it had happened, but it was not the world, but himself, that had been overturned. The dust had yet to settle. She remained. He had been lost.

‘Please answer me, Ralf.’

He must have taken a step forward, or even two, because she tried to shrink away. Her retreat was unexpectedly blocked by the packing-case. She registered no surprise. It was as though she had moved back only to encourage him forward. This close to her, he saw ambiguity in her eyes, contradiction, the enigma of the feminine. She was like the sea. The tides, the waves themselves, advanced only to retreat and retreated only to advance. Breaking on the shingle, the tumbling water drew back on itself, both augmenting and discouraging the following surge.

‘What are you doing?’

There was no going back. She was both sea and beach. The long, long fetch of his ocean comber, conceived far away on another shore, deepening with the moon and wind, was ending its last mile, growing unstable as the seabed rose. As his two hands found hers he could feel the calming breath of land on his cheek, but her perfume, exhaled from her very substance, steadily more intoxicating, undermined him into further recklessness.

Her eyes, her lips, were suffuse with permission; and yet she resisted. The obdurate gap between his face and hers was being maintained by nothing more than an aristocratic effort of will. But even this was deceptive, the reef between will and willing, and he sensed rather than saw her slight but sure accommodation, the accepting change in angle, that would entice his mouth to merge with hers. At the last moment her eyes closed as if in expectation of bliss; and it began.

The wave, their finally conjoined flesh, dissolved in a warm, smooth rapture which subsided only to be renewed with greater force, and yet a greater, all along the shore. They were joined in a language of light. It flooded like the saltings as they filled, drowning doubt. The difference between them was dispelled. The man, the woman, the land and sea, became sky.

The sweet, tactile pressure of her lips on his reduced, lingered, and was gone. She buried her face in his shoulder and clung to him even more tightly. Still lost in her perfume, he nuzzled her earlobe and neck. Her hair smelled of rosemary. Her clothing had been newly laundered. And, incredibly, she was in his arms.

'Ralf,' she said. 'Oh, Ralf, we mustn't.'

These words, and the wetness of her tight-shut eyelashes, allowed the weight to reassert itself. The beating he would receive, his punishment for this kiss, would be fully in proportion.

Eloise had descended to this territory of the serfs, the cow-house, and for love had accepted him among the debris of the farm. She was not Mary Ibbott. Her resistance and now her despair belonged to the oppressive mountain of her life. Behind her lay her father, the court, the

monarch: all the power of the throne. The avalanche would carry her forward, rolling over Ralf, and leave him crushed.

But this was not entirely a cow-house. He had started to transform it into a workshop. And it had been their kiss, that other wrecking-bar, that had broached the case of his father's tools. The project had begun.

Set against the Crown, it counted for nothing, but it was all he had.

They drew apart.

'I love my father,' she said. 'I'd never hurt him.'

'Nor would I.'

He thought of him as he had been this afternoon, happily presiding at his canopied feast, and felt guilty. Ralf saw that he himself loved the baron, in his fashion, much as he loved Father Pickard, despite the diocese.

He said, 'You ought to go.'

At any minute the cowman might cross the field to halloo his herd to milking.

She was watching him as if they would never meet again. Just as his father had done, Ralf raised a forefinger; but, instead of prescribing patience, he held it to his lips and gave her what he could of an encouraging smile.

'My lovely Ralf,' she said, in tears.

'Go.'

She moved past him, touching his hand, and he stood and watched her leave.

* * *

August and September saw the main autumn passage of the wading birds. Each day new migrants poured into Mape, swelling the numbers at the lagoons, on the grazing,

on exposed mud by the reeds, and above all in the estuary. Thousands would stay for the winter; the rest would pass on. At the ebb, feeding busily, they spread far across the mudflats, by day or night. They lived to the rhythm of the tides, and as the water rose they sought out secluded places to roost: on islands, in the higher saltings and grass-marsh, and among the shingle-ridges of the beach. At the flood, aerial flocks of knot and dunlin fumed across the harbour. Each flock was like a single entity, hissing as it passed, swirling in unison so that it was one moment dark, showing backs, and the next white, showing bellies and underwings.

The waders brought the harbour alive. Curlews, whimbrels, godwits, stints: there were far more kinds than Ralf could identify. Their voices, all different, spoke of desolate places and the journey yet to come. He had always liked the evocative call of the greenshank, a ringing *tew-tew-tew* that carried for half a mile or more. August was the time of most greenshanks, twenty or thirty, and it was their cry that became, for him, the signature of the mill.

Barges brought many of the things the workmen needed. From Rushton came wheelbarrows, billhooks, baskets, picks, shovels, and timber for the shed. From the quarries at Maidstone, via the Medway, came a thousand tons of Kentish rag which were dumped on the foreshore, ready to be hauled or carried across the dike.

From Southampton, by horse, came Mr Ryle, to make tests on the soil and advise on the composition of the bund. Its line was to cross the adjoining lagoon. Some of the ragstone would first be used to divide the lagoon and allow the eastern part to dry out. The bund itself was to be made of soil from the pen base, with added chalk and clay and an

expansion core of crushed bracken. As the bund proceeded, its inner face would be proofed with ragstone and flint rubble, sealed with lime mortar.

The reeds in the pen were harvested. The scrub was cut down and burned, making smoke that drifted across the harbour like flocks of knot, leaving a wasteland of mud and roots. The roots were levered up and added to the fire. Linsell set a target, a piece of board, on the north-trending dike. One of the baron's foresters arrived with his bow. With the thinnest twine tied to his arrow, he shot the course of the bund to the far side of the lagoon. The hauling of rock, by men and horses, began; and with it the digging.

Each man was to be paid a penny a day. Any who worked four days was paid for five. At first it was not always possible to find twenty diggers. The manor was building the access track, in chalk, and the harvest overrode all else, but as time passed and word spread it became necessary to turn men away. More barrows were bought and the force was increased to thirty. Ralf devised a schedule showing who would work when. It quickly became filled to the end of November and beyond. Some diggers from outside Mape found lodgings in the cottages. For the others a camp was set up on the village green.

In the second week of August two more barges arrived from Rushton, bringing a cargo of scorched and tarred spruce-trunks for the piling. The next day another barge appeared, also black, bigger than any that had come before. It carried a team of men from Portsmouth and their marine pile-driver. The shears, a tripod of spruce sixty feet high, were fitted with a complex pulley and a chain-drawn cylinder of rock encased in steel. Blow by blow, between

the tides, this hammered the piles into the foreshore along the curved line of the screen.

The yells of the ganger, the brawn and unity of the haulers, the daring and boldness of the rigger who, without a second's thought, would climb up to free a tangled chain: these combined to exercise in Ralf a peculiar and deep-seated pull. He would watch, when he could, the cylinder slowly rise. It would hang tightly against the block, awaiting the ganger's warning shout. The release would be thrown; with a flailing of chains the cylinder would fall, striking the flat face of the waiting pile; and, constrained by the ring-guide, the unimaginable power of the impact would be transmitted down the trunk and into the mud and stones. This was engineering in action, and he was enthralled.

He had found his vocation. To the greenshank's cry, he worked in any weather, from first light to dusk, not caring what he did or how dirty he got. Often, wearing no more than his linen braies, he would become covered in mud. At high tide even his braies would be discarded when he and the other men leapt into the water to clean off.

They deferred to him. He was the master's son, and his thoughts were his own, but still he found a form of comradeship with them.

Under the August sun his skin turned brown. Sometimes he surprised himself with his own strength. And, in every moment of the day, he was possessed by Eloise.

From Imogen he learned that the baron's petition had been received and was awaiting the royal consent. Ralf was made to listen in church as the banns were read. Soon the sanction would be granted and the betrothal would become binding. Any who violated it would be committing an act

of treason. Death was the penalty: beheading for a noble, and hanging, drawing and quartering for a commoner.

He saw her only at church. She never looked his way. Week by week she retreated further, and with each retreat his carapace of resignation grew thicker and heavier.

But beneath it Ralf was on fire. His former petty trials were forgotten. Only rarely had he known passion in himself: at Alincester, when the workshop had failed; in the seablite, when he had started his run towards Godric; and, perhaps, in his short-lived fury with Aholiab Peake. Those disorders had been nothing. The further she retreated, the more intensely his torment burned, feeding on itself, feeding on him. His scruples for the baron and propriety were driven to higher and higher ground. When nowhere was left for them, they too went up in flames. At bedtime, exhausted by his labours at the site, he would fall instantly asleep, both fearing and longing for his dreams. Once, they had been largely chaste. No more. The background, the setting, was always the mill: the mud, the greenshanks, the burning roots. The shears became an engine of siege, or decapitation, and piecemeal, hour by hour, they were building the barrier that would for ever keep him from her.

In daylight he saw the prosaic line of piling finished. The spruce trunks were set a hand's-length apart and would stand three feet above the highest spring. To them were nailed overlapping sheets of heavy canvas. Tarred sandbags were heaped against the canvas and confined in a stout net of tarred rope. By the end of the first week of September, Linsell had satisfied himself that the screen was watertight and the pilers were released.

The dike opposite the screen was widened, reinforced, and dug out for the foundations of the house. These were formed of flint-rubble and mortar, faced with re-used granite on the outer slope. Into them were sunk pillars of oak, tenoned into heavy oak sills, two feet deep, mortised in turn to take vertical studs. At the level of the first floor, and then the second, the studs were tenoned into horizontal bressummers that carried the floor-joists. The uppermost studs were tenoned into horizontal wall-plates that carried the lower end of the rafters. There were twenty-three pairs of rafters, supported by graceful tiebeams and principals arranged to transmit the weight of the roof not only through the studs to the ground below, but also, in proportion to its size and strength, to every joint of the frame itself. The roof had been given a single dormer facing north, and half hipped gables at east and west to provide more storage space.

From sills to roof-ridge the mill was thirty-nine feet high. At this alarming elevation, with a new perspective on the landscape, the harbour and the sea, Ralf worked beside his father and four other carpenters, on ladders, in slings, or sitting astride beams, dowelling joints or nailing riven oak spars along the rafters, for the thatch. Up here the breeze was stronger, the air even more clean. The autumn was on its way.

Midway through this process, towards the end of September, Godric, with his father, paid another visit to the site. Like Ralf, they thought the proportions of the skeleton mill-house harmonious. Godric returned to the abbey without so much as Ralf having, through his presence, laid eyes on Eloise.

All that month, Ralf had been anticipating its twenty-ninth day, the feast of the archangels, Michael, Gabriel and Raphael. Michaelmas, the third quarter-day of the Christian year, was celebrated with a banquet in the Long Barn for everyone in Mape. She was not there. Nor was she watching the procession of children that snaked round the green. The leading child was a boy of nine, dressed in white and bearing a painted wooden sword in commemoration of the passage in Jude where Michael contends with Satan for the body of Moses. The procession started at the Hall and ended at the church. And even there, throughout the concert of harp music and plainchant, throughout the hymns, throughout the unheard sermon on the Book of Jude, Eloise did not once look in Ralf's direction. Her aunts and mother surrounded her like a bodyguard. Though the day was fine, they all left directly after the service.

Alone, he went to the workshop. This was where he had kissed her on Lammas Day. Like a fool he had acquiesced and let her leave. If a serf ran off and could evade his owner for a year and a day he would be free. Without money it was not easy. Very few ever tried it; even fewer succeeded. But it was possible. A serf could do it, and so could they, but for them the limit would not apply. They would have to run away for ever.

Ralf took up his smoothing plane and adjusted the blade. Though this was a holiday, all he wanted to do was work. He knew it was irrational; he knew the mill had nothing to do with her, but work was the only thing that gave him ease. As the afternoon yielded to an early autumn dusk, he poured all his heart and skill into every stroke. The whisper-thin shavings curled up from the throat of his

plane and fell away to the workshop floor. He was making the jambs of a window-frame. This one was to go in the dormer, overlooking the lagoons.

He lit the lamps. As he opened his vice with a whirl of the screw, Ralf admitted to himself what he had denied till now. Part of him was coming to resent her.

Forgetting how, at every turn, he himself had behaved, he blamed her for his pain. Today her withdrawal no longer seemed heroic, but a venal act of indifference, or even cruelty. This work, building this monument to a mythical Eloise, was finite. One day soon there would be no more of it. The mill would be complete. Soon after that, she herself would be gone. She would vanish into the world of privilege and he would be forgotten.

The next afternoon a barge from Rushton brought the weatherboards for cladding the walls. In the days following, working from the ground upward, Ralf and the others steadily covered the frame, using lost-head brads alternately toed at thirty degrees. Linsell insisted on standardising the interval between each course of wood, providing each pair of men with a five-inch gauge. Ralf soon saw the reason for it: the parallel shadows of the overlapping boards made a pattern. The higher the boards climbed up the face of the mill, the more regular and pleasing the pattern became.

The whole building was pleasing, apt, right for its location and purpose. Even after his years at Rushton, Ralf had not understood quite how deep his father's talent and knowledge ran.

The thatchers arrived, four middle-aged freemen who included a pair of twins. Most of the thatch in Mape and the surrounding manors was their work, marked by a fluid

style in the finish of ridges, dormers and gables. Long ago, they had re-roofed Jacob's cottage. They worked in nothing but reed, the best material, producing roofs that might last a hundred years.

Linsell wanted a simple design, with a plain ridge which was to be finished in sedge. While the thatchers applied their bundles and wielded their rakes, knives and leggetts, the carpenters laid the floors in the house below. The underside of the thatch was coated with lime plaster, to reduce the risk of fire. The shutters were fitted, and then the three external doors, and the house became weatherproof.

It had three floors, not counting the shallow basement void. Under the rafters was the granary floor, where grain would be kept ready for grinding. Below that was the stone floor, for the millstones. On the ground floor would be the meal-bin and the frame for the gears. Descending even lower was the pit for the pitwheel, the first cog, to be driven directly by the axle of the waterwheel.

The largest of the rooms on the ground floor would be set aside for later use: the manor was planning a lathe. Its power would be provided by a secondary layshaft, belt driven. Another, small, room served as a porch.

The stone floor comprised two rooms. The smaller, at the west, would be used for storing sacks and tools. On the eastern side would be the hurst housing the millstones and the millstone crane which would allow the runner to be swung aside or removed for cleaning and maintenance. A sack-flap – a trapdoor with paired, upward-opening flaps – would allow the flour to be brought up from the meal-room below, using a hoist driven by the wheel.

The granary was served by an external door opening under a salient beam that overhung the dike on the village side. Using a second hoist, wagons would be unloaded here. The finished sacks would be removed from a corresponding door below. Besides the granary, there was on this floor a second room, with its dormer window overlooking the lagoons, which would accommodate the miller and his assistant: their hours of work would be determined by the tide.

October remained largely dry. The diggers made steady progress throughout the month. By dusk on Saturday the thirtieth, about fifty yards of embankment had been raised. Of those, half had been proofed. Work there was ahead of schedule.

The men returned to the village through the gathering dark. The access track was finished now. The fresh, glaring chalk of its surface ran beside the dike all the way to the two-hundred-acre field, where the existing, zigzag, track had been widened to take big wagons, its corners smoothed. Those serfs with reduced strips had grumbled so much that the manor had offered payment or the exchange of these for demesne strips elsewhere. For reasons of sentiment as much as the improvements they had made to the soil, most of the serfs had settled for the money.

The air felt damp and chilly. It was over. She had gone from him. The mill-house had been built. She had not even waited for the machinery.

Walking on chalk beside his father, Ralf thought the track underfoot so white that it seemed they were walking on hard-packed snow.

10

Like Lammas, the Christian observance of All Saints or Hallowmas had been adapted and rendered harmless from an older festival. For the English now, the first of November was the day when the souls of departed saints were remembered. Hundreds of years earlier it had marked New Year's Eve, Samhain, the pagan Feast of the Dead.

That was the time of the final harvest, when surplus beasts were slaughtered and laid down to salt. The Sun God, becoming feeble, was descending into his time of greatest mystery. Samhain opposed and counterbalanced Beltane, Mayday, the spring rite of fertility. It fell at the hinge of the year, belonging neither to the old nor the new, when order became chaos and re-formed. The ancient shamans had then felt closest to the divine, seen their most transcendent visions and made their most accurate predictions. The sacred burial mounds had been opened to welcome the return of the dead; to light their way huge beacons had been torched. They had consumed the debris of the year, the past itself. The heat and flame had also held back the oncoming winter, an act of human defiance in the face of the gods. In even earlier times the slaughter had not ended at beasts.

Wisely, the church elders had not forbidden the lighting of beacons. Every year at Hallowmas, bonfires – the original word was 'bonefires' – still burned on village greens.

Mape's fire was made at the eastern end of the green. Supervised by the bailiff, it was assembled over a period of at least two months, a mountain of fuel heaped around a low framework of timber. Besides scrap, driftwood, hedge-

cuttings and poplar brashings, the Hallowmas fire devoured anything combustible which the villagers wished to be rid of and which would not do for a domestic hearth: leaky barrels, soiled straw and thatch, sometimes an old shallop or punt, broken ladders, and even verminous clothes, which were thrust into the middle of the heap with long sticks.

No captives were consigned to the flames. Instead the children warmed their hands and roasted chestnuts in the ashes. The seers' drugged trances had been replaced with harmless games of future-telling. The young girls of the village placed hazelnuts at the edge of the fire, each one named for a potential suitor. As the nutshells grew hot the traditional chant was heard: 'If you love me, pop and fly; if you hate me, burn and die.'

Eloise knew these words, though even in childhood she had never sung them herself. Once the fire got going, she and her family would emerge to mingle with the crowds on the green. It was the custom for the manor to provide food: hot, unleavened bread with butter and honey, baked apples and three or four roebucks. These last would be roasted at the Hall, basted with a sauce of reduced red wine and capers, sliced, and served to the revellers from broad trenchers.

'Do have some,' said her Aunt Béatrice, who had just eaten a piece. 'It's very good this year.'

Eloise obeyed, taking the smallest morsel she could find. Leaning forward to protect the material of her pelisse, she put it in her mouth.

They moved away from the food table and stood among those watching the dancing. To the ragged music of two pipes and a drum, and brightly lit by the fire, nine or ten

couples were attempting a circular manoeuvre. Few of them seemed to know what to do. There was much laughter, especially from the spectators. The dance broke down only to be started again.

Having reached the logs at its centre, the fire had taken on a life of its own. The flames were reaching ever further into the clear November sky, sending up crackling sparks as if to make new stars. In the east, over the Hall, hung a sliver of moon, its horns to the left. Above the sparks, above the squirming billows of underlit smoke, the sky was perfectly black.

Eloise did not want to get any nearer the firelight than this. She was afraid of encountering Ralf. For the same reason she had not attended the Michaelmas banquet.

The wedding was almost a year off. She knew she could not hide herself till then, so this evening she had agreed to accompany her aunt to the green. Their presence was expected, though she was already wondering how soon she could reasonably withdraw. There were at least two hours to go before dinner: the bonfire had been started at dusk.

The taste of Hallowmas venison brought back other childhood memories, none particularly happy, but Eloise already felt subdued. The royal sanction had arrived on Thursday.

It was inscribed on vellum, the first letter illuminated, and bore the careless signature of the King. Below that, hanging from a red ribbon at the left-hand corner, the royal seal had been precisely impressed in matching wax. The document had been brought by a royal bearer and handed with due ceremony to the baron, from whom a receipt, just as elaborate, had been exacted.

The words were in Latin. Her father had translated them for her. She could no longer recall more than a few fragments. 'Concerning a petition laid before us … be it known by all men … that the betrothal of Robert, knight, firstborn son of our most loyal vassal and kinsman, Hugo Ingram, the Duke of Kent … is hereby in the sight of Almighty God sanctioned and approved … given under our hand this twenty-fifth day of October in the Year of Christ, 1258 … Henry, by the grace of God king of England, Lord of Ireland, Duke of Normandy and Aquitaine, Count of Anjou …'

Since her introduction to Robert Ingram in March no subsequent meeting had been arranged. It would serve no purpose and might cause awkwardness or difficulty. This was the usual practice. The next time she saw him she would be joining him at the altar.

She was being coached in every aspect of the family into which she would marry: their genealogy, the deeds and exploits of their most famous sons, their titles and honours, their estates in Kent and elsewhere, the splendour of their houses in London and Oxford. She was being schooled in the nuances of etiquette when dealing with the family and the court, both as the wife of Robert Ingram and later as the Duchess of Kent. Aunt Matilde, a widow, had lately taken her aside and informed her in graphic terms of her conjugal duties, which, in sum, comprised pleasing her husband in any way he commanded. That might include submitting to the king or one of the princes.

All this Eloise had accepted with outward stoicism. She was by nature undemonstrative and was learning to keep her feelings not just hidden but secret.

Three days ago, on Friday, her parents had left for the London court. Her sister-aunts, Mildred and Matilde, had accompanied the third sister, her mother, leaving only Aunt Béatrice. Even Godric was away.

Béatrice was her father's younger sister, neither as haughty as Matilde nor as vapid as Mildred. 'Shall we wander a little?' she said. 'Make ourselves seen?'

'No, Aunt, I think I'll go back. I'm not feeling well.'

'What's the matter?'

'I don't know.'

Her aunt spoke close to her ear. 'Is it your time?'

'No, it's not that. Not for five days yet.'

'Are you so regular, then? We ought to stay longer. They'll take it amiss if we don't.'

From the darkness Imogen appeared, with Isolda. 'Good blaze, isn't it?' she said, once they had acknowledged Aunt Béatrice.

'One of the best,' said Eloise, wondering whether Imogen had reconsidered the proposal made by Isolda's elder brother, Bernard.

'Have you seen Ralf?'

'No, I don't think we have.'

'We can't find him anywhere. He's not at home. Isolda wants to dance with him.'

'Imogen, I don't!'

'You do. Well, I want you to dance with him and that's almost the same. Better, really.'

Aunt Béatrice was following the conversation with an amused expression. She liked Imogen's vivacity; had told Eloise so.

While not obviously attractive, Isolda would have appeal for men. Her dissent had been unconvincing. Eloise, as she

made herself smile too, discovered that she was not yet immune to jealousy. Ralf was probably at the byre, the workshop. She had sometimes seen him going there. He would stay long after dark.

Not mentioning the workshop, Eloise added her suggestions to Imogen's speculations on her brother's whereabouts.

Isolda was unsuitable. She was not good enough. Imogen, too open, had misjudged; but this was just the beginning of a long process in which she, with the best intentions, would offer help to her brother in finding a mate.

The two girls set off in quest of their prey.

'I want to go back now,' Eloise told her aunt.

'As you wish. But I must just greet the steward's wife.'

Before Eloise could prevent it, she had started towards the Caffyns, who, together with other members of the household, were also watching the dance.

Eloise considered walking home on her own. Her aunt would be annoyed, but what of it? It was her duty to play the chaperone and in that she had already failed. Compared with the duty that held Eloise in its grip, her aunt's was trivial indeed. She deserved to be made unhappy, to feel guilt, to taste a grain of the bitters that, thanks in part to her, had come to flavour every minute of her niece's life. Eloise watched her talking to Mrs Caffyn and was on the point of deciding to leave.

She felt a touch at her elbow.

'I must see you again,' Ralf said.

His expression and tone of voice were not just urgent, but desperate, made even more ghastly by the flames.

‘Eloise, it’s been three months. You’re driving me mad. —’

‘Stop it.’

His grasp on her elbow tightened.

‘You’re hurting me.’

He released her at once. ‘Meet me somewhere.’

‘I won’t. I can’t.’

‘At the Three Sisters. I’m going there now.’

‘My aunt’s coming back.’

‘I’ll be waiting.’

Eloise had no chance to compose herself. Aunt Béatrice said, ‘Who was that you were talking to?’

‘Imogen’s brother, Ralf. She’s still looking for him.’

‘Such a polite, industrious young man,’ Béatrice said. ‘Good-looking, too.’

‘If you say so, Aunt.’

‘What, don’t you agree?’

‘Yes, I think he’s very good-looking. I’m sure Isolda’s swooning.’

‘You can’t blame her. I wouldn’t mind being twenty years younger myself. Have you been out to the mill?’

‘Not yet.’

‘We must go. Tomorrow, if it stays fine. Ask Imogen. Then he can show us round.’

Eloise did not reply.

‘Are you still feeling unwell?’

She knew that she should say she was. She pictured herself walking back to the Hall with her aunt, then sitting with her at table while the servants brought the food. She foresaw the long and tedious evening, culminating in the moment when she could shut her door and be alone. She

would kneel, as always, to her prayers. After that she would go to bed.

I must see you again.

The Three Sisters were a trio of oak trees at the other end of the green, near Ralf's house. They were divided now from the bonfire by the workmen's tents. At their base stood a bench. One day last summer she and Imogen had examined it. Over the years, the weathered surface had been covered in carvings by village boys. Most were harmless; one or two had been vigorously effaced.

She had felt uncomfortable there. The bench was a place for assignations. In his choice of meeting-place Ralf could not have made it easier for her mentally to break with him once and for all.

Eloise imagined him sitting there in the dark, waiting in vain.

'Thank you, Aunt, I'm feeling a little better.'

'Shall we stay longer?'

'A few minutes, if you wish.'

At Lammas, in the way he had let her go, she had known that he understood. He knew the penalty as well as she did. But tonight he was different. That grip on her elbow had arisen from something raw and disturbing, like the vanished carvings on the bench. She recognised it in herself. It had informed their kiss: her first, but not his.

On that August night, the sheets against her skin, she had wondered what else he knew. Since then her abominable lecture from Aunt Matilde had at last made her understand her place. She had no cause to look down on Mary Ibbott.

It's been three months. You're driving me mad.

In a growing ferment of indecision, she walked beside her aunt. All she wanted, all she had wanted during those three months, and for years before, was to be with Ralf. That was impossible. She would have to end it, as she had tried to do on Lammas Day. But that meant seeing him again, talking to him, risking the same result. It would not do. And she had already told him as much.

Later, she realised that it had been the sanction itself, as much as his words, that had made her let Béatrice walk her towards the Caffyns, and from there to other gatherings which needed to be acknowledged and smiled at, nearer to and further from the flames, until, among the confusing shadows of the spectators, her aunt's face was fully averted in conversation and, on impulse, Eloise seized that moment to detach herself and move away.

She guiltily raised her hood. The music and hubbub of voices grew quieter as she found a course through the edges of the crowd. She came to the dimness of the road on the northern side of the green. From there, having turned left, she started towards the three oak trees.

At this distance from the fire there was little but starlight to guide her steps. Feeble glows showed here and there in the cottages to her right. Opposite them, on the green, the vague forms of the workmen's tents passed her by.

The oaks had yet to lose the bulk of their leaves. The three trees were as one, their intermingled branches forming a single overtowering darkness, in antithesis to the fire: not sending up but drawing down the sky, down and through the trio of trunks, more and more of it as she drew near.

'Eloise?'

Her eyes had grown more accustomed to the night. She made out a faint silhouette rising from the bench and moving towards her. She was expecting a touch, or even an embrace, but neither came.

'You mustn't talk to me,' she said. 'I don't need to say why. Forget me.'

'I'd rather be dead.'

'Don't. It's finished. It never even started.'

'Then what are you doing here?'

'I came to tell you to leave me alone.'

'When can we be together?'

'Never. I'm betrothed. By permission of the King. Can't you understand? Even this is treason.'

'I thought we could meet at the workshop, but that's too close to the Hall. They'd see the lamp. It's got to be the mill. That's the only place.'

'Did you hear what I said? I'm not going to meet you anywhere. Ever.'

'Come to the mill, when everyone's asleep.'

'I'm leaving now. Don't try to approach me again.'

'I'll be waiting for you. All night.'

'I won't come.'

'You will.'

'Goodbye, Ralf.'

She walked away, towards the fire, more distressed than she had believed possible, even after the past few months. It really was finished. She had uttered the words to dispatch him at last. Here was the end to her silly dreams. Here was the launching of her adult life. Under those trees, under those branches that must have overheard so much, she had finally grown up.

When she was sufficiently recovered, Eloise approached the flames and allowed herself to be found. 'There you are,' Aunt Béatrice said, her anger plainly tempered with relief. 'Where on earth have you been?'

For the first time in many years, Eloise told a serious and premeditated lie.

* * *

That night she could not sleep. She lay listening to the owls. There were two, one in the churchyard and another in the garden, their shrieks and moaning hoots deadened by the shutter, the glass and the lined holland drapes.

The smell of the bonfire was penetrating all those barriers, though slightly. There was just enough wind to make the smoke drift.

The green was not visible from here. The flames would by now have died to a glow, flaring now and then as they took hold of a twig from the corona of unburned stuff surrounding the embers. In the morning men would come with pitchforks and heap it all up. The fire would go on for days, even in rain, leaving a great mound of ash that would be requisitioned by the groundsmen for the kitchen garden. Even after that, the Hallowmas fire lived on as a circle of burnt and barren soil, eight or ten feet across, where the grass hardly had a chance to regrow.

Eloise opened her eyes in the darkness.

Since Lammas Day she had relived their kiss so many times that it no longer seemed real. Her memory had bleached its substance away. What had happened had become confused with the rest: with her most private

fantasies. Before Matilde's instruction, those images, in part, had been blurred.

At times she had imagined Ralf coming to her room in the night. He would know her door, just as he knew Godric's. He might even know how to traverse the corridor, and before it the solar staircase, without treading on the boards that creaked. But how would he get into the Hall? The outer doors were locked at night. There was only one safe route: through the parlour window. Even that required the window and its shutter to be left unlatched. Indoors, there was a low table under the window, and outdoors a bench. But beyond the bench lay a path of shingle which crunched underfoot. He would have to approach by means of the lawn and cross the path with, at most, two cautious steps.

Even so, how could he fail to be heard, arriving or leaving, by someone upstairs? By her father and mother, or one of her vigilant aunts?

But tonight only Aunt Béatrice was here, and she was two doors away. The chambers on either side of this one lay empty. Tonight, Eloise realised, it would be possible.

His longing, his incompleteness, might even equal hers. She thought of his handsome, tortured face in the firelight, the frenzied grip on her elbow, his words under the trees. She had no doubt that, at this moment, he was waiting for her at the mill.

If she were very quiet, she could steal along the corridor and down the stairs. Her aunt would not hear. From the stairs she could flit into the parlour and climb through the window, cross the path and follow the lawn round the side of the house.

The mill was a long way off. Bella was in her stable. Her hoofs would sound on the cobbles. The noise could be deadened with two pairs of thick woollen stockings, just like the ones Eloise had in her shelves; but what of the groom, who slept down there, and the dogs in the kennels, which would surely bark as she went by? And how could she saddle up in darkness?

Bareback: she would ride bareback, and cling to the mane. Out towards the harbour and the staith, out along the new chalk roadway to the mill she had never seen; under the autumn stars she would find him there.

But to do that, she would have to have left Bella in the paddock, and tonight Bella was in the stable-block.

Eloise let herself consider walking to the mill. She could dress and leave now, this minute. She even felt her body tense as if in preparation for rising.

Ralf no longer cared about the sanction. Nothing mattered to him, but her. This was how it had been before, in that far-off time. Then, too, had they not risked everything?

The owls had stopped calling. They, perhaps, had found each other, or settled their dispute.

'I won't come,' she had said.

'You will.'

'No, Ralf,' she whispered bleakly, alone in her bed, seeing again the vellum of the sanction, its ribbon, and its crimson seal. 'I won't.'

11

High tide arrived in the middle of the morning. Without careful scrutiny it was never easy to say just when it

turned: just when the flood finally became slack water and slack water finally became the ebb, and Ralf today did not have time for that.

He was so heady with exhaustion that he was afraid of falling off his ladder. Using a wide, long-handled, hogshair brush, he was one of two men applying tar to the weatherboards of the mill. His ladder was equipped with a standaway, two props with cushioned ends, which kept the tops of the rails a foot from the wall. To this was fitted a safety platform where tools – or a bucket of tar – could be kept.

The tarring had begun yesterday and would with luck be finished by tonight. It was transforming the look of the building. Walking along the track at dawn, Ralf had thought the approaching mill already seemed smaller and neater. The gleam of wet tar would soon fade to matt, making an agreeable contrast with not only the roof but the stone surfaces, when they were built, of the culvert and the sea-gate wall. Like the future stonework, this rectangular blackness would mark out the structure as man-made, yet the mill was also beginning to harmonise with its setting.

Ralf had developed a strong sense of the place. He had spent nearly every weekday here since the beginning of August. He remembered his excursion with Imogen, but most of all, as he worked, he thought of his few minutes alone on the dike with Eloise.

The spot where they had sat had been dug up, refashioned, and hidden under the ground floor. On the floor above, perhaps exactly above, would be the hurst and its two millstones.

He knew he should not have approached her the previous evening but, having seen her alone in the firelight, he had been unable to stop himself. And then, talking to her again, looking into her face, something had given way inside him.

As hope had faded in the early hours, he had walked back from the mill in time to get home well before breakfast. He had gambled on no one coming downstairs in the night. His rumpled bed, in the parlour, had remained untouched.

At the table, to allay suspicion, he had complained of not sleeping well. In truth, he had not slept at all.

'Ralf!' his father called, from the ground. 'Time for your break.'

'I'll just do this bit!' After that, the ladder could be moved.

He was wrong to have asked her, wrong even to have thought of it, and doubly wrong to have spent the night, cold and uncomfortable, at the mill. He had been right before, and yesterday evening, under the Three Sisters, she had been right too. She was always right. It was finished. He would never be alone with her again.

Ralf's inattention was punctured by the shock of realising that, like Eloise, the brush-handle had slipped from his grasp. He swore under his breath as he watched the brush making a graceful, end-on-end turn. It hit a chalky puddle twenty-five feet below. Mud spattered against the sill and the untreated boards just above.

A shout of mock approval came from three or four of the men at the brazier, further along the dike.

He grinned at them and made a gesture of indifference, at which there were smiles. 'Damn it,' he breathed again,

took the tar-bucket, and started climbing down, still thinking of Eloise. 'Damn everything.'

In his break he drank a steaming beaker of tisane and ate a couple of oatcakes smeared with soft cheese. They tasted somewhat of tar, but he was glad of the hot drink: the wind, while not strong, had veered more to the north. The sky remained blue. In the harbour channel five or six boats, far apart, were tacking towards the fishing grounds. A long way off, against the sun and level with the end of the Point, Ralf thought he recognised the *Meg*. Hundreds of brent geese were floating there, waiting out the tide. They were insolently tame, and would do no more than swim a few yards to avoid an approaching boat. But their eyes were beady: at the first hint of a weapon the whole flock would take wing.

Drinking the last of his tisane, Ralf looked across the pen and along the bund, watching the diggers. Today there was a full complement of thirty, with half a dozen from Mape. The mud-caked barrows and mud-caked men were passing to and fro along glistening lines of duckboards. Ralf was not sorry to be tarring instead. He had done more than his share in the pen, digging, barrowing, packing, manhandling lumps of rock, setting flints and slopping mortar.

He replenished his tar-bucket and left it to heat while he moved the ladder along and hammered the securing-pegs into the ground. This morning he was working on the inland face of the mill.

'Mind yourself up there, won't you, lad?' said his father, as he passed. 'Don't overreach.'

'I'll be careful. I always am.'

'That's what I like to hear.'

Ralf had moved the ladder twice more and was about to climb down to do so again when motion registered in the corner of his eye. Three distant riders were on the access track, women. Even at this range he knew the horses. One was Hennet, another Bella, the third the mare used by the paternal aunt, Béatrice. They had crossed the arable field and were just starting along the base of the dike. Far behind them was a fourth rider, possibly the steward or the baron himself.

The track led nowhere but to the works. As far as Ralf was aware, Eloise had never inspected them. Why should she wish to do so now, today? Or was she simply accompanying her aunt, accommodating her wishes?

In growing disquiet, he descended to the brazier and opened the lid of the tar-barrel. He ladled more into the bucket, set it on the grid, and went back to his ladder. He took his time over the repositioning, pretending to change his mind, double-checking the pegs and stays. The charade could not be stretched out indefinitely, but he wanted to be on the ladder when they arrived. The aunt would expect Linsell to show them round. If Ralf were tarring when the moment came, he might not have to join them. He could wave, call down a collective greeting to his sister and the two women from the Hall, and that might be enough.

With infrequent glances to the right, he watched them reach the work-shed, which had been set below the dike, just west of the place where the bund started. His father had already seen them and gone forward. The women dismounted.

Ralf resumed his work with even greater attention, brushing under the eaves so that he could look upwards.

Feminine voices, becoming louder, reached his ears. He could feel himself being noticed, watched, by Eloise.

'Hello, Ralf!' his sister cried.

He affected surprise. 'Hello, Im!'

'Good morning!' said Lady Béatrice; Eloise merely smiled.

'Good morning, mesdames! Forgive me, I'm covered in tar.'

Ralf went on brushing.

From the western side of the mill, Linsell showed the women the screen and explained its purpose. He walked with them nearer to the bund. A minute later he could be seen pointing across to the further dike.

The fourth rider had come close enough to be identified: John Ryle, the earthworks engineer.

'Oh, no,' Ralf muttered. What was more, he had run out of untreated wood. He came down to the ground, busied himself with the pegs and stays and began to reposition the ladder. But it was no use. He could hear them approaching.

'Ralf,' his father said, once Ralf had made his bows. 'Mr Ryle's here. Our visitors have graciously insisted I mustn't keep him waiting. Would you finish showing the ladies the site?'

Taking a rag from his pocket and wiping his palms, Ralf again begged forgiveness for his appearance. Eloise was avoiding his eye. Under her fur hat, her cheeks were glowing, perhaps from the northerly breeze. Her buff-coloured riding-habit, in a close woollen cloth lined with fur, did not quite conceal her figure; and her pigskin gloves concealed not at all the slender make of her hands.

'What is it you're doing up there?' said Lady Béatrice.

‘It’s tar, madam, to preserve and waterproof the wood.’

‘I thought as much.’

‘You’ve got some on the end of your nose,’ Imogen told him.

Ralf sheepishly stood still while she, having rejected his rag as disgusting, rubbed at the spot with a clean handkerchief, first dry, and then with a little of her saliva.

‘All gone.’

For the first time ever, Ralf saw a twinkle in the eyes of Lady Béatrice. Like her niece, she was dark and lissom. She might in her youth have been attractive. Ralf thought her features pinched, disappointed, even disagreeable, though she was not as intimidating as Aunt Matilde. He had always admired her style. Her hat, jauntily set, matched her winter riding-habit. Her gloves she was holding in one hand and resting in the other. All were in a soft, dark-grey cloth, lined with pale fur. Her braided riding-crop, held with her gloves, was finished in grey leather, like her boots. Even with his nostrils full of fumes, Ralf could detect her scent. If her niece had not been standing beside her, taller and incomparably lovely, she might have seemed even more expensive and elegant.

‘May we see inside?’ she said.

With warnings about wet tar and objects underfoot, Ralf showed them up the two steps to the open west door, through the porch and into the spacious room set aside for the lathe.

Their boots sounded on the boards of the floor and echoed from the vacant wooden walls and ceiling. It was strange to have such exotic and decorative creatures standing there, looking round at this mundane and unfinished artefact produced by mere men. Their presence

overfilled the room, especially the presence of Eloise, who was being careful to place the others between herself and Ralf.

From here they passed through the meal-room, where the flour would be collected, and into the gear-room, where the mainshaft would enter the house. Lady Béatrice posed two dry questions about the timber-framing which Ralf answered as succinctly as he could. From the east wall, outside, he could hear the scraping of his companion's tar-brush.

Back in the meal-room, Lady Béatrice said, 'So the millstones will be on the next floor up,' and indicated the hole left in the ceiling for the spout.

'Yes, madam.'

'I suppose that ladder gives access.'

'Yes, but it's only temporary. We're having an iron one made. Would you like to go up?'

'I think not. I'm not one for ladders. What about you girls?'

'I'm game,' said Imogen. 'You'll come, won't you, Eloise?'

Eloise hesitated.

'You really should look,' her aunt said, 'as long as we're here.'

Ralf could not read Eloise's expression. 'There's a good view of the marshes,' he said. 'You can see all the way to Angmer church.'

Her eyes, in meeting his, transmitted a scintilla of ambivalent meaning, coded for him alone. He was able to divine only that the understanding between them yet continued; but this was enough. He felt as if he had never

loved her till now. What had gone before was just a sketch, an idea, an outline for the cathedral.

She said, 'Are you sure you won't come with us, Aunt?'

'No, I'll wait down here.'

To preserve decorum, Ralf climbed first. He was disappointed that Imogen happened to come next; disappointed that it was only his sister's gloved hand that met his when he helped her from the ladder. Eloise was helped by Imogen.

On this floor not even the partition wall had been built. It was just a cavernous space, resounding to their feet and voices.

'You only get the view from the top floor,' Ralf said, once he had explained the purpose of the room, and they all three climbed again. This time Eloise came before Imogen, and as her face drew level with Ralf's, as his hand grasped hers, she again met his eyes with a subtle, unfathomable smile.

'Why, thank you, Ralf,' she said.

He had no time to react: Imogen's head and shoulders were already rising through the hatch.

Once Eloise had helped her off the ladder, Ralf, feeling as if, from thirty feet, he had fallen off his own, said, 'This is called the granary floor.' Each with her mouth slightly, charmingly, open, the two young women looked at the rafters and the plastered underside of the thatch. Despite his reluctance to reach the inevitable end of this moment, he said, 'The sacks of grain will come up here from the wagons.'

Eloise's plaits had been coiled into an abundant chignon, contained by a coarse-meshed net in black silk. No: not black, but the darkest possible brown, just like the hair

underneath. He noticed a small silver stud in her earlobe, the selfsame earlobe he had once nibbled. Her ears were as neat and well formed as her white teeth, as her breasts, her hips, as everything about her.

Distracted further by the luxuriant contrast between her neck and the fur at her collar, he unfastened the outer door and swung it towards him, revealing the dike far below. It stretched straight ahead towards the village, the retreating tide on the left. 'Don't get too close,' he said, and continued his talk. 'See that beam up there? It'll have a pulley attached, for a sack-hoist. The floor's designed to take ten tons. Fifteen, really, but the miller will be told to store no more than ten. His assistant will empty the sacks into a bin, about there. We haven't cut the hole for it yet, but the chute will go down between the joists.'

'To the sock,' she said, as if to prove that she had been listening earlier. She was maintaining an expression of seamless interest, but was taking none of it seriously.

'That's right,' Ralf said, looking at her askance, tempted to smile a gentle acknowledgement. 'To the sock.'

He decided the matter then, just as he had decided to drag Godric from the mud. Whatever it took, whatever happened, he was going to make her his wife.

'Look, Im,' she said. 'You can see the staith. Do you know how far away the village is, Ralf?'

'Two miles, nearly.'

When they had seen their fill, he shut the door.

'What a sweet little room!' Imogen cried, as he showed them into what would be the millers' dormitory. Both girls went to the window and looked out over the lagoons, and to the right, towards Angmer.

Yes. She was for him, as he was for her. She was the reason he had been born. For the first time since Lady Day, he felt something like peace. If not peace itself, then certitude. The future as presently constituted was not to be thought of. Watching Eloise in three-quarter profile, as she stood beside the other girl he loved and pointed across the unfinished pen to the far-off tower of Angmer church, he refused even to consider it.

But, as she turned from the window, he saw that her expression had clouded. All trace of teasing, amusement, had gone. Before Imogen too had turned, she looked at him with such poignancy that when Imogen asked, 'Is there anything else we should see?' he feared she would guess everything.

'I don't think so.'

They returned to the ladder. Imogen went down first.

Having given Ralf her hand, Eloise stepped on the rungs. For a second or two, as Imogen withdrew further, he refused to release it. She tensed, close to panic.

Very quietly he whispered, before letting her go, 'I'll be here again tonight.'

The remaining minutes passed in a daze. Eloise refused to look him in the eye again and he knew she would not be coming to the mill tonight, or on any other night. Even though he had given himself no choice but to do as he had said and keep vigil, he had erred again. She was not only beautiful and intelligent but wise. Where he was hot-headed, she was prudent. Where he was thoughtless, she had depth.

The ladies departed. Ralf turned back to join his father and the earthworks engineer. Climbing the bund, he saw that it was possession of her character as much as her

person that he craved. What could not be achieved with a woman like that at his side? And to have her company, every day and every night, her touch, her look, her smile: this might even be too much happiness for a mortal man.

He paused on the top of the bund and watched the horses carrying her away.

* * *

To stamp his authority on the capital and on England, William the Conqueror had built the Tower of London. When in town, his descendant slept either there or at Westminster, which lay two miles outside the London wall.

Westminster still retained the structure of a village, centred on its hall and its church, the Abbey. But it was unlike any other village in the land. With its royal palace and lawcourts, treasury and government, its parliament and the residences and apartments of courtiers and burgesses, it formed a unique enclave of privilege and influence.

Gervase's small house there had been in his family for nearly a hundred years. It was near the Hall, the second from the left-hand end of a timber-framed row called the Wooleries, roofed with red tile and with every window glazed. The servants slept in the attic. There were three bedchambers on the second storey and two on the first. Besides the service rooms, the ground floor was divided into a comfortable parlour, a dining hall, and Gervase's private office. This fronted the street and was furnished with his grandfather's things: an oak desk, two hard chairs with cushions, an oak-and-yew cabinet, tapestries. The rug he had purchased himself, in Ghent.

On this chilly Tuesday morning the leaded window remained shut. The street, the passers-by and the occasional rider or wagon, like the Hall opposite, showed as distorted, sunlit shapes in the coloured lozenges of glass.

Gervase, behind his desk, was doing his best to hide his contempt. He turned his eyes from the window and back to the corpulent and richly clad personage in his visitor's chair.

Some people produced in him the disturbing and irreligious idea that human beings were akin to swine. Hugh Fitz Peter was that contradiction in terms, a Christian moneylender. Usury, for Christians, was against the law. Since their heyday under Henry's father, the Jews had been so mercilessly fined, tallaged and persecuted that most had gone abroad. One, at Bristol, of whom ten thousand marks had been demanded, had lost a molar tooth each day until he had paid up. The English Jewry had anyway been emasculated by Magna Carta. The remnants exercised their trade with much circumspection. The King borrowed his money directly from the continent, often from merchants in Flanders and Florence.

Men like Gervase had to look nearer home. The interest charged by those such as Fitz Peter bore various euphemistic names: fees, benefits, gratuities. He preferred 'consideration'.

Fitz Peter was variously said to be worth ten, fifteen, or thirty thousand marks. His debtors included many of the grandest hypocrites of the court. On the strength of Gervase's reputation he had already lent him two hundred marks to cover the wedding licence and the early payments to Master Grigg. Further loans had been agreed, to finish the mill. Because of the risks of detection and

default, his charge for all these amounted to an annual interest rate of thirty-five per cent. Compared with the Jews, who normally charged forty-three and a third, but could ask as much as sixty-five, he was cheap. Or he had been.

'I wish I could be more helpful,' he said, 'but my man has taken everything into account. So have I.'

Fitz Peter's valuer had examined the steward's ledgers to estimate future earnings. The various figures, combined with his master's rate of interest, produced a limit on the sum that Gervase dared to borrow. Above this the principal could never be repaid. Compound interest, accruing for ever on the remainder, would eventually exceed the revenues of the manor. Unable to pay either his scutage to the Crown or his tithes to the Church, Gervase would quickly be dispossessed of his title and lands. The lordship of the manor would revert to the king.

This morning Fitz Peter had announced an increase in his rate for any future loans. Instead of thirty-five per cent, on these he wanted fifty.

'It's a matter of risk,' he said. 'My advisers fear a suit.'

'There will be no suit.'

'You know the archbishops are already talking to Rome?'

Fitz Peter's network of bribes must have permeated William's staff; or Rochester Castle, the seat of the Archbishop of Canterbury. The money had been wasted. Gervase was confident of his position. 'That's only to be expected,' he said. 'They'll naturally want to change the law. My mill, however, will remain exempt. The principle of retrospection will apply.'

'Assuming it falls outside the existing definitions.'

‘It does. Rest assured, it does.’

There was something odious about Fitz Peter’s smile. It hinted at resentment, past slights, detestation of the ruling class. He said, ‘The costs of such a suit would not be small. You might end up having to pay them. Where would that leave me?’

‘There will be no suit,’ Gervase said, as if explaining something to Hubert. ‘I have retained Edward Chevalley.’

Fitz Peter nodded, apparently impressed. Then he added, ‘As I say, fifty per cent. That’s your new rate.’

Even at fifty per cent, Gervase would have ample credit for the dowry and the cost of the wedding. By that time his mill would be established and working, the so-called risk would have disappeared and the rate would have returned to normal. The loans he had already arranged were unaffected.

As soon as he had got rid of Fitz Peter he hastened to the palace. The King had just left for the Tower. Gervase would follow.

In the stone corridor behind the throne room he encountered, among others, Lord de Braux, hobbling along on crutches. Last June he had broken his left ankle. Despite the ministrations of the best leeches in London, the break had not yet healed. A faint but nauseating smell emanated from the splints, the bandage and his black woollen hose. Although he inclined to Leicester’s part in the Gascon question, de Braux was a faithful servant of the King.

‘You did well to miss him,’ he said. ‘He’s in a vile mood.’ He craned his neck and Gervase followed his gaze. At the end of the corridor, where it joined the gallery, a party of clerics was sweeping past. Leading the way strode an

elderly man in a cardinal's red biretta and robes. His beaked nose and angular cheek-bones were familiar.

'Who's that?' Gervase said.

'The papal ambassador,' said de Braux. 'He doesn't look happy, does he?'

'What does he want?'

'He saw His Grace earlier, in camera. After that he went to see the Lord Chancellor, about Sicily, so I hear.'

As far as Gervase knew, the tide of the Sicilian campaign was going in favour of the Pope. The King was paying for it, or was supposed to be. There should have been no difficulty; no need for a legate.

Gervase was struggling to recall the cardinal's name. He had met him recently, somewhere or other.

'We heard raised voices,' said de Braux, 'but I think the quarrel will be resolved. Whether the King will grant him another audience, I cannot say. "Parson Pellegrini", he calls him now. To his face.'

12

Ralf had trouble making sense of the liquid call of a curlew, and he began to understand that he was emerging from a dream. He must have failed himself and fallen asleep. And if he had failed in that way, might he also have left too little time to get back to the village undetected?

Heavy with fatigue, he opened his eyes. The room was so dim that the wick in the lamp must have burned down to the collar, but he could not have been asleep for too long or the flame would have gone out altogether.

He had brought the lamp from the workshop and set it on the floor to the right of his blanket. He turned that way

and with his left thumb and forefinger adjusted the screw. No light could escape to the village or any boats in the channel: the walls had now been sealed, and he had been sure to fasten the door and shutters before taking out his tinderbox and striking, in the cold darkness, flint on steel.

In a minute or so he would step outside to inspect the sky and tide, and from them judge the passage of time.

He had told Eloise that he would be here. He would have untold her if he could, and slept like a rational being, at home. But untell her he could not, so he had condemned himself to a second pointless and uncomfortable night in the lathe-room.

It was then that he saw her, on his left, watching him gravely, seated on her heels and with her hands resting on the skirts of her riding-habit. He had the absurd thought that he must still be dreaming, despite the crisp, logical and undeniable reality of the lamp, the floorboards, and the curlew's continuing call. Moreover, he could distinctly smell sawn oak, tar, seaweed and salt; and now a grey plover was calling too, far out over the mud, bemoaning its solitary state.

He sat up, extended a tentative hand, and touched her left forearm. This also, the warm feel of her sleeve, like the living flesh beneath, was real.

She caught her breath, more tense even than she had been on the ladder, and looked down at the wooden floor between them.

Ralf remained silent, shocked, unsure what to do or say. He found himself studying her eyelashes, the shape of her nose, her mouth. Even by the light of one small lamp, the gloss of her hair, especially where it was drawn back, had retained undiminished its power to bewitch his eyes. Her

hair no longer seemed dark-brown but black. It revealed the enchanting shape of her head. This morning's chignon had been undone and replaced with a single thick braid, laced with a ribbon whose colour he could not quite tell. He noticed her gloves and fur hat, laid on the floor next to her right thigh.

However much she was trying to disappear into herself, however intently she was staring at the floorboards, he could conclude only that she was here. She had come, of her own volition, to give herself to him. It was everything he had dreamt of, but dismay began to seep into the edges of his astonishment. Despite all his urgings he had not expected this of her. His disappointment became tinged with feelings of another sort. He knew her to be courageous, but till now he had never suspected her of daring.

She had begun to tremble. He could feel as well as see it.

She was human and so was he. For months their love-affair had taken place in their two isolated minds, becoming more and more frenetic and extreme. Only during their kiss, three months ago, had it been given an outlet. The kiss had been initiated by him. It had launched the assault that had finally overwhelmed her will to bring her here tonight. Not just her will, but her reputation, modesty, and sense of shame.

Ralf knew how hard she had struggled. If there were guilt in this room, it was his. He ought to send her back. He should never have done this to her.

But his will, also, had been overwhelmed. He leaned towards her and at the same time adapted his grasp to bring her closer. The tension increased in her arms and shoulders, in the feminine pliancy of her whole body. As

ever, she was resisting. Her resistance was like the word *no*, carved in granite a mile high, rooted there by her father and the court, an obstacle so treacherous and difficult to scale that, till this morning, Ralf had impotently wandered back and forth along its base.

And as he tried to press his lips to hers she lowered her head even further.

He took the risk of releasing her arm so that she could leave whenever she chose. Instead of taking her hat and gloves and rising to her feet, she remained in place.

'The mill,' he said, not understanding why. 'It's for you.'

Eloise looked up. He had found the magic key to a magic doorway, opening at ground level. The *no* did not have to be scaled at all. There was no incomprehension in her eyes, only recognition, fear and, unmistakably, desire.

The King's sanction, with its promise of dismemberment and death, was rising within him like his own aphrodisiac blood. Again he tried to place his lips on hers, seeking her consent, and again it was withheld, but less convincingly. Her hands rose to his shoulders to push him away. This did nothing but emphasise her nearness, and her touch inflamed him even more. Now it was his turn to resist. He did so easily. As she concentrated all her strength on pushing harder and harder, her mouth inadvertently gave ground, softening in its tactical retreat. In the clarity of the instant before he capitalised on his gain, Ralf was aware that he was about to commit not just a mortal sin but a crime against the Crown. He was willing to barter his torn and tortured body, in chains, for a single kiss. The idea, fusing spectacularly with the sensations she was generating, unleashed an unstoppable surge of energy.

She had read his mind. Into the bargain she flung the erotic vision of her neck on the sword-block. She cared no more than he did. All notions of safety were thrown in the furnace.

The resulting explosion of flame hid an artful change of balance. Under cover of their kiss, she let him think that it was he who was causing their bodies to decline towards the blanket. The pretence continued even as she fought to stop him discovering the way into the bastion of her riding-habit. Her fingers, in opposing his, yet managed to direct him under the blind hem to the first of the concealed buttons. So much of his attention was devoted to their kisses that, without this delicious hindrance, he might never have found the second, or the third or fourth or fifth. The sleeves presented another difficulty. He decided to come back to them once he had made progress with the bliaut, whose fastenings had been contrived purely to baffle a masculine mind. The otherworldly feel of the deep-red material, silk crepe, was like nothing he had ever known. Very far now from discouraging him, she eloquently communicated, with a sigh, her pleasure in his exploration of her crepe-clad breast.

At this Ralf became worried. Except for inadvertent glimpses of Imogen when younger, he had never yet seen feminine nakedness. His knowledge stopped at kissing. The vaunts of the Rushton apprentices were quite inadequate to this.

Had he hesitated? Had she sensed his anxiety? He felt the tingling charge of her hands under his tunic and shirt, sliding up his back. With that he discovered the trick to opening the bliaut and clumsily attacked the remaining

hooks and eyes. Underneath, guarded by what seemed like hundreds of tiny buttons, he found a pink silk shirt.

'Wait,' she said, and sat up. The riding-habit fell away and became an adjunct to the blanket. Her feet were perfect, as he saw when she removed her calf-boots and lincoln tights. Next came her bliaut and, button by pink button, as he looked on, the shirt. Below that, suspended on narrow shoulder-straps, she was wearing a shift in sheer, golden silk. She found her silver crucifix and looked down at it, acknowledging what it was. He thought she was going to take that off as well; instead she reached behind her and nimbly began to unravel her braid.

Stupefied, Ralf saw her hair set free. It made another night. He gazed in wonder and put a hand to his mouth.

'Do you know what to do?' she said.

'Not really.'

'You didn't … you've never ..?'

He shook his head.

The subtlety of her smile reminded him of this morning – yesterday morning, now, – upstairs in the granary, when he had handed her from the ladder.

It went badly. He had imagined this too many times: her fragrance, the feel of her hair, the final undressing, the eager suppleness of her flesh against his; except that his imaginings had been ill-informed, pallid and jejune, and he had never needed for her, in vain and much too late, to try and intervene.

Only afterwards did they notice how cold the room had become. She wrapped her riding-habit round them, the lining against their skin. Lying with his face against her breast and his head cradled in her arms, Ralf became conscious of the steadying thud of her heart. He wanted to

apologise but it was not necessary. She already understood. He thought of his resolution to make her his wife and had the strangest feeling that they had lain cocooned in furs before.

At last his journey without her was over. He had come home.

He remembered his first meeting with Godric and the sense of predestination that had revisited their friendship ever since. Eloise was part of that. More: she was the greater part.

He said, 'Can you hear the curlews?'

'Yes.'

The distant curlews, and the greenshanks too, all the shorebirds, belonged in their unknown past.

'What did you mean,' she said, 'about the mill?'

Ralf tried to explain. He told her about his talk with Godric by the river, his subsequent conversation with his father, and the moment, by the slip at Rushton, when Linsell had come up with the idea. He told her about their interview with the steward, and about the walk the next day, with Imogen, to see the site. He reminded her of their own excursion, last midsummer's eve, to this very spot. He described each step of the project and said that each step, like the unfinished mill today, had been secretly, devotedly, by him, dedicated to her.

He looked up. Her eyes were filling with tears.

'O Ralf,' she said. 'If you only knew.'

'Knew what?'

She did not answer at once. 'How much I love you.'

'What were you going to say?'

She silenced his question with another kiss and he saw his earlier misgivings in all their fault. She had been right,

and very brave, to seize this fragment of happiness for them both. Outside the freshly tarred, weatherboarded walls of their mill there was no one who would agree. The freezing night air, kept at bay only by the warmth of her skin, had settled on a uniformly hostile world. Judgement dwelt in every stone on the shore, in every atom of mud, in every withered leaf of the trees round the church and Hall. It stretched to the dark horizon, to the Pole Star, and spread its stain across the Milky Way. Out there, they would be deemed sinners. But how could this ever be wrong? The world was mad. Sanity, love, resided here in her arms. She was the sanest person he had ever met. Even now it was not too late for her to rejoin the squalid, temporal society of madmen outside the mill. Such were her generosity and truth that she would rather stay.

'Are you sure?' he whispered, as she gave him to understand that, like him, she was ready to begin anew.

'Yes. I'm sure.'

* * *

Watching her dress, Ralf felt yesterday's mere certitude yielding to true peace. There could not have been a gentler or more wonderful end to his boyhood. Her gift would be with him always. Overflowing gratitude and affection threatened to dim his vision. As he wiped at his eyes she paused and looked at him.

Half smiling, she reached out and with her index finger rubbed, once, at the tip of his nose. 'All gone.'

With her bliaut still unfastened, he drew her to him and hid his face in her hair. 'Eloise, let's run away.'

'We can't. Don't talk about it. Don't spoil —'

‘I’m sorry.’

‘Please stop apologising to me, Ralf. You’ve nothing to apologise for. I’m the one who should apologise.’

It could not be helped. Despite the supervising skill of his father and the care of the men, including himself, who had nailed up the boards; despite the thoroughness of the construction and tarring, the night was already seeping through the walls and into the mill. As soon as she stepped outside she would again be immersed in it, and so would he.

He let her finish dressing and finished dressing himself. As he buckled his boots he said, ‘When can we meet again?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Do you want to?’

‘More than anything.’

Solving the problem with a ready practicality that surprised him, she said she would leave a signal when another meeting became possible. If he went to the path beside the churchyard and found a pebble touching the yew, in a fork of roots, it would mean she could come to the mill that night. If he found two pebbles, she would come the night following; if three, the night after that. She would only set out if, having checked after the evening bell, she found the pebble or pebbles had been removed.

‘My father and mother will be at court till the fifteenth, but I don’t know about my aunts.’

This overt mention of the baron subdued them both. For the first time tonight, Ralf felt a pang of conscience.

‘Will you confess?’ he said. ‘To Father Pickard?’

Her melting dark eyes had looked just like this at their first meeting, years ago, by the wall of her father’s house.

She said, 'You needn't see me again if you don't want. I'll understand.'

'O my sweet love, that's not what I meant.'

'Then what is there to confess? You have given me absolution.'

It was not he, but she, who needed protecting. She was already resigned to being caught.

'We must be very careful,' he said.

'You've thought about it, too.'

'I told you last night. I'd rather be dead.'

In desperation she put her hand on his lips.

He wanted to hold her again. Instead he led her to the porch and down the steps. The narrow moon was outdone by the flare of Sirius, the brightest star in the sky. Sirius made a jewel in the collar of Orion's larger hound. The giant himself, wheeling westwards, had crossed due south. With him he had turned the heavens: the time was between three and four. Ralf did not even need to look at the state of the tide, which, an hour or two from low water, had uncovered wide tracts of starlit mud.

'Look!'

Down through Leo, a streak of light was plunging towards the sea, a meteor, a shooting star.

He said, 'I don't care if the sky falls in, not now.'

'What time is it?'

'Three hours before dawn. At worst.'

She had tethered her horse in the shelter of the work-shed. There was just a breeze, or the frost would have been thicker on the thatch, which took its glow from the northern sky. Ralf made a stirrup of his hands and helped to lift her: Bella had no saddle, only a headstall. Eloise's

face was indistinct but he knew that she would soon be unable, any longer, to hold back her tears.

Nothing remained to be said. She started forward along the track. He climbed the bund and, for the second time in less than a day, stood and watched her go.

* * *

In the lathe-room Ralf noticed an unexpected scroll of something at the edge of the blanket and found it to be the ribbon from her braid. At the zenith of their love-making the blanket had got pushed aside. Mostly hidden, the ribbon had been overlooked. To see its colour he held it near the lamp. He might have known it: deep-red, the precise shade of her bliaut. He adored her colour-sense and her taste in clothes. When they were married he would have to find the money for that.

Ralf carefully pulled the ribbon straight, between the first and second fingers of his left hand, then rolled it up and put it in a corner of his pocket. The next time he saw her he would ask if he could keep it – for ever.

Lifting the blanket to fold it, his eye was arrested by a small, dark stain on the floor. He moved the lamp closer and vividly recalled the urgent moment when she had winced, her fleeting pain giving way to a mystical and reassuring smile. Blood-crimson was also the colour of sealing-wax, detached now from its ribbon and the vellum of her skin. And it was he, Ralf Grigg, who had dissolved the divinity of the King.

'My God.'

On his haunches, he shut his eyes. 'My God,' he breathed again, all innocence gone, comprehending at last the

magnitude of their crimes. High treason. The meed of that was bodily death. But for their crime against Heaven the penalty was eternal: spiritual death, damnation, everlasting torment by the fiends of Hell.

Yesterday, on the ladder, he had said it. 'Damn everything.' O to take back those words! Their lives were ruined. They had tasted the fruits of marriage without God's sacrament. How could it have happened?

He loved her, that was how.

But if he really cared for her, would he not have stopped it long ago, or never let it start? Or had faith, and waited? Was this nothing more than lust? 'You have given me absolution,' she had said, as if she had no sense of wrong. But her conscience too was on the rack. She knew as well as he did how powerless they had been.

What did she see in him, a carpenter's son? What awaited her on her wedding-night? Her groom, whatever he was called, would surely not be fooled.

'No,' Ralf told himself, his mind in pieces. She could be no one's bride but his. Yet it was impossible. How could he gain her father's permission, still less support her on a tradesman's wage? They could not run away, as well she knew, for they would be found and caught and put to death.

He stood up. Last week his father had moved the site-chest, containing small tools, from the work-shed to the mill. It stood in a corner of the meal-room. Ralf had a key.

He returned with a one-pound hammer, a punch, a broom and a handful of nails. In the uncertain glow of the lamp he started work. Only one floorboard was affected. He punched the heads of its nails right through, so that they no longer engaged with the wood. Each blow of the

hammer, each ringing impact on the square head of the punch, hardened his sense of wrongdoing. Had it sounded thus at Golgotha? And had the wielder of that hammer, then, sensed the onset of the cosmic guilt that would indelibly poison his soul?

This was not how love should be. Love was not furtive. It should not depend on secrets, or deceit, or hiding the truth from Linsell Grigg.

'I'm sorry,' Ralf told him, under his breath, agonising over the example of his father's fortitude and continence, and seeing, as he knelt, how badly he had betrayed it.

He pulled up the floorboard and turned it over to hide the stain. Having made sure that each punched-in nail was below the surface of its joist, he duplicitously laid the board in place. Her blood was upside-down. Instead of facing inwards, towards the light, it now belonged to the dust and darkness of the underfloor void, to be dirtied and crawled upon by spiders unseen. With villainous guile he angled the new nails so that they bit sound wood, both in the board and joists, but the heads he made to fill the punched-out holes.

The turned board was scarcely distinguishable from the others: indistinguishable, once he had passed and repassed with the broom. His perfidy was complete.

Eloise too would have to lie and deceive. The idea of this was doubly painful to him, for she was truth itself.

He saw then that he needed her now far more badly than he had done before. He needed her strength and wisdom and clarity, to guide him out of the maze. There had to be a way out. She was everything good, everything he wanted. Shame lay not in Eloise herself, but in this shabby deception.

Ralf returned the broom and tools to their places, snuffed the lamp and left the mill. Walking away, he remembered the hot and innocent August afternoons when, naked, sweating and filthy, he and his comrades had leapt into the tide.

His skin needed cleansing again, but now, in the November darkness, if he jumped without her, he would only land in guilty slime.

PART THREE

1

After breakfast on Wednesday morning a packet arrived from Chevalley. Last week Gervase had sent the lawyer a copy of a letter he had received from the Molarius, and had informed him that he would be at court until the fifteenth of November, twelve days hence. The copy had now been returned.

It has been brought to my notice that Your Lordship is ordering the construction of a sacred mill at Mape. I shall esteem an intimation by Your Lordship's household of the proposed date of completion of said mill, and seek to recommend that Your Lordship's household nominate a day before such date when one of my officers may inspect said mill with a view to establishing its capacity and hence agreeing between us the proper sum payable annually to this office in respect of a molar licence.

Assuring Your Lordship of my most profound respects, I perpetually remain, etc.

After glancing at the formal covering letter to himself, written by one of Chevalley's clerks, Gervase turned to the copy of Chevalley's reply to the Molarius.

His Worship the Molarius

Dean's Close

Alincester

Reverend Sir

My client, Lord de Maepe, has sent me your recent letter. I beg to inform you that there is at present no sacred mill in his manor, nor is one planned.

Any further communication on this head should be directed through me.

I have the honour, etc.

Edward Chevalley

At the bottom of his covering letter, Chevalley had autographed, in English:

I have been expecting this. Nothing to worry about. I should be glad of the original, at Your Lordship's convenience.

E. C.

Gervase put the parchments aside.

'Good news?' said Margaret, at which he did little more than nod, for she did not really want to know.

They were all seated in the parlour. His sisters-in-law were in London to spend money, principally on clothes, but also on the other fripperies they seemed to find so important. In this enterprise they found a willing and regular helper in the shape of his wife.

Relaxing in his customary seat, Gervase crossed his legs, half listening while they continued with their plans. The hapless shopkeepers at London Bridge, it seemed, were to be their victims today.

Not for the first time, he pondered the mentality of a man who had named his three daughters alliteratively: Margaret, Mildred and Matilde. How many momentary confusions must that have caused, when he had begun to address them? How many times had three heads been

turned, instead of one? Perhaps that had been the idea, to keep them on the *qui vive*. Who could gainsay such a parental tactic?

Reconsidering his opinion of his late father-in-law, Gervase wondered which of the three had been his favourite. Surely not the eldest, Matilde. Even when he had been wooing Margaret, he had found her not just unsympathetic but fearsome. It was incomprehensible that the lamented Lord Gordano had fallen and remained so much in love with her. God alone knew what went on in a human heart. Her dower had proved no more than modest, but the vulgar idea of retrenchment never seemed to trouble Matilde.

Mousy Mildred, the youngest, had not found a husband, or even a suitor, as far as he knew, which was a pity, for she was, despite the many foolish things she said, fundamentally kind.

He suspected that Margaret had been the favourite. She had been indulged, spoilt, and at his interview with the old man, seeking her hand, the young Gervase had been left in no doubt that this was at all costs to continue.

In consequence he might have been a little hard on his own children, though the consensus of his friends was that he was too lax. Recently, in particular, he had begun to have serious doubts about his treatment of Eloise. She was a clever, enquiring girl, romantic and tender-hearted. Had it been a form of cruelty to keep her so much at home? There had been occasional trips to court, here in London, at Oxford, Gloucester, York and Stafford, and occasional periods when she had been the guest of the parents of other noble daughters, but nothing substantial. Away from the manor she had no real friends. Even at home he

doubted whether she had any. She must have been lonely, and it had been his doing. He had been too busy, too interested in his own ambitions, to see.

At forty-eight, her mother was still a desirable woman. As he watched her talking, Gervase perceived his motive for keeping Eloise concealed. She was becoming even prettier than Margaret had been, which he would have thought impossible. Her calmness and self-possession might drive a young man wild. Had she been exposed more to the world she would surely have made a sooner but far less advantageous match. That was why he had held her in reserve.

Might it also have been that he had been reluctant, personally, to lose her?

He would make it up to her; had already begun to do so. The forthcoming wedding was almost set to ruin him. Indeed, without the mill, it would. But she deserved the best: the best ceremony and the best reception. They would be talked about for years. And after that, she would become one of the greatest ladies in the land, mother of the ducal dynasty which, perhaps, held more sway than any other. With a word from her, across the pillow, England could change direction.

On the strength of a single day Robert Ingram was already besotted with her. He knew nothing about her mind. Little did he realise what a helpmate awaited him.

During the dinner last March at the Hall, Gervase had made a close study of his prospective son-in-law. He had then been twenty-five. Gervase would have welcomed rather more maturity, but nonetheless had generally concluded that things might have been worse. It was, after all, a matter of chance. Rank was not always attended by

soundness of character. Ingram was unlikely to turn out a drunkard or a brute, especially once Eloise had taken charge of him, but the risk was there. Gervase remembered his own doubts, on the eve of his wedding day. At the very edge of the precipice he had suddenly seen that he had known next to nothing about his bride.

'I beg your pardon, my dear,' he said to Margaret. 'What was that you said?'

'It's started to rain.'

'And?'

'Really, Gervase. How can we go shopping in this?'

* * *

By dusk on Friday, when, to his relief, he found a pebble at the yew, a fatalistic change had come over Ralf.

It was inevitable that he and Eloise would be caught. She was already reconciled to it. She had knowingly trapped herself by what they had done. No later than her wedding-night she would be found out. And so would he, for he was determined not to abandon her. She had put all her trust in him. Like him, she was prepared to die for the sake of their time together.

Her parents and maternal aunts were still away from home. Conditions at the Hall were unchanged. There was no practical reason why she should not have met him again immediately. But on Wednesday, and again on Thursday, the yew roots had remained bare. He had hoped that she was merely giving him time to reflect.

Completing his separation from his father, Ralf had asked for and been granted permission to sleep in the workshop. His mother had reluctantly approved the

scheme. With his bed in the parlour he had always been woken by anyone who came downstairs in the night, and various other inconveniences would be ended if he could sleep elsewhere. So, on Wednesday afternoon, his father had helped him to erect a canvas screen in one corner of the workshop furthest from the double doors. They had carted over his bed and bedding, a chest for his clothes and his meagre collection of footwear.

On Wednesday evening there had been no visits to or from neighbours. Ralf had spent the hours after supper alone, at the kitchen table, with his futureless Latin and mathematics.

At bedtime he had lit a lantern and made his way along the staith-track to the workshop. Other lights had been visible across the pasture, at the Hall.

Thursday evening had been much the same. Both days had been wet. Except for the gentle sound of the rain, the workshop had been silent, as silent as the mill.

Before this week Ralf had never slept in a building alone. His sister and mother, at least, had always been near by, if not in the same room. But now he was divided from them in person as well as in every other way. He had discovered how easy telling lies could be.

The wet, nocturnal silence of the workshop extended to the churchyard. There, this Friday evening, twenty yards from his grandmother's grave, Ralf was lurking beside the dike-path.

After supper, pretending that he wanted to go to the workshop, he had come to check again, by feel, the yew-roots. Under some newly shed lime-leaves, the pebble had still been there. Having removed it, he had continued along the path to the stock-gate and entered the graveyard from

the seaward side, taking up a position behind the low fence opposite the yew.

The rain had not stopped. If it went on much longer like this, digging in the pen would have to be suspended.

Ralf saw Hubert's lantern arrive, swinging from side to side and casting huge shadows on the yew-bushes lining each side of the path from the lich-gate to the porch. Even at night Hubert gave an impression of inadequacy. As he walked, his feet pointed inward: not much, but just enough to affect his gait. His open, eager face, with its straggling ginger beard, became unfamiliar, sinister, when lit from below. Ralf heard the heavy latch of the west door. Once inside, the moving lantern-light registered in the small, high windows, and halted, stabilised, at the foot of the tower.

Nothing happened.

'Come on, Hubert,' Ralf breathed. 'Ring the bell.'

Why was he waiting? What ethereal impulse would he receive when the time was right? Beyond the church and its burials lay a mile of marsh, a blackness of reeds and mud and grazing, terminated by a rain-drenched beach. Beyond that, fringed by shambling, invisible surf, and devoid now even of fishermen's lights, stretched the sea. Somewhere above, through the rain, an obscure timepiece held Hubert thrall. He was its priest, its acolyte.

The sequent sounded then: two groups of three. Hubert retreated; the lich-gate squeaked.

Soon afterwards, someone without a lantern opened the footpath gate.

'Are you there?' Ralf said.

She sounded startled. 'Ralf?'

'Yes.'

‘Where are you?’

‘Behind the fence.’ He extended his hand in the darkness, moving it blindly from side to side. ‘Here.’

They made contact.

‘Don’t go out to the mill tonight,’ he said. ‘There’s no need.’

* * *

Six days ago, on the fourteenth of November, Godric had turned nineteen. His ordination was only two years away. He should by now have been equipped to face, if not deal with, human tragedy, but, sitting here this afternoon in the dayroom alone with his sister, he felt utterly lost.

Her complexion, her eyes, had faded. She seemed overcome, saturated, drowned, by despair. But she had told him nothing and was keeping her conversation determinedly light.

The way she held herself had changed. Whether it was this or the shadows under her eyes, Godric could think of only one cause.

He had arrived from the abbey yesterday afternoon, Friday. This morning he had ridden out to the site. The wet weather had stopped most of the digging and sent the labourers home. Bridged with duckboards, gaps had been made in the dike for the culvert and the sea-gate wall, but even those had been abandoned for now.

Ralf and his father had been working inside the mill-house. Cupboards, shelves and two beds had been fitted in the dormitory. The grain-bin and chute had been constructed. On the floor below, the hurst for the stones had been started and the sack-flap installed. On the ground

floor the partition walls had been put up, and generally, throughout the building, the state of finish had been much improved.

To his very great alarm and far greater guilt and distress, Godric had at once detected in Ralf changes exactly corresponding to those in Eloise. He too, of course, had said nothing to hint at what had surely happened between them.

The grand wedding, scheduled for October next year, might not take place and it was Godric's fault. Had he not had that excoriating confrontation at the abbey last June with his erstwhile friend Bartholomew, he would never have tried to put Ralf and Eloise together. He had done it from jealousy and to hurt them both. Well, now he had succeeded. The two beings he loved best might on his account be put to death. The scandal would kill his father and mother, too, but in a different and even crueller way.

For all that, Godric was aware of another sensation as he looked at Eloise. The idea that two such beautiful young people had consummated their love could only be seen, impartially, as beautiful in itself. In every way they complemented one another. It was Ralf to whom she should be affianced, not that other man: the Ralf to whom Godric owed his life; the Ralf who, through Godric's sins, now risked arrest, mutilating torture, execution.

In Christian doctrine, Godric had been taught, marriage was sacred. At its most obvious it allowed for procreation and the upbringing of children. Beyond that, it provided an arena in which the deepest friendship between two people could be explored. And beyond that, the most important and sacramental aspect of marriage was to be found. The sexual union, the merging of two souls, led to the

dissolution of self which, like all the mystical practices of the Church, gave the chance of finding a pathway to God.

Godric honoured his father, as the decalogue adjured. He knew him to be a devout and most charitable man. Yet he was adding to the debasement of matrimony that defied God's ordinance. Marriage among nobles had for centuries been a mere tool of statecraft. Like so much else, it had been corrupted and befouled.

Godric's disillusionment with the Church was now almost complete. To begin with he had simply been bewildered by the disparity between word and deed. Later, as his reading had grown wider and deeper, he had identified his first intelligible doubts. Even the source of the gospel, the four accounts of the Evangelists, contained inconsistencies. These might in some places be construed as semantic, or innocent omissions or changes of emphasis; in others they smacked of deliberation. And after the Evangelists had come wave after wave of interpreters and commentators, self-appointed and occasionally quite mad, whose exegetical ravings had done nothing but obfuscate Christ's words, which were as plain as any words could be. From this confusion had been born, for political reasons, the Roman Church. The Emperor Constantine had established it to hold his empire together. Since then the Church had grown from bad to worse. Its present emperor, the Pope, was as worldly as Constantine himself; as Julius or Augustus Caesar; as Nero or even Caligula.

The summer in which Godric had met Ralf had been the happiest of his life. He had not forgotten what Ralf had told him of his beliefs. At the time he had been shocked to learn that anyone in this enlightened age should be possessed of such primitive and animistic ideas. But, throughout his

career at Leckbourne, Godric had slowly come to see that Ralf was right. Ralf's god was more authentic than the version handed down from Rome. He was indeed, as Ralf had said, everywhere, in everything; and if you had doubts, that was his doing too.

The rain had hardly ceased today. It was falling yet, lightly, blown against the window on a westerly wind, the same wind and rain to which the diocese laid claim. They belonged not to Bishop William, but God, just as did Ralf, and with him Eloise.

'My sister,' Godric said, when their conversation momentarily lapsed. 'Are you unhappy?'

'What an odd form of address!'

He made no answer.

'What makes you think I'm unhappy?'

Godric was pained to see suspicion in her eyes. He could not blame her for it; only himself.

She said, 'There is something bothering me, as a matter of fact.'

'What?'

'I wonder if the Church … sometimes I have the idea that …'

'Tell me.'

'Is it possible that we live more than once?'

'You want to know if the idea is orthodox?'

'Yes.'

Godric did not want to ask why this esoteric subject should have raised her interest.

Father Dominic, one of his favourite teachers, who had once lived at Constantinople, had made a special study of heathen beliefs in the east and south. In after-hours discussions he could sometimes be persuaded to speak of

it. The ancient Greeks had believed in the transmigration of souls. Like the Hindoos, they had taken it as a matter of course.

Some early writers had tried to attribute such ideas to the gospel. In the sixteenth chapter of Matthew, Christ was reported as asking his disciples, 'Who do men say I am?'; and they said, 'Some say that you are John the Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremias or one of the prophets.' The apologists for reincarnation had asked how else Christ could be thought to be Elias or Jeremias or one of the prophets. The doctrine, they said, appeared to be taken for granted, even by the Saviour himself.

Many other examples were held up by these authors: elsewhere in Matthew, in Mark and John; and in the Book of Job. All were ambiguous, and had effectively been debunked by Tertullian, Gregory of Nyssa, and Irenaeus, all of whom Godric had read.

Though she was trying to hide it, the question seemed of immense importance to Eloise.

He said, 'The Bible teaches that we live once on this earth, and once only.'

'But what if … what if you can even remember things?'

'What sort of things?'

'Or people. People you meet, when you feel you already know them.'

'How can that be?'

'I don't know.'

'What do you remember?'

'The sea. From long ago.'

Godric perceived that she was under a tremendous strain.

‘The sea in some other place,’ she said. ‘A rocky shore I’ve never been to. And there’s something else.’

‘What?’

‘I don’t know. Something. And when I hear the shorebirds … Godric, do you think I’m going mad?’

‘Are you having trouble sleeping?’

‘No.’

This was perhaps the first lie he had ever had from her lips. He wondered whether to raise Ralf’s name, or even hint at it, but decided against. ‘These people you think you know from before. Who are they?’

She hesitated, and was clearly framing another lie.

Just then Hubert knocked on the door.

‘Please, Miss. Miss Grigg.’

In rising to his feet, Godric noticed a look of surprise on his sister’s face. She had evidently forgotten having invited her friend to the Hall.

Once he had made himself agreeable, Godric told himself he should leave the girls in peace and return to his Greek. But he liked Imogen and seldom had the chance of absorbing her charm. Moreover, he enjoyed looking at her. He remembered once telling her, only half in jest, that she was the prettiest girl in Sussex. Since then she might well have outgrown that county and several others besides. Today, seated opposite Eloise, the light falling directly on her face, she no longer even had a rival. She was one of the Creator’s most exquisite ideas: for what was the world and everything in it, if not the speculations of God made flesh? He had spared nothing in constructing this young woman, desired by almost every swain in Mape. According to Eloise, brother Henry had also, one afternoon last summer, been struck down.

Ingenuousness invested much of Imogen's appeal. She had no idea of her effect on others. She was also astonishingly outspoken.

'Really?' Godric said. 'Mary Ibbott, you say?'

'Mrs Creech told my mother this morning.' Imogen glanced at Eloise, whose expression remained grave.

Godric said, 'Who is the father?'

'That's just it. She doesn't know. It could be Aholiab Peake. Or John Hollins. They both say it was the other. Then again, it might not be either of them at all.'

'How many … no,' Godric said, changing his question altogether. 'When is the baby due?'

'The spring. Five months away, no more than that.'

Mary Ibbott was a serf. What had happened to her was by no means unusual. There would be a hurried wedding. Father Pickard would officiate, and eventually wet the baby's head at the old stone font, and after a few years no one would remember or even care that the child had been conceived out of wedlock.

Godric looked at Eloise and back at Imogen, trying to disguise his feelings. What had befallen Mary could easily befall his own sister. The outcome would not be the same.

He had no choice. He would have to say something, later, at an opportune moment, even though he had promised Eloise last July never to mention the subject again. He would have to put a stop to it, no matter if that cost him her friendship, and Ralf's.

'Will you kindly excuse me, ladies?' he said, and stood up. 'I must return to my studies.'

2

For over a month, almost without pause, rain swept in from the west. On some days amounting to no more than drizzle, on a few so heavy that it obscured the view, it fell and fell and fell. On the first of December ground-water broke upon the marshes in a new freshet: then two, three, ten, a dozen. By the middle of the month the coast road itself had flooded, forming a new river fed from below by springs never before known.

The fields turned to ooze. Dilute mud gushed from the banks beside the staith-track and made that another river down to the sea. The cutters' craft remained upturned and unused, the reed stems and plumes bowed, pelted, mildewing, the harvest abandoned. All work on the mill was stopped.

The rain discovered the slightest errors in every wall and roof. In the church the priest put out buckets not only on the floor but on the altar too, for the rain seeped through the masonry above the rood and at intervals dripped, like transparent blood, from the base of the crucifix. Nevertheless, on the afternoon of Christmas Eve the Nativity play was enacted there as usual.

Ralf paid little attention to the youthful shepherds, to the three wise men, to the false-bearded Joseph, or to the diminutive Mary with her swaddled doll laid in a wooden manger.

Dusk had arrived. The lamps and candles had been lit. The interior of the church felt muggy: not only was the day unseasonably mild, but warmth was being generated by the breath and bodies of the congregation. Nearly the whole village was here, including the baron and his

household. Godric had arrived late last night. His two brothers, Henry and Gervase, were also home for Christmas.

From his place at the back of the nave, Ralf did not even try to look at Eloise.

They had been to bed together, in the workshop, four times in all. This despite the fact that Godric had told her, at the end of his last visit, that he had guessed what was going on. His initial attitude had been one of simple concern for his sister's welfare, and for Ralf's. She had denied his accusation, at which his tone had hardened. By mentioning their parents he had as good as said that he was prepared to tell the baron if the deception continued.

Having heard Eloise's account of this, Ralf had at first been very angry with the absent Godric. To Eloise he had accused him of arrogance, meddling self-righteousness, and of knowing nothing. What did Godric, the celibate, understand?

Later, on his own, Ralf had seen what lay behind his anger: guilt, engendered by the knowledge that Godric was right.

Even if Ralf and Eloise agreed to stop seeing each other, it was too late. She was disqualified from her own marriage. But they could not stop. Their need for each other only increased. As it increased it became ever more unhappy and oppressive.

Again Ralf had broached the idea of elopement. Again Eloise had rejected it. She had said that they could not hide anywhere without being denounced. No village would take them in and they had no way of subsisting and passing unnoticed in a town or city, especially in London, where

the need for money was greatest. If they tried to go abroad things would only be worse.

Whether or not Godric carried out his threat, they would be caught. If the matter remained in the baron's family it was unimaginable that he would allow his own daughter to be executed; otherwise she and Ralf would certainly be killed. In any case they would soon be parted.

An unspoken agreement had slowly become clearer to them both. Their only hope of staying together was in death, in making an escape on their own terms, at a time of their choosing.

Whether they did it was a question of belief. If they believed what Godric and Father Pickard, what the Bishop of Alincester and the Pope, what the whole world seemed to believe, they would accept that suicide was the worst possible crime which would hurl them both straight through Hellmouth and into the flames.

But Ralf did not believe as Godric did. He knew that now. He had never truly believed, despite his admiration of Jesus the man and teacher. Ralf's deity owned no name, expected no prayers or offerings or devotion, and indeed treated them with indifference – or contempt. It lived not only here in this church but in the sun and stars and clouds, in the curves of the downs, among the trees and in the wind that stirred them. It lived in the rain, in the plashes and rivulets, in the marshes and the waters of the estuary. It lived in the moon, in the tide-swell and the unending procession of grey-green waves, in the dazzle of the surf and the roar of the shingle-drag. And it lived in people, if only they would let it manifest.

This god lavished every luxury of effort and invention on all it did and made, for it knew only one quality: the

best. Yet it cared nothing for any of it. Ralf's years in a fishing-boat had taught him the value of an individual creature's life. Were men not the same as crabs? Sorted by size and tossed into baskets, were they also not left to suffocate and be sold?

He had spoken of these ideas to Eloise. She had not been shocked. Nor had she sought to argue, though she remained steadfast in her Christian faith and thus in her belief in Hell. Her tacit understanding and growing acceptance of their pact had raised in him a feeling of genuine awe. He had not been wrong about her.

Nothing had been arranged, decided, or even articulated. While Godric had been away they had let matters drift, but at their previous meeting, anticipating his return, their talk had been heavy with finality. Eloise had arranged to meet Ralf again tonight, insanely dangerous as that might be. They were becoming reckless, almost as if they wanted to be caught.

Flanked by his sister and grandfather, Ralf now for the first time considered the mechanics of killing himself and Eloise. A vague, contingent plan had formed in his mind. Somehow the workshop seemed inappropriate. Only the mill would do. They would go there and, perhaps, in the early hours of Christmas morning, make their farewells. If they failed in their resolve and survived beyond that time, nothing would be left for them but disgrace and pain.

A knife. That was the way. As sharp as he could make it, the blade drawn across their wrists. Such an end was supposed to be relatively easy.

There was a leather-knife in the workshop. He pictured himself honing it on the whetstone. He saw the streak of gleaming maroon appear in the white skin of her first

outheld wrist, immediately swelling; the other wrist presented; her silent gaze as he turned the blade on himself. Would they speak after that? Would they embrace as extinction came?

And in the morning, when they were missed, how long would it be before their bodies were found? Who would find them, and what of the aftermath? He thought of his parents and sister. It would be far worse for them if he were brought before the Justiciar; worse for the baron, worse for everyone.

Ralf looked up. The play was over. Father Pickard was already reciting the blessing.

The next time Ralf and Eloise would enter this building would be tonight, for midnight mass. They might not come here again, alive or dead.

Full darkness had set in. He noticed that the wind had increased. The rain had become heavier too, hitting the glass like pellets. The whole church seemed to vibrate to a dull, pounding percussion from the roof.

'Dear Lord, will it never stop?' said Ralf's mother, as they shuffled towards the open church door.

Ralf was at one with the unremitting weather and the winter gloom, but, for an instant, moving towards the door with Imogen at his side, he felt through his misery a peculiar surge of exhilaration raised by the drama unfolding inside his head. This was akin to the adolescent pride, hardly admitted even to himself, that rose in him whenever he thought of Eloise as his 'girl'. If she were that, then he was still a boy, and all this nonsense about knives and pacts was surely no more than childish fantasy.

But he was eighteen and no boy. A fortnight ago Eloise too had passed her eighteenth birthday. They were both

fully culpable under the law. Treason was not an occupation for children.

The worshippers were slower than usual to clear the porch. Parents were gathering children, struggling with hoods and hats, taking time to fasten the buttons and toggles on waterproofs. Father Pickard's hand was wet with rain.

'Ralf,' was all the acknowledgement he made, smiling, friendly, easy, before turning to Ralf's mother and father and then to those coming behind.

'Goodbye,' Ralf said, under his breath.

According to custom, the baron and his wife, followed by his family and their house-guests and senior retainers, had left the church first. Ralf was half expecting Godric to be waiting for him. They had not yet spoken today. Ralf was dreading the encounter. Without, as far as he knew, making it obvious, he looked about among those few ill-lit figures still lingering beyond the porch.

'Not there?' Imogen said.

'Who?'

'Godric. Who did you think I meant?'

'I'll see him later.'

In their tallowed coats and broad-brimmed hats, the two made haste along the flagstones, into blackness and the driving rain. Most unusually, Imogen did not take Ralf's arm. Even after passing through the lich-gate, she remained separate. Nor did she speak.

Their parents and grandfather had been detained by neighbours at the porch. Brother and sister were soon alone, making headway into the wind, splashing along the road beside the village green. There might have been, probably were, other people on the road, but nothing could

be seen except, faintly, the verges and some stray slivers of lamplight behind cottage shutters.

The gale was loudest from the right and ahead, where stood the three oaks. The swishing of their branches, like the noise of the sea, was now being underlaid by a deep, insistent moaning.

Still Imogen had not spoken.

Ralf could endure it no more. He said, 'Is something wrong?'

Her voice sounded harsher, more adult and resolute, than he had ever known it. 'I saw Eloise today.'

'And?'

'I asked her outright.'

'Asked her what?'

'Don't you start lying to me as well.'

He did not answer.

'You know what'll happen to you? To you both?'

'We know.'

'Ralf, how could you?'

How could he explain what had happened? He did not understand it himself. He said, 'Who told you?'

'No one had to tell me.'

'Not Godric?'

'Does he know about it?'

'Yes.'

'And he hasn't tried to stop you?'

'He has. He will.'

'But he hasn't stopped you yet?'

'No.'

'I must say I thought better of him than that.'

They reached the front path. Imogen halted in the darkness and grasped Ralf's sleeve to make sure that he halted too.

'Do you love her?'

'Yes.'

'Then why did you let it come to this?'

Once more he was unable to answer. This was the question at the core of his torment.

'Tell me you won't see her again.'

'I won't. I can't.'

'What about Father and Mother? What about Grandfather? What about the baron? What about everyone but yourselves? How could you be so selfish? I thought she was my friend. I thought —'

'Don't blame her. Blame me.'

'Ralf, I shall never ask anything of you but this. Do as Godric wants. Will you promise?'

'No.'

'I'll give you till tomorrow to change your mind. If you don't promise me then, I'll go to Father. I swear it.'

* * *

Ralf had little choice but to spend the rest of Christmas Eve at home, wondering at Imogen's ability to pretend that their conversation had never taken place; and at his own to behave normally in the face of his looming decision.

He had always seen himself as her protector. That comfort also had been lost to him. He could not rid his mind of the accusing bitterness in her voice. The word 'selfish' repeated itself over and over again. Was it really so? Was that what he was? And Eloise?

It was not difficult to guess what effect Imogen's confrontation was having on Eloise, and how badly each was feeling the loss of her friend.

Ralf had supposed Imogen's devotion to him to be permanent. He had taken her for granted. That had been wrong. Her love, any love, had to be deserved. He had betrayed her just as surely as he had betrayed Eloise, the baron and baroness, and his own parents. His treason had spread like a stain, from the King downwards, to poison everyone he loved.

He had never argued with his sister before. In all her life they had scarcely even disagreed. Yet she still loved him. The strength of her feelings told him so.

After supper he remained, physically, in the parlour with the others. The smallness of the room always made it seem overcrowded when the whole family was present; never more so than tonight.

The hearth, smoky at the best of times, was unusable in a high wind, so the fire again remained out. Light came from three rush-lamps, one of which stood on the rough table opposite him, next to Imogen, casting its draughty glow across the knitting in her lap. With four wooden pins, she was making new boot-socks for her grandfather.

Jacob was seated at his usual place in the corner, by the stair-foot door, talking about past Christmases at Mape. The wrinkles on his face were less obvious in the lamplight. The ruddiness of his complexion seemed to be a mark of good health rather than of a lifetime's exposure to the weather. His scarf and his heavy woollen tunic, worn over a thinner one to compensate for the lack of a fire, concealed for the most part the marks of age in his throat, chest and shoulders. Had it not been for his white hair and

beard, he might this evening have passed for a younger man. Even his firm, masculine voice, despite its slight and recently acquired whistle, made Ralf realise that Jacob too had once been eighteen.

Ralf thought about Jacob's bride, the grandmother he could barely remember, whose grave her husband tended every week, keeping the grass short, laying flowers. By rights Ralf should have had three uncles and an aunt on his mother's side, but Anna, the youngest, was the only child to have lived beyond the age of two. Ralf tried to imagine the suffering his grandparents had endured, and could not.

His parents were like that. So was Imogen, and so was Godric. In St Matthew, in the Sermon on the Mount, Christ called such people the salt of the earth. Ralf did not want to be parted from them, but he was being made to choose, and he knew what he must do. He was salt which had lost its savour; was good for nothing but to be cast out and trodden underfoot.

The wind had continued to strengthen, though for an hour or so past the downpour had eased. Now the rain began to renew itself with even greater force.

'I don't like the sound of that,' Jacob said. 'Not one bit. Wind's backing southerly.'

Linsell said, 'What about the boat? Is she secure?'

'They all are. We was down earlier, with the reeve. He was right enough about the storm.'

Ralf had been to help his grandfather and the other fishermen at the staith. He had himself heard Mr Kenway's pessimistic prediction, now coming true.

Mape was used to winter storms. There was at least one every year. The reeve was responsible to the steward for the precautions against damage: beaching, upturning and

tying down the boats, clearing the staith of loose objects, getting in the animals, fixing the doors and shutters of farm buildings.

To Ralf, Linsell said, 'We should have backfilled.'

'The dike, you mean?'

Except as somewhere he might meet Eloise, Ralf had almost forgotten about the mill. The project had scarcely crossed his mind all evening.

Jacob cast an apprehensive look at his son-in-law. 'You know there's a big spring tonight?'

'A sixteen footer. At least.'

'Sixteen one, Mr Kenway says. Sixteen three tomorrow night. That's the peak.'

Ralf said to his father, 'Are you worried about the screen?'

'We're liable, that's all.'

The excavations for the culvert and the sea-gates had left the dike effectively useless. Were it not for the screen, the sea would invade the unfinished pen, attack the earthworks, and undermine the foundations of the mill-house.

Linsell was required to supply the baron with his mill no later than the date specified in their contract. He had considered most carefully the risks posed by fire and storms.

Like the timber framing of the mill itself, the screen had been deliberately over-engineered. The piles stood well above the height of the highest high tide. The proofing comprised a heavy canvas lining, nailed in place, and sandbags restrained by a tarred net of hempen rope. The sandbags were small, solidly packed, and made of the best hessian. They had been tarred and laid in overlapping

courses with the tar still wet. The sloping profile of the proofing had been designed to deflect the waves. No more could have been done to improve the screen. Linsell had once told Ralf that it was more resistant to the sea than the dike itself, a fact of which Ralf reminded him.

'Even so, we ought to have filled in.'

Anna adjusted her lamp. 'Ralf,' she said, using a tone which brooked no opposition, 'I don't want you sleeping in that workshop tonight. We'll make you up a bed here.'

Imogen met his eye. Her fingers did not break their rhythm; her pins did not stop clicking; and her face remained, except for the subtlest lift of her eyebrows, quite neutral.

Ralf looked away, feeling worse than ever. Eloise was due at the workshop some time in the early hours, whenever she deemed it safest. If he obeyed this injunction and spent the night here, he would have to get word to her at midnight mass. It was unthinkable for her to risk coming downstairs from her chamber in the dark, to climb through the parlour window and make her way through the storm to the workshop, only for her to find him absent. But there was no chance whatever of speaking to Eloise in private at the church. That meant he had to go to the workshop himself, which meant in turn that nothing had changed.

'Tomorrow,' Imogen had said.

Yet again Ralf tried to piece together the events that had led him to this. Sometimes he hated Eloise, so violent and volatile were his passions and his feelings of bewilderment. She was an incubus who had descended on him from nowhere, from the Long Barn, from the dream which, looking back, had constituted his life. Before Eloise his

days had been straightforward, his hopes and ambitions clear-cut and easy to understand. Now he was hemmed in. All exits had been blocked but one. It was incomprehensible, impossible, that she had so quickly brought him low: impossible that he could be sitting here on Christmas Eve with his family, contemplating death and weighing the chances of thus circumventing the threats of his sister and his friend.

And now even the weather was involved. Not only had it trapped him at home but, at about ten o'clock, word went round the village that the storm was becoming so terrible that for the first time in memory the traditional midnight Christ's Mass had been cancelled.

* * *

The howling of the wind would alone have kept Ralf from sleep, but the storm outside was calmer than the one in his head. By midnight he had given up any idea of going to the workshop. Not even Eloise would venture out in such conditions.

In the past he had always been drawn by the glamour of extreme weather. Even as a small boy he had never been afraid of thunder. One June night, alerted by a distant rumble in the stifling heat, he had revelled in the long and minatory approach from the west of an electric storm. Shawcross Street was on a slope: his window looked down towards the centre of Alincester. The abject roofscape had flinched at each blink, at each bang, each fulminating peal. Ralf had been thrilled by the noise of it all, so loud and extravagant, so careless of human rest, so magnificently indifferent, that it banished for ever the delusion that

grown-ups controlled anything of importance. In each flash the city had been revealed, transformed, the cathedral's densely scaffolded west front lit up as if Jove himself were fain to inspect the ant-like efforts of his subjects. Even after the deluge had set in, the six-year-old had remained sitting along his window ledge, his casement thrown wide, hoping to glimpse just once more the overwhelmed gutters and gargoyles, the whole glistening length of the cathedral roof shedding cataracts of water.

This rainstorm tonight, equally torrential, could not have been less glamorous or welcome. Instead of excitement it produced worry: dull, gnawing, becoming colder and more fretful with the passage of each hour.

Jacob's cottage was making a poor job of withstanding it. As much as its chimney and leaking shutters, the cracks and joints in the flinty walls were letting the water in. For some time the rafters had been creaking as though a huge and impatient hand were trying to yank the roof from the house. Only the thatch was proving its worth, though Ralf feared that at any second the whole lot might be shredded away downwind.

He remembered the thatch being laid. The same four men had thatched the mill. They functioned in, carried about with them, an air of competence, like Jacob and Edwin in the boat, or Ralf's own father. Two of the four were twins, sandy-haired, benevolent, plump, and it was one of these – Ralf could never be sure which – who was the master. The master always did the tricky bits. He had finished the ridge: its woven sedge was a work of art.

Lying in the darkness, Ralf mentally surveyed the mill from the ridge downwards. He reviewed each stage and detail of the construction, the effort and craftsmanship that

had been expended on the frame and foundations. The mill had been planned with bad weather in mind. Its position could hardly have been more exposed. Linsell had anticipated rough seas and high winds. A worse tempest than this would be needed to unseat his work.

Then Ralf recalled the gap in the dike.

His father was right: they should have filled it in. By leaving it open, they had made themselves dependent on the screen of piling, and the piling had been erected by others.

Yet those men with the shears also knew their trade. They had helped to make docks, flood defences, bridges and jetties all along the south coast, not least for the Navy. There was no reason to be anxious on that score.

Ralf's mind had reached the lathe-room. He recalled Eloise and her Aunt Béatrice, perfumed, stylish, grand, standing there and taking incongruous interest in the work. Imogen had been with them, the impoverished friend on a borrowed mare, whose clothes in comparison had been shabby. But she was just as much a lady as either; perhaps, compared with Béatrice, more. He remembered their riding-boots resounding on the floorboards, thought of the bloodstain he had inverted, and realised that, were it not for the storm, he and Eloise might at this moment have been together again in that room.

Just then a sound of splitting, or wrenching, was followed by a diffuse crash. The ground seemed to shake.

Ralf leapt to his feet. His first idea was that the roof had come off the Rendells' house and been driven into Jacob's, but he had felt no impact from the walls, and decided the cottage had not after all been hit.

A light was hurriedly descending the stairs. The door opened.

'What was that?' Ralf's father said. 'Something down here?'

'It could have been a tree,' Ralf said. 'On the green. One of the oaks.'

Linsell looked over his shoulder, at Imogen, who had just appeared. Like himself and Ralf, she was still fully dressed. 'Fetch the others, please, Im,' he said. 'It's getting too risky up there.'

* * *

They passed the rest of the night in the parlour. Linsell thought the roof vulnerable. Beams and rubble might fall into the bedchambers. Staying indoors was dangerous, but the alternative, in the dark, would be far worse.

Towards dawn the wind abated somewhat, though rain continued falling. In the first glimmers of daylight Ralf and his father donned their waterproofs and left the cottage by the back door.

The main structure seemed to be unscathed, though the privy door now hung by a single hinge and was on the point of coming off. The narrow garden was full of debris – twigs, mostly. While his father continued to scrutinise the house from the rear, Ralf went round to the front.

On the green, one of the Three Sisters had been blown over. The entire root-ball had come up, so much had the last weeks' rain softened the soil. Like Jacob's rear and front gardens, the village green and street were littered with broken branches, twigs and thatch. Several houses on either side of the green had sustained damage, mostly to

their roofs. The front elevation of Jacob's appeared to have come through intact, as had the Hall, its tower, and the church.

'Let's do it, then, Ralf,' Linsell said, as he joined him by the road. 'Let's look. Bit late for praying, I suppose.'

Ralf wanted to reassure him, but could not.

More people were emerging from their houses. Ralf walked with his father to the path beside the church. Father Pickard, Mr Caffyn and the sexton were already in the graveyard. One of the bigger lime-trees had fallen diagonally, crushing several of the yews, smashing headstones. The furthest tips of its branches were broken and bent against the wall of the church itself. Several other limes had lost large limbs. Looking towards the Hall, a gap had appeared in the stand of trees there.

Linsell shouted a question to Mr Caffyn. 'Has anyone been hurt?'

'Not that I know! I've only just come out!'

'Me too!'

Ralf opened the gate to the footpath. As they passed the yew tree he was unable to prevent himself from looking at the roots, though he knew no pebble would be there. For all its destructive power, the storm felt unreal, like his sleepless night, like the sluggish dawn and the uniquely unfamiliar beginning to this day. It was as though he were already dead; as though Hell were a twilit place where the rain never stopped.

Following his father's lead, he clambered over and through the branches of a lime-bough and approached the stock-gate.

Ralf had never known his father to utter an oath, even under his breath, even when he had hurt himself. As for

profanity, Linsell forbade it in his presence. But now, above the wind, Ralf distinctly heard him say, 'Great God above!'

From here, away to the left, the mill would just be visible. That was why they had come, to see if it was still there. But neither of them had yet thought to turn in that direction.

The grazing, the reeds, the whole marsh west of the church dike, hundreds and hundreds of acres, had disappeared. The lapping, wind-blown edge of the floodwater, interrupted here and there along its length by clumps and stalks of grass, was no more than eighty yards from this spot. Ralf thought the land itself had been washed away. Then his eye, hampered by rain and the half-light, perceived the line, a mile distant, of the beach. Beyond it he saw waves so gigantic and surf so wild that he wondered that any of the shingle-bank remained at all. A long section of it had vanished, been brushed aside, and through this gap, at high tide in the early hours, the sea had poured unimpeded.

Shielding his eyes from the rain, Linsell was already peering to the left. Far away along the line of the eastern dike Ralf too now made out the solid, familiar form of the black walls and thatched roof of the mill.

'Do you think the steward knows yet?' Linsell said. 'About the marsh?'

Before he could answer, Ralf turned to see Mr Caffyn approaching.

At first he was too shocked to speak.

'The beach can be re-made,' Linsell told him, as though embarrassed that the mill had not also been swept away.

'I know.' The steward was still trying to assimilate the new sea that had been made of one of the most productive

parts of his domain. 'The bank went in '32, further east. So the record says. But the expense. And we've lost the reed-harvest altogether. Just look at it.'

'Any cattle out there?'

'Kenway got them in.'

'That's something.'

With this, Mr Caffyn seemed to awake. He turned to Linsell. 'What about the mill?'

'It looks all right. We're going out now to check.'

'Be careful,' said the steward, but his attention had already returned to the flood, to the cost of repairing the damage and the implications for the manor. He turned away. 'I must tell His Lordship.'

3

From a distance, the aligned humps of the upturned fishing-boats resembled outsized crustaceans clinging to the highest part of the foreshore. They had resisted the storm completely. As Ralf drew near he could make out the ropes and pegs with which he himself had helped to fix them down. The bulbous, clinker-built hulls, like the precincts of the staith, the glossy boards of the landing-stage, and the windward parts of the sheds, were strewn with fragments of bright-green weed and glaucous saltmarsh plants.

The brown stream flowing down the track had widened at the bottom, around the staith, into a flood. Puckered by raindrops and shivering before the wind, it seemed to be waiting for a yet greater flood to subsume it. Ralf saw that if the church dike gave way, the water presently trapped in the Great Marsh would be released with a rush into the

harbour and might well hole the eastern dike at the village end. If that happened, much of the area behind the eastern dike – including the unfinished earthworks for the pen – would be threatened by this afternoon's high tide.

Beside his father he waded across, knee-deep. Though their boots and leggings were already soaked, the water struck him as spitefully cold. He cast a glance skywards.

Linsell said, 'There's more to come, by the look of it.'

With squelching steps they negotiated the path along the top of the dike. The way was not easy. A few hundred yards on, Linsell slipped and fell. Helping him up, Ralf was aware of their frailty and transience, their smallness in the landscape. He thought again of his failure to meet Eloise last night; and he thought again of Imogen's threat. 'Tomorrow' was here. At what time today would her patience run out? How long would she give him?

To their left lay the big arable field, which was now so waterlogged that large pools occupied the lower-lying parts. To their right stretched the estuary, being increasingly exposed by the ebbing tide. The salty wind across it smelled not just of mud and weed: it bore a faintly gangrenous tang, as though the sea in its storm-throes had dredged from the abyss and left beached some colossal corpse, a rotting monster, a leviathan or kraken, the fabled xiphias or rosmarine. Ralf had been told about these creatures by Godric, who had learned of them at Leckbourne. Godric's account had been so descriptive that Ralf felt almost as if he himself had been privileged to turn the vellum pages of the abbey's bestiaries; as if he himself had been stirred by the words of the ancient authors or seen the bizarre and frightening drawings so faithfully reproduced by the monks.

The sea, inconceivably vast, constrained for landlubbers by a curved horizon, had opened itself up and fallen on Mape. Struggling towards the mill, delirious with exhaustion and worry, it seemed to Ralf that sea and Church were of the same. Under a deceptive surface, both concealed teeming complexities, unknown terrors, inky and sinister depths. Both were capable of wreck as well as creation: for both were manifestations of the Almighty, and unless he destroyed he could not also create. Ralf had glimpsed the beginnings of the answer to his conundrum, but the idea was so tenuous that he had trouble in pursuing it, and when, a moment later, his father turned and spoke again, he lost the thread altogether.

'Can you see it?' Linsell said, pointing.

'What?'

'Up in the corner there.'

They had left the field behind and drawn level with the first of the lagoons. The new chalk-track was largely under water. They had been forced to keep to the top of the dike. Ahead, the harbour entrance was rougher than Ralf had ever known it. Waves extended far up the channel towards the staith. It was obvious that the shore here had been punished almost as severely as the open beach. On the far side of the channel, at least a quarter of the dunes and saltings at the end of the Point had gone. Ralf could hardly recognise the view.

The mill-house was yet two hundred yards off. Until now he had been approaching it with a sort of complacency, for it seemed, like the upturned shallops, to have shrugged off the storm entirely.

Beyond the mill, where the eastward trend of the dike reached its limit and turned, he made out something odd in

the shape of the embankment. For a distance of fifteen or twenty yards, part of it had subsided.

When they got to the spot they found that the mortar and boulders on the seaward face had been dislodged, revealing the earthen body of the dike. Only the retreat of the tide had prevented it from being breached.

Last night, somewhere above the storm, there had hung a new moon, a perfect and invisible circle of blackness. Its consequent spring, the highest tide of the year, was due today, an hour after dusk. If repairs to the dike were not carried out beforehand, the sea would come into the pen, break through the excavations and assail the screen from behind. The proofing might be lost. In any case, the hardcore underpinning the foundations would be washed away. Then, within a few hours at most, the building would collapse. Linsell would be ruined. He would never be able to repay what he owed the baron.

'Ralf —'

'I know what to do.'

'As many as you can.'

'What about more baskets?'

'Don't bother. We've got the barrows. No chance of bringing horses. But fetch some food out here, and water. I'll make a start while you're gone.'

Ralf turned and, in his flapping coat and sodden boots, started running for the village.

* * *

Eloise had drawn on the deepest reserves of her lifelong schooling for the court. She had summoned all her native powers. Her external calm could withstand any scrutiny.

As this dreadful day had begun to unfurl she had even surprised herself. Till now she had not realised how thoroughly she had been groomed to shape and deliver lies, of fact and omission and, even subtler, by implication. Godric's questioning had been turned aside. He had been fended off. For the present he seemed satisfied that the affair had stopped.

Imogen was another matter. She was like the rupture that had appeared in the shingle-bank. Catastrophe must follow, whether she spoke to Godric or to her own parents.

Eloise moved serenely through the Hall, attending to her parents and their guests. She had helped yesterday with the decorations for the church and house, with evergreen wreaths and sprays of box, ivy, pine, yew, and berried holly, or 'Christ's-thorn', as the older serfs still called it.

Her mother had deputed her to supervise preparations for tonight's feast in the Hall, to which some of the neediest as well as the most prominent villagers had been invited. For this reason Eloise had risen especially early. Many details remained to be settled.

Such was her aplomb that she had mastered her urge to see, be with, and talk to Ralf. She hoped he had had the good sense not to expect her at the workshop last night. Storm or no, she had been unable to get away. Her mother had changed the sleeping arrangements. For lack of space, one of her cousins, a boy of fourteen, had slept in the parlour. It was through the parlour window that Eloise went out at night.

All her brothers and aunts were here, together with her paternal uncle and his family. There were three other house-guests, two bachelors and a widow.

At first the guests had not understood the gravity of the news brought by the steward. They had regarded the storm as merely picturesque. Even the two lime-trees that had crashed across the lawn had excited little more than amusement. Her father, ever the host, had not seen fit to disabuse them. After all, this was not the first time in the history of his manor that the shingle had failed. The marsh had been under water before. As soon as the wind had blown itself out, as soon as the sacred day had passed, the villeins would be directed to rebuild the beach. The flood would seep away, and by spring there would again be black cattle peacefully grazing the turf.

Unlike the house-guests, Eloise had an idea of how much labour and money it took to move shingle about. The yielding surface of the stones doubled the effort. Only with difficulty could they be shovelled. It was almost as quick to gather them by hand. Movable boardwalks, jointed with rope, had to be laid for the wheelbarrows. These required great quantities of planks which afterwards were fit only to be burned. Eloise did not know how much it would all cost but, from the worry in her father's eyes, even as he smiled and reassured his guests, she saw that he did.

Mr Caffyn, dripping rainwater in the lobby, had brought more bad news. She had overheard him saying that both he and Mr Kenway thought the church dike might not bear repeated fillings. It had been designed to resist a flood from the east, not the west. Prolonged rainfall would have weakened the dike just as it must have weakened the shingle, loosening and lubricating its structure. If the pent-up waters were released there was a chance they would breach the eastern dike. The manor's largest and most

valuable field could be inundated, its strip-boundaries lost and its fertile topsoil washed away or poisoned with salt.

More than this, a flood would race eastwards to invade the Severals and the unfinished mill-pen. The workings for the sea-gates and culvert had left the foundations of the mill-house open to the elements.

If the sea demolished the mill, Master Grigg would be responsible for rebuilding it. But did he have the means? Had he bought insurance? In view of the tender price, Mr Caffyn did not think so. The manor might sue him in the king's own court, but what use was a debt that could not be recovered? The steward had roundly cursed himself for his lack of foresight, at which her father had touched his forearm and told him not to be foolish. This storm was exceptional.

And it was not yet over. According to Mr Kenway, the lull this morning might only have been that. The wind had not dropped much below gale force and, ominously, was turning east of south.

There was more trouble inland: buildings damaged in both Mape and Eyton, poplars lost, livestock killed and injured during a panic in the Long Barn.

Learning all this, Eloise had been unable to stop an unworthy thought from entering her mind. She knew that her father was depending on the mill for her dowry. Without it there would be no wedding next October.

No sooner had this idea occurred to her than she had dismissed it as disgusting. What kind of daughter could rally at the thought of her father's misfortune? The same kind, she supposed, who could deceive him in every other way, who was untruthful, weak and dutiless, who sought

only her own gratification; and who had not even considered the fate of Master Grigg.

Perhaps it was for the best that Imogen was about to bring matters to a head. Eloise did not think she could last out until October. Without Imogen, she had faced an impossible dilemma: should she confess beforehand, or should she let the ceremony proceed? Should she then throw herself on the mercy of her new husband? Which shame would be less for her family? Which course would be more likely to protect Ralf and his parents?

She had become so wretched and heartsick, so tired, that she had given ear to a disturbing trend in Ralf's talk. He had not said as much, but he was thinking of making the coward's escape.

Damnation awaited them whatever happened. They were sinners, and sinners went to Hell. Repentance might save them, but her redemption would be an act of self-interest, because her father would have to pay its price in disgrace. He would be laughed out of court, or worse. For such a high-minded man, the contempt of his inferiors would be insufferable. It would rob him of his purpose in life, his service to England and the King.

So Eloise had not silenced Ralf, as she should. Indeed, she had been tempted by the prospect he had held out. Yesterday, after her break with Imogen, and particularly, somehow, during the Nativity play, she had begun to consider it in earnest.

Imogen was motivated by a desire to defend her brother and parents, whom she loved most dearly. Eloise did not doubt that she would act. Imogen was so direct, so open and uncomplicated, so pure, that she had immediately identified and seized the heart of the canker that

threatened her family. Eloise must stop seeing Ralf. It was as simple as that.

In Imogen's disappointment and pain Eloise had seen that she had cared for her too, had perhaps loved her; perhaps even still.

Last night, as the storm had racked the roofs and tower of the Hall, Eloise had seen a way out. Going again and again over what Imogen had said, the memory of her face, her lustrous grey eyes, her beauty, had become suffused with seraphic radiance, as if she were a herald sent to put Eloise's feet in the path leading to salvation for Ralf and release for Robert Ingram, for her father and the King.

At dinner there had been talk of the route followed by pilgrims through Alincester to Bishop's Waltham and Portsmouth, across the sea to the sanctuary of Mont St Michel and onward to Santiago de Compostela, where St James the Apostle was entombed. Godric had told his uncle about a gruelling detour into the mountains taken by a handful of the most righteous, to a remote and inaccessible crag above Luz. Here, over a hundred years ago, a Carthusian convent had been established, renowned for its piety and rigour.

Eloise possessed enough jewellery, her own property which she could sell, to get passage to Bordeaux. If there were any money left over she would buy a horse or an ass; otherwise she would walk. She would prostrate herself at the feet of the prioress and beg for admittance, beg for the chance to leave her worldly clothes and cares behind, to take the tonsure and dedicate herself to penitence and God.

In her bed, she had been certain of this plan. It had given her an hour or two of peace. She had even forgotten the gale, and slept.

But this morning doubt had begun to arise. Was there really merit in this course? She had never before considered a life of contemplation. Unlike Godric, she had no predisposition to it. What would a nunnery be to her, unless another form of craven escape? How could her flight help her father?

It was an alternative to suicide. That was all. Eloise would never kill herself, unless to save another. Approaching the kitchen, she finally put the horrible idea from her mind for good. That Ralf had even thought of such a thing was a sign of how grievously they had sinned. Ralf, strong, youthful Ralf, who was energy and optimism incarnate, Ralf who so brimmed with life, who was so gentle and brave and kind; that Ralf had been brought to this was her doing. She would never be able to atone for that.

But she could make a start, and the start could be made now. She decided to renounce him. Never again would their bodies and spirits merge. They had kissed for the last time.

As she inspected the pots and the turning spits, as she listened to the complaints of Aelfleda, the chief cook, she could feel the size and weight of her loss growing inside her. It was worse, far worse, than she could ever have imagined. Her future without him had begun.

'Them there shallots is rotted, Miss, and that's the truth.'

The shallots had been harvested too late. 'Onions are every bit as good,' Eloise said, agreeing with her. 'Nobody will mind, I'm sure, as long as you don't use so many.'

She wished she could speak to Imogen. Then again, perhaps too much had been said already. Actions – or lack of them – were what counted now.

As Eloise was leaving the kitchen, Hubert ushered in a figure from the lobby of the west door. He was forty feet away: she did not recognise him. His averted face was hidden by the brim of a tallowed sealskin hat and his shoulders were covered by the reinforced yoke of a rainproof dreadnought, much spattered and begrimed. His leggings were filthy. His mud-caked boots left grey footmarks across the flagstones. The newcomer's bearing spoke of urgency, disaster. Eloise's father was already advancing to meet him. There was command in the upright way the man carried himself, in the sureness of his movements: in the very way he took off his hat. With a jolt of surprise, of realisation of what had been hers and what she had given up, she saw his shaggy blond hair and knew him to be Ralf.

* * *

'Are you sure about this?' said Ralf, half turning and raising his voice above the wind, so that he would not have to repeat himself again.

'Just keep going,' Godric said breathlessly. Following Ralf's lead, he lengthened his step to avoid a crumbling section of the path.

Again Ralf glanced ahead, at the turbulence of the offing, a mile and more away, visible between the transformed landscape of the Point and the end of the dike. The fishermen were rightly wary of the undertows there, where eastward currents from the Point shore met the outflow from the estuary. Ralf could not even begin to imagine how much water had fallen last night on the downs, or how many millions of gallons were sliding each minute into the

harbour. Accelerated by the ebbing tide, fresh water was colliding head-on with salt. The strengthening wind had turned even more towards the south-east, and was itself contributing to the tumult.

And now the rain was again becoming heavy.

He heard Godric say, 'I'd do it anyway,' he said, 'for your father as much as mine.'

Ralf was touched, even though he doubted that Godric was strong enough to be of much use. It might have been better had he stayed home.

But behind Godric, also wearing rainproofs and carrying shoulder-bags crammed with food and drink, came his strapping brother Gervase, their uncle, and two other noblemen, the de Maepes' guests, whose names and titles Ralf had already forgotten. Henry, Mr Tysoe and the bailiff were some way back; Jacob had gone on ahead, and would by now have reached the site. Mr Caffyn, Mr Kenway, the doorward, and the baron himself were still in the village, trying to raise volunteers.

Except for Jacob, not one of the serfs had agreed to help. Even Edwin Maw had refused a direct appeal. He had said this was the holiest day of the year. It would be blasphemous to do as the manor asked.

Only the serfs' religious objections had been voiced, but others had been uttered just as clearly, in the sullen and gloating language of their eyes. At bottom they were still Saxons held down by the usurping Normans. Didn't the Seigneur make enough demands on his people during the rest of the year? Even slaves were entitled to a holiday. Besides, what did the mill signify to them? It was being built by His Lordship for his own benefit, not theirs. What did they care if the damned thing fell down? Some were

probably hoping it would, because that might mean more day-labour and more silver pennies to hide under their beds. As for the two-hundred-acre field, that had flooded before and would certainly flood again. Mape was by the sea. What did the baron expect? It served him right, him and his miserly ways. The eastern dike should have been reinforced years ago; the church dike too, and the shingle. Any prudent landowner would have done as much.

When Ralf had reached the village, he had gone straight to the steward's office. Finding it empty, he had pounded the bronze dolphin against its plate on the west door. That entrance to the Hall was reserved for the family, for persons of rank and invitees. It was at the north door that he should have applied to speak to the baron, but that would have taken longer for them both to reach, and every moment lost was one less in which the evening tide could be defeated.

Ralf had seen Eloise in the great hall, and she had seen him. She had kept away from the gathering of the menfolk. When it had become obvious that not only the baron's sons and chief retainers but the baron himself meant to accompany Ralf back along the dike to the mill, the adult male guests had offered their services, not fully understanding, perhaps, what was required: brute labour, menial and possibly dangerous, to be kept up all day in rain and wind. Any flippancy in their manner had disappeared once they had heard the baron and Mr Caffyn issuing orders.

Back at the Hall after his fruitless attempts to rouse the serfs, and while the others had still been getting ready, Ralf had for a minute been left alone with Godric. He had been expecting Godric to allude in some veiled way to Eloise.

Instead he had been his old, his usual self. The scandal was surely dominating his thoughts; but, every inch the aristocrat, he was permitting no trace of it to show.

As they proceeded along the dike, Ralf began to see the real reason why he wished Godric had stayed behind. Godric should have spoken. He should have been angry, told Ralf to leave his sister alone, threatened him with violence. Ralf had betrayed Godric and his whole family. He had repaid their trust by seducing their youngest daughter and jeopardising the patriarch's reputation. Godric's urbane silence went against human decency. It was not civilised but effete. In such silences did the nobility conduct themselves. In such did high-born daughters wed the unseen sons of dukes; and in the same miasma of deceit did embassies to foreign courts seal their corrupt and decadent business. At least the serfs made no bones about their feelings, even if they did have to mind their tongues.

Ralf began to find Godric's presence intolerable. There was not much he could do about it now, for they had finally passed the mill-house and were nearing the place where Jacob and Linsell were at work on the dike.

Linsell was at the base of the outer slope, crouching precariously among the ruin the sea had made of the granite facing. Jacob had just brought a barrowload of ragstone. Chunk by chunk, he was tossing it down for his son-in-law to pack.

The barrow was one of those used in the pen, with a ribbed and broadened wheel. It had already left four ruts in the muddy path along the top of the dike, interrupted by and remade across the imprint of sea-boots.

Clambering as quickly as he dared up the slope, Linsell reached the top in time to meet Ralf as he arrived. 'Is this

all?' he said, looking beyond Ralf's shoulder, ignoring Godric. 'Is this all you've brought?'

'The serfs won't come.'

Jacob said, 'I told you they wouldn't.'

'But – there must be others. This isn't enough. We'll never do it in time.'

'His Lordship's coming himself. And the steward and reeve and doorward. That'll make fourteen of us. More, if the baron can persuade them.'

Squinting against the rain, Linsell involuntarily looked up, towards the south and east, just as if the sun, or even brightness, could be seen.

'It's still early,' Ralf said. 'We've got the whole day. Till dark.'

'That's high water itself.'

To Ralf's surprise, Jacob said, 'Jabbering won't mend the blessed dike. Let's get on with it.'

It was as if he had drawn authority from the storm, or from the sea itself, his place of work. In his quaint, quiet fashion, Jacob had always drummed into Ralf the need to beware the sea, to fear and respect it as a most dangerous foe. With the same underlying modesty he deferred to Linsell's education, intelligence and rank. Expert as he was in the ways of the sea, Jacob did not forget his place. He was a serf, the son of serfs. But out here, this morning, far from the village and the Hall, in this emergency at the very edge of the land, Ralf suddenly saw his grandfather in a new light.

Ralf felt himself swelling with admiration as Jacob turned to Godric and his two brothers, to their uncle and the two house-guests. 'You sirs. See that shed yonder? You'll find barrows in there like this one, with mud-tyres.

Pray get one each, fill it with small ragstone from that pile, and hurry along back here.' To Linsell he said, 'Ralf and me'll start bringing mortar.'

4

This morning's high tide had turned at four o'clock. This evening's was due at twenty past four, which would put low water at about ten thirty.

The height of the coming tide had been predicted at sixteen feet three, twenty-five inches above the average. When the sea was calm, its level would reach no nearer than four feet from the top. In a storm, however, overspill was to be expected.

The dike had been built with such tides in mind. Its minimum height was eleven feet six. Ralf had heard Mr Caffyn estimating that it would take the sea about three and a quarter hours after low tide to reach the base of the dike. Because of the shallow angle of approach, the rise till then would appear quite rapid. Thereafter the water would cover the slope of the dike at a rate of ten or eleven inches an hour.

By midday, or thereabouts, Ralf began to fear they were not making enough progress. No serfs had appeared, though the baron had brought many of his male servants and had managed to recruit six men from the families of the senior tenants. The work was slow and hazardous. The rain and wind had moderated, but the top of the dike had become slippery from the passage and repassage of so many boots and wheels.

The larger rocks were too heavy and awkward for a barrow. They had to be carried between two or four men,

using the pen-builders' stretchers. There were not enough pairs of gauntlets for everybody. Ralf's hands and those of his father were by now bleeding and covered in mud and grit. Mr Caffyn would not trust anyone but himself, Linsell, Ralf, Mr Kenway, and Mr Hodson, his bailiff, to set the stone.

The distinction between master and man had been inverted. The tenants and noblemen were acting as mere beasts of burden. For a curious few minutes Ralf had reflected on the buried, unspoken, long-nursed resentments of the serfs. Two centuries had passed since the advent of the Conqueror. What now was Ralf himself? And Eloise? There were no longer such creatures here as Normans or Saxons: only the English. Both alike spoke of the French, all the French, as the enemy.

Lord de Maepe was working as hard as anyone. He had barely paused for breath since reaching the site.

Ralf's astonishment at seeing the baron thus employed had long since dulled. As much as the heavy, mindless and repetitive exertion, the weather had rendered him numb. So much water had trickled down his neck that his clothes had become saturated, and so feverishly was he working that he, like most of the others, had become over-warm. Ralf's rainproofs were near the bottom of a heap of others on the landward side of the dike. His leggings and quilted tunic, his shirt and breeches, glistened and oozed with almost every motion of his body.

His dreading thoughts of Imogen and what she might say, of Eloise, of the consequences for his father if the dike did not hold: these mental wanderings had receded and become blurred and distant, as though belonging to somebody else. His only reality now was the advancing

edge of the tide. Every so often he felt drawn to waste a glance, first at the mudflats and then at the pebbly foreshore. Each time he did, unreasonably more territory had been claimed by the swollen, rain-pocked surface of the brine.

For twenty yards the top of the dike had subsided, here by a few inches, there by three or four feet. At the steward's direction, the party had as yet made no attempt to fill in. The job could be tackled last. If there were no time even for that, the spillage would be nothing compared to the devastation caused by wholesale collapse of the dike. What mattered was reproofing the outer face, starting at the bottom and working upwards.

Of the original granite in the damaged section, the sea had carried away at least half. Many of the boulders had been dragged, by as much as a furlong, out into the estuary. Most of the smaller stones had simply vanished. The men had salvaged as much of the remainder as they could. The rest was being supplied by the Kentish ragstone intended for the bund.

Ralf was conscious that this was the worst day of his life. The future surely held a day worse yet, but it could not be more crushing than this. He had been exhausted yesterday. Last night he had not slept. This morning, in mud-clogged boots and rainproofs, he had run the two miles along the dike to the village. He had marched out here twice, once with his father and again with Godric and the rest. Since then he had not stopped at all.

He let go of his trowel and looked up acceptingly. Bernard, the senior tenant's son, threw down another head-sized lump of ragstone. It landed near by with a hollow thud and rolled a few inches. Before it had come to

rest, Ralf grabbed it and tried to fit this piece among its new neighbours, but even in that simple endeavour his mind was slowing.

The baron appeared with another barrow filled with leather buckets of mortar. Ralf heard his father, to his right, calling something up at him, but his words were flung away on the wind and the baron did not hear them. 'What did you say?'

Linsell shouted again. 'No more of that, my lord! Not after this! It won't have time to set!'

The mortar was a riddle which had been troubling Ralf for a long time past. Lime mortar would not set in this rain, but Mr Caffyn had concurred with Linsell in insisting that they use it as far up the slope as possible. Ralf supposed that, sheltered by the rocks, some of it at least could be expected to harden. That which didn't would be washed down to a lower level. The mix they were using, stiff as it was, would need a couple of hours for the surface to set sufficiently to resist even calm seawater.

His father's instruction had come earlier than Ralf had expected. He looked over his shoulder again. The slopping water had almost reached the base of the dike.

They were not going to do it in time.

'Another!' he was about to say, but Bernard was looking elsewhere, towards the village, towards the rapid approach of a stocky, middle-aged man whom it took Ralf a moment to recognise as Father Pickard. His pointed cap, concealing his characteristic pate, made him look different, younger, despite his beard, but the skirts of his rainproof did not quite hide the hem of his habit, soaked now and just as muddy as his impractical, everyday, boots.

His arrival gave Ralf the wild hope that he had at mass sermoned the serfs on their duty to the manor and was coming to announce that the whole workforce was on its way. The same idea had obviously seized the baron, who was already helping to close the few yards remaining between himself and the priest.

Ralf gained the top of the dike and joined the huddle of men too late to hear the beginning of the talk, but he understood at once that no serfs were going to appear. It seemed that Father Pickard had merely come to help in person.

'No,' the baron said. 'I can't allow it.'

For some reason, Father Pickard, noticing Ralf, turned in his direction. 'Ralf, tell him not to be so pig-headed.'

Ralf was taken aback. He had never seen the Father like this before. His composure had deserted him. He was not so much a priest as a plain man determined to act: exasperated, perhaps even enraged, by the serfs. Ralf stammered, dimly aware of the bishop, of the diocesan panel and Molarius, of the whole grandiose apparatus of opposition embodied by the Church. 'Father – it wouldn't be right. Besides, it's dangerous out here. Too dangerous for you.'

'Damn it, Ralf,' said Father Pickard, glancing at the baron. 'This man is my friend.'

'Joseph,' said the baron. 'Go back to the village and ring the tocsin. Tell them – tell them every man who comes will get sixpence. A shilling. We must have more people.'

'It's true,' Mr Caffyn said. 'We shan't finish, otherwise.'

'I'll tell them a sight more than that.'

As he returned to his work, Ralf wondered what Father Pickard had meant; what, exactly, he would say to the

villagers that he had not urged on them already. He wondered whether he would, presumably for a second time, absolve them from breaking the holy feast; whether he would lecture them on the unfailing decency of the baron and his steward; and whether he would mention brotherly love, or even, on this of all days, the name of Jesus Christ.

Even as this thought passed through Ralf's overwrought mind, a shower of spray hit his back. The incoming tide had broken its first wave on the base of the dike.

* * *

The unstoppable fading of daylight and the unstoppable rise of the tide proceeded in tandem. As the dusk deepened the heaving water came ever closer to the top. Eager to surpass itself, the sea began casting speculative froth, wind-borne, over the boots and barrows of the men. Then, without warning, to shouts of dismay, an especially adventurous wave, a drenching pioneer, filled the subsidence and left it seething.

Its following companions seemed daunted by this feat. Ten, fifteen, twenty more tried and failed to match it. Just when Ralf thought the tide must have turned, a second big wave proved him wrong. So much water poured over the path that the pile of rainproofs was scattered and carried halfway down the inland slope.

The party was working at a frantic rate. Only seventeen of the more mercenary serfs had heeded Father Pickard's call, though it seemed that the whole village had assembled in answer to the warning bell. The extra men had enabled the steward to complete the facing. Now, with full darkness

coming on, barrow after barrow of ragstone was being tipped into the flooded subsidence.

The wind had backed further and was blowing from the worst possible direction: east-south-east, against the coastal current, straight into the harbour mouth and contrary to the outflow from the river, serving to heighten and prolong the tide.

Ralf did not know how much more he could take. As the wind turned it was becoming much colder. And now, with every fifth or sixth wave, a rush of freezing seawater overtopped the dike with such force that it was hard to remain upright.

'That's it!' Mr Caffyn shouted. 'Back to the village! Now! Forget the barrows! Leave them where they are!'

Ralf saw men descending the inland slope to sort through the haphazard debris of rainproofs, looking for their own. To south, east and north the sky was black. Only in the west, over the Great Marsh, did a rim of light remain. All had become grainy and misleading. Between waves, as the water withdrew and regrouped, Ralf tried and failed to see whether the new facing was being washed away.

'Hurry up, Ralf!' his father cried. 'Get your things!'

Ralf, among half a dozen others, could not find his own coat. Someone else had taken it by mistake. On his father's urgent instruction he picked up one that seemed about his size and, while cold water drained down the slope and around their ankles, put it on.

Quite distinctly, he heard Imogen say his name.

He knew then that he was hallucinating with fatigue. The sun had set on his sister's oath. When he got home she

would speak, for he would not agree to her demand. He would never relinquish Eloise.

It was by now so dark that he could hardly see. Most of the men had mounted the dike and started along it. The first had got as far as the mill.

The ingress proceeded so quickly, was so sudden, so grotesquely appalling and, at heart, so unexpected, that Ralf did not initially understand that a charging mass of water was rushing towards them through the pen. Nor, over the wind and the noise of the sea, had he heard it coming.

'Quick!' Linsell screamed. 'Get up the bank! It's gone! It's gone!'

Another man shouted, 'God help us!'

Ralf was struggling to understand something so incomprehensible and unfair. The sea had got behind the dike. It had come in from somewhere else, somewhere nearer the village, carrying with and before it everything it had swept up in its passage: mud, stones, branches, hedge-bottom leaves, straw, froth, dung.

Just ahead of it, he scrambled up the slope and gained the path, beside his father and the other stragglers. The flood spewed over the top of the dike, meeting the unpolluted waves on the other side, slopped the other way, equilibrated, and rose and fell, now revealing, now concealing, the narrow strip of land that was all the safety the grudging deep would vouchsafe them.

Among all the voices Ralf heard the steward's, nearer the mill. 'Back, everyone! Back! Back the other way! Slowly, now! Mind your footing!'

He, at least, was thinking clearly. The dike must have been holed further to the west. The route to the village had

been interrupted. Therefore they had to move eastwards, following the line of the dike as it turned with the beach and eventually gave way to rising ground. From there they could push inland, uphill, and get back by means of the Angmer road.

'Ralf! Are you all right, Son?'

'Yes.'

'Where's Jacob?'

'He's with the steward. Behind us.'

The repairs they had made were holding. Ralf negotiated the subsidence, trying to keep his balance. He reached the far side, behind two or three others, ahead of Linsell, and found firmer ground underfoot.

He looked round. The work-shed had disappeared under water but the mill was still there, a silhouette against the west. Ralf thought of the currents sucking and swashing through the excavations for the culvert and sea-gates, loosening soil, eroding, weakening; he thought of the timbers, the foundations, the screen and its sandbags; and he knew that by daylight the building would no longer be there. At some unpredictable instant in the darkness the critical point would be reached. The supports would no longer bear the weight of the roof and walls, the floors and internal fittings, the solid members of the frame. Twisting, perhaps, or with a sideways lurch, the building, and with it the whole of his father's life, would collapse.

The family was ruined. They had gambled everything on the mill. His father would be a journeyman till he died. So would Ralf himself. His mother's drudgery would be everlasting. Imogen would have to marry the first man of means who asked her. They would have to leave Mape. And he would never be with Eloise again.

* * *

As soon as they reached dry ground, the baron gathered the men and made doubly sure that no one had been lost. After that, they made their way home.

Jacob pushed open the front door. Linsell came behind him. He had scarcely spoken. He knew as well as Ralf what was going to happen in the night.

'Anna?'

She was not in the house, even though two rush-lamps, long since lit, were burning in the kitchen.

'Im? Im?'

The women were elsewhere.

'Something to eat,' Ralf said.

'Not for me,' Linsell said.

Having shed their rainproofs, both he and Jacob dragged themselves upstairs. With filthy hands Ralf opened the bread-pot and pulled a piece from the loaf. Overhead, he heard his parents' bed take the impact as Linsell fell back on it, utterly done in.

Ralf realised he was thirsty and clumsily drank two cups of water from the pitcher. He crossed the threshold into the parlour and, still wearing the strange coat, still wearing his wet clothes and boots, stretched himself at full length on his cot. He brought a chunk of bread to his mouth but was unable to eat. The ceiling, faintly seen in the incident light from the next room, had begun crazily to turn. The turning, the giddiness, continued when he shut his eyes. The bread was forgotten. His hand fell to the earthen floor. The fingers opened; the bread escaped. He was already asleep.

'Ralf! Ralf!'

His mother's voice would not go away. Nor would they, whoever they were, stop shaking his shoulder.

'Ralf!'

He opened his eyes to see her kneeling beside him. She had brought a lamp into the room. He tried to focus on her face but could not. Beyond her shoulder he saw the old table next to Imogen's seat, and on it he saw a crumpled form that he recognised as her unfinished knitting, Jacob's new boot-socks, or sock, for she had started only two nights ago.

'Where is she?' his mother said. 'I've been all over the village.'

Ralf sat up. 'What about the Hall?'

'She's not there. They haven't seen her.'

'Isolda's?'

'No. Nowhere. She's nowhere, Ralf.'

'The dike's gone,' he said, unable to follow his mother's talk any further.

'I know. The church dike broke. At high tide.'

'The church dike?'

'Then the other one. Near the staith.'

'The staith?'

She took him by the shoulders. 'Ralf! Wake up!'

He tried to concentrate, for it had become plain to him that his mother was distracted with worry, a worry that had nothing to do with the dike, or the mill, or the ruin of his father. It had to do with Imogen.

'Ralf, where is she?'

5

The search went on till midnight. Most of the village took part. Every dwelling and outhouse was checked, the Hall, its offices and grounds, the church and churchyard, the bakery, the workshop, the byres and pig-sties. Bernard walked to Eyton to see if Imogen had ended up there or sprained her ankle and fallen on the road; Ralf pinned his hopes to the idea that she had suffered a minor but immobilising accident and was lying somewhere waiting to be found. Henry and Godric set out for Angmer.

The search proved fruitless, but as they had nothing more than lantern-light she could easily have been missed.

Ralf thought he knew why Imogen had left the house unannounced. She would have been looking for him and for their father. She would have known where they were. And if she had been on the dike when the breach came …

But Ralf, like his father and Jacob, was so tired that even his guilt could not keep him awake. Leaving his mother in the kitchen with Father Pickard and Mrs Creech, he shut the door of the parlour and lay down on his cot.

He closed his eyes. She had to be safe. The alternative wasn't possible. Beside that the loss of the mill would mean nothing. She would be found. Tomorrow, she would be found tomorrow.

During the rest of the night the wind eased further. The surface of the puddles became viscous, then motionless. They filmed with ice. The shallower ones froze solid. Towards morning, flakes of snow began tumbling from the dark.

Ralf had slept for no more than three hours when his dreams became so disturbing that he made himself wake

up. He instantly became aware of the drop in temperature; and instantly understood what this would mean for anyone left outside.

Light was still edging the kitchen door. He found his mother and Father Pickard at the table, in the same coats and boots they had worn during the search. Mrs Creech had gone, leaving an unfamiliar trencher of bread, cold meats and cheese. The food remained untouched.

'No news,' the priest said needlessly.

Ralf sat down. He wanted to ask Father Pickard to go with him to the confessional, or at least into the garden, away from the ears of his mother. He wanted to receive God's verdict, his punishment, his most condign punishment. But even if a judging God existed, even if a mortal man could be authorised to act as his conduit, such a request would be an admission that Imogen was already dead. Since it was certain that she was not, Ralf remained silent. He did not even think of prayer. Nothing was to be done but sit and wait for daylight and the inevitable relief of the reunion.

Soon afterwards Linsell came downstairs, followed by Jacob.

'It's snowing,' Jacob said, on returning from the privy. 'Not much.'

Linsell took his wife's hand. Her face was without expression. She had suspended herself, was existing in a state of self-protective torpor, the alternative to hysteria, or outright madness.

Looking away from his mother, Ralf happened to catch Father Pickard's eye. In that compassionate, penetrative gaze he detected a new depth of insight. Ralf avoided him, suddenly afraid that Eloise had confessed, even as recently

as yesterday. Was it possible that he knew what was going on in Ralf's breast?

Examining the old deal boards of the tabletop, feeling the faint irregularities of the grain with his scratched and damaged fingers, Ralf tried to shake off the feeling of violation that his suspicion had aroused. The Church, in the form of its ministry, was everywhere, got into everything, permeated every recess of the soul. It was bad enough to be tortured by your own inner voice, to be continually goaded by that sense of right and wrong, without being chided by an external morality. Or perhaps the two were the same. Perhaps they amounted to nothing more than guilt, the chief product and stock in trade of the Church. Guilt was the means whereby the Church controlled the people. Because guilt operated on the conscience, it was a far more effective lever than fear, the most powerful weapon available to the king.

In a world uncomplicated by Church or Crown, Ralf and Eloise would have committed no crime. They had done no more than fall in love. Their impulses were those of nature. If God had created such impulses, how could they be sins?

Ralf could not think straight. Flavoured by the sunlit marshes of his childhood, a paradisal existence had presented itself to his mind. Here the birds and animals, the fishes and plants, the elements themselves, followed the sweetly natural course laid down for them by their creator. Human beings belonged to the same creation. Ralf did not see why their interactions should not be just as pure and free.

Why were relations between people so tangled? Was this God's will too? Or had it all gone wrong, as Father

Pickard had preached on Lammas Day, in the Garden of Eden?

Sitting here at the tail-end of this cold, solstitial night, his own lamplit countenance one of a circle of suffering faces, Ralf withdrew further and further into himself. He hardly looked up when, an hour before dawn, the priest left for his own cottage, there to change his clothes and snatch some breakfast; and there, before crossing to the Hall to help organise the renewed search for Imogen Grigg, to spend ten minutes in fervent prayer.

* * *

By daybreak there had still been no sign of her. The searchers were marshalled outside the Long Barn. The largest group, led by the baron in person, set about repeating last night's search of barns and outhouses. Others were given particular roads and paths to check, spinneys to investigate, hedges to walk. Five men went to comb the poplar plantation. Twenty, in two groups, were appointed to test the infinitely grim, and minute-by-minute more likely, theory that she might be somewhere in the floods.

The two subsequent high tides had widened the gap in the shingle. The church dike had failed at the village end. The eastern dike had immediately followed, losing a wide section just east of the staith. A quarter of the baron's land had been opened to the sea.

The reeve led one party down to the Great Marsh. Linsell was to lead the other, to the Severals. He asked Ralf to join them. There had been speculation that Imogen,

headstrong Imogen, might have been making her way out to the site, intending to help with the work herself.

Ralf alone knew another reason why she might have started along the eastern dike yesterday afternoon.

'The harbour,' he said. 'I'm going to look there.'

Jacob had already left with Mr Kenway's group. To Linsell's approval, Edwin said, 'We'll take the *Meg*.'

It was five years since Ralf had worked in the boat with Edwin Maw and his son, Cebert. Ralf's dislike of Cebert no longer influenced his opinion of Edwin; Ralf had learned to respect him. He was not sorry to have been given Edwin's rather than Jacob's company on the walk down to the staith, for he meant to set sail on his own.

It was bitterly cold, under a heavy sky. The snow had stopped falling. Not much more than a dusting covered the fields and stock-rails, the windward bark of the wayside maples and oaks, the frozen reeds and rushes of the riverbank. The brackish water showed black under the bridge, whose platform had lately been scuffed by ten pairs of boots.

Linsell's party was a few minutes ahead. It had already waded across the breach when Ralf came within sight of the dike.

The tarred walls of the mill ought to have been obvious against the snow.

They were not there.

Ralf realised, too late, that he should have gone with his father. He should have been with him now, at this moment.

Ralf's anticipation of their loss, of the iron consequences, had been purely intellectual. He was too young to have known how to prepare himself for its emotional impact.

‘What’s the matter?’ Edwin said.

Ralf could do no more than gesture despairingly at the place where the mill had stood.

At the staith they unbound and righted the shallop. From the sheds they brought the oars and fetched and fitted the mast, boom and sail. With a grinding of keel on slimy shingle, Ralf and Edwin dragged the craft down the slope of the foreshore. Her prow broke the water.

Edwin stood by while Ralf, as the lighter man, boarded first. Holding on to the stern, Edwin was about to complete the launch and jump in himself when Ralf said, ‘No, Edwin. I’m going on my own.’

Edwin protested. Ralf would not be refused. Without saying so, he knew where to look, where the complexities of wind and current, acting together, would have brought the burden he did not want to find. But if he found it, if he were right, the idea of another’s presence could not be borne.

‘I’ll wait here, then,’ Edwin said, at last understanding.

‘You don’t have to.’

‘I will.’

‘As you wish.’

‘Ralf —’

‘Shove her off,’ he said, his voice close to breaking. ‘Please.’

Using an oar, Ralf poled the *Meg* into deep water, fitted the rudder and, while Edwin walked towards the landing-stage, hoisted the sail.

Even this far up the estuary, the water remained choppy. Ralf luffed as tightly as he could, but what breeze there was, from the north-east, forced wide and frequent tacks across the harbour. In this his course was being opposed,

but not by the ebb, which was carrying him further and further along the channel and towards the open sea.

Unsure of his inward predictions, he scrutinised the mud and saltings on either hand. Snow had given the saltmarshes an unusual aspect. They had become a variegation of white, melted in odd shapes wherever tongued by the darkness of the water. There was no green, no colour, only grey and white and black. Even the distant shingle of the Point beach, running beside the seablite and here and there clumped with wood-sage, campion or horned poppy, had been cloaked overnight in whitish grey.

A cormorant flew low across the water. Far to port Ralf saw the widely separated figures of his father's party, picking their way along the dike. It seemed that they had as yet found nothing.

The site of the mill drew nearer, came abeam, passed within two hundred yards. The screen of piling yet remained, standing proud of the mud. It had lost most of its netting and sandbags. Beyond it and to the left, a few broken timbers jutting skywards were all that was left of the house. The thatch, the weatherboards, the beams and rafters and floors, had been converted into a worthless tangle of flotsam, tons of it, strewn along the tideline. There would be more on the other side, in the pen.

Somewhere among it all the sea had claimed a certain floorboard. The stain on its underside would have been repeatedly bleached and scoured, abraded among the wreckage, washed again and again until no trace of virginal blood remained.

Ralf put the helm over once more, almost as if he were in possession of himself, but his actions were automatic. He was being dragged both with and against his will,

towards an area of muddy gutters and inlets near the end of Mape Point, at the indented northern shore where, curving inwards, it received much of the superficial tidestream.

Since boyhood he had been intimate with these currents. Just as he had been able to say where Godric's dog would end up, so this morning he had guessed where his sister might be.

As the water on the weather bow thumped at her strakes, the elderly *Meg* heeled her stoical way through the swell. Her work-worn frame rose and scended, taking and absorbing each knock, shrugging off each shower of spray, leaving the staith and the village behind; and all the time Ralf's eyes raked the starboard shore for a sign they feared to see.

His hopes began to rise. He was approaching the end of the Point and still there had been nothing but sand and mud, snow-clotted samphire and purslane. The bustling flocks of small waders ignored him, even when close in. They continued feeding, careless of the hated human form. They saw only a broad-sailed floating shape, large, silent, familiar and benign.

But two crows, further in, did take wing. They were followed by a third. Mated pairs often had a hanger-on, Ralf knew, a solitary bird whose perennial presence was tolerated. Carrion crows were intelligent and wary. One of the pair uttered a croak of warning or annoyance. At a safe distance all three pitched on the sand to wait for him to pass.

Where they had risen, a yard or two along an inlet, there was something out of place, something like a flattened bundle of stained and soggy clothing.

‘Please God, no.’

The bundle was foreshortened, lying lengthwise. Ralf’s unwilling retina now registered the pale sole of a feminine boot and, beside it, the pale, awkwardly bent sole of a naked feminine foot.

He dropped the sail, beached the boat and threw down the steel claws of the anchor. Step followed step, breaking through the crust of ice and sinking into the mud. Ralf was most afraid of crabs. If the water were warm enough for them to be active, if her face were exposed, they would already have eaten her eyes. As it was he did not know what the crows had been doing, whether they had had time to make a start.

He came to the place.

She was sprawled face down, wearing her tallowed rainproof, her hair drowned and dishevelled and, like the wreckage of the mill, strewn about by the ebbing tide.

Ralf fell to his knees beside her. He was not sure how long he remained like that, or whether he had only imagined giving vent to a raw howl of grief, or how soon he had been able to reach out and touch the cold, livid flesh of her cheek. The morning had stopped. Even the act of carrying her to the water’s edge, of going down on one knee and cradling her so that with one hand he could wash the precious face clean, even that was conducted in the space between two discrete heart-beats. Before the first, there had been hope. After the second, there was none.

Her eyes were untouched. He put down the lids.

Remembering the boat, Ralf stood up with her and the scene rushed in: the estuary, the saltings, the weather, the cries of the birds.

He kept to the sand on the way to the *Meg*, fearful that he might stumble or that his feet might sink too far in the mud. Placing his load in the bows, he set about unshackling the sail. His frozen fingers struggled intermittently with the task. He found himself staring blankly, pausing for unknown periods while he tried to understand.

Imogen was dead.

He was the cause. Were it not for him, she would never have ventured along the dike. She would never have stumbled, or been caught by the flood and washed off the path. Weighed down by her skirts, perhaps flung again and again by the waves against the facing, she would have had no chance of survival. No one could have heard her screams. No one, in the dusk, could even have seen her fall.

Leaving only her face exposed, he wrapped her in the sail and laid her once again, very gently, as though she were sleeping, in the bows. He dismantled the boom, retrieved the anchor and went to the transom to pull the boat into the water, not caring how deeply he had to wade or how wet he became. When the hull was floating freely he hoisted himself over the side, sat on the forward thwart, took up the oars. More time must have elapsed than he knew, because the ebb had weakened to little more than the flow of the river. The tide was on the turn.

As the doleful oarlocks creaked, as the *Meg* made her ponderous passage towards the village, Ralf's unravelling mind traced the chain of events leading to Imogen's death. It stretched back to his earliest days. He rued having enthused over the mill, and meeting Eloise, and saving Godric. He rued Acklin and the beadle, he rued the bishop, but most keenly he rued the sunny May evening in which

his father, driving that ox-cart, had brought the family here.

Once, and once only, with dripping oars, he again turned to look at his sister. Head first, she was now preceding him to Mape.

'O dear Lord,' Edwin said, when the boat finally bumped against the landing-stage. 'Dear Lord.'

* * *

Edwin carried her back to the village while Ralf went on ahead to find his mother. Hubert tolled the bell and the search was called off. Imogen was taken to her room. Mrs Creech helped Anna with the laying-out.

The frost hardened. That night, during the vigil, there was a heavy fall of snow. When, the following morning, the sexton set about digging a new grave next to her grandmother's, he had to break the soil with a pickaxe.

At the insistence of the baron, the funeral reception was held in the great hall. Everyone in the village attended. Even Ralf had not known how well-regarded his sister had been.

'She was an angel,' Bernard told him, when he came to make his condolences, 'too good for this world,' and, for once, the stale form of words was true.

Ralf had risen that morning with a painful sore throat. During the service, and especially in the churchyard, he had felt feverish and chilled. All he wanted now was to go somewhere else – not home, for he had no home. To the city, any city. He looked across at his parents and wondered how they were able to keep functioning.

He drew closer to the fire, which the baron had ordered to be fuelled with charcoal and beech-logs.

'Ralf.'

Eloise was at his shoulder. She looked terrible, as if she had slept no more than he.

'It's over between us,' she said quietly.

He should not have regretted knowing her. They belonged together, were two halves of a whole. Ever since that November morning when he had shown the women over the mill, he had yearned to make her his wife, but there was a supernal will far greater than his. Whatever it opposed could never come to pass. He wanted her yet, but she was, as always, right. It was over.

He said, 'What will you do?'

'Marry him.'

He gave a resigned, a bitter little nod.

She said, 'I loved her. We fell out on Christmas Eve. I wish we hadn't. With all my soul I wish we hadn't.'

The brief opportunity for private conversation passed. While Ralf accepted more condolences, he watched her moving away. The last time Eloise had seen Imogen, she had lied to her. The lie could never be undone.

Their whole affair had been conducted in lies. Now, because of those lies, Imogen had been killed, and it was over.

Ralf had not wanted to talk to Father Pickard again today, not after the nauseating nonsense he had spouted during the service, but the priest deliberately sought him out.

'Remember your beatitudes, Ralf,' he said. 'Blessed are those who mourn.'

There was a sarcastic edge to Ralf's voice as he said, '"Quoniam ipsi consolabuntur."'

'Just so. They shall be comforted.'

'You don't really believe all that, do you?'

To say such a thing to a man of the cloth was not only foolish but dangerous. It was tantamount to heresy. But Ralf no longer cared. He was sick of it all, the incense, the Mass, the oleaginous prayers. He was sick of the silence, of God not being there; or his vindictiveness. That was more like it. Vindictive. He was indeed an unkind god. *For dust you are, and to dust you shall return.*

Father Pickard did not blench. He did not even look surprised. 'Do I believe?' he said. 'One clings on, you know, by one's fingertips.' He looked round, at Ralf's mother, who, unable to remain standing, had sunk into one of the baron's seats. 'This will pass, Ralf.' He started towards her. 'Everything does.'

6

Gervase decided to wait no longer. He did not wish to intrude on a family's grief, but, as Walter had pointed out last night, he had to have an early answer from Master Grigg or set other plans in motion.

Within minutes of hearing that the mill had been lost he had resolved to rebuild it. He was a de Maepe. The de Maepes were not daunted by adversity. Nor, he had realised, examining the matter in all its aspects, were they daunted by bullies. On the contrary. That letter from the Molarius, like Bishop William's warning stare, had produced an effect diametrically opposed to the one intended.

Gervase had heard that Lord de Braux had died. Two successive amputations of the leg, occasioned by a putrid distemper spreading from his broken ankle, had not been enough to save him. His middle-aged son was already an accomplished courtier and far exceeded his late father in his partiality for the Earl of Leicester. Once he had the patent, his influence with the King might prove fatal for the pacifist faction.

That was not the only reason why the wedding had to proceed. Gervase was determined that a freak of weather would not rob Eloise of elevation and her destiny. He had told her so on the day after Christmas, not long after the tragic conclusion of the search for her friend.

The death had hit her very hard. He had not realised the two had been so close. Eloise had taken to her room, emerging for little but meals. Godric had spent much time with her, but otherwise she had barely spoken to anyone.

Godric had also spent time with young Ralf, who had, in the three days since the burial, been laid up with an ague. At lunch Godric reported that he was somewhat better. With that, Gervase sent Hubert to the Griggs' to seek permission for a visit.

It was nearing dusk when Gervase arrived. He unpeeled a glove and rapped at the door. He was received by Master Grigg in the kitchen, where the fire had lately been banked up. Even so, the place was horribly cold and Gervase sat down without removing his wolfskin coat and hat.

'Ralf's in the parlour, my lord. That's where he sleeps.'

'How is he now?'

'He was pretty bad last night. Then the fever broke. He'll pull through. He's strong.'

'I'm glad. My son told me as much.'

‘Mr Godric has been very kind. And please thank Her Ladyship for the tinctures.’ Grigg had aged. His face was grey.

‘And Mrs Grigg? Where is she?’

‘Gone to the Creeches.’

‘Jacob Farlow?’

‘Digging shingle.’

‘He was excused.’

‘He said he wanted to. Bereavement takes people different ways.’

‘Yes. I am very sorry indeed … I …’ But there was nothing whatever to be added to what Gervase had said to him and his wife after the funeral. The girl was gone, snatched away by capricious fate. That lovely young innocent was not the first to have been claimed by the malign waters of Mape; nor would she be the last, but to her parents she was the only one who would ever matter. Her father had not just aged. He was broken.

Again Gervase tried to imagine how he would feel if Eloise had drowned instead. The attempt did nothing but intensify his feelings of sympathy. He wanted to reach out to Grigg and make physical contact, to demonstrate that, as a father, he was not alone. He couldn’t. Rank came into it, he supposed, and custom, and a fear of reminding him that Eloise unaccountably lived while his daughter did not; but most of all he was afraid that the impulse would be misinterpreted as pity.

‘I take it the mill isn’t insured.’

‘No. It isn’t. But I’ll do my best.’

‘To do what?’

‘Repay what I owe you.’

‘You owe me nothing.’

‘I don’t call a hundred marks nothing. More than that. I’ve made up the account. There’s eight pounds odd in cash, some materials on site and what’s in the workshop. It’s all yours. The rest will take time.’

‘Is that why you think I’m here?’ Gervase reached into his pocket and brought out the contract, which he unrolled and held up to view. Grigg afforded it a reluctant glance. Gervase had intended to consult it, if necessary, during their talk. Instead, on a whim, he gave himself the pleasure of making his co-signatory’s eyes follow the document to the fireplace. He put it on the flames.

‘That doesn’t change a thing.’

‘We’re going to have a tide mill. We want you to build it. If you won’t, we’ll get somebody else.’

Grigg said nothing.

‘It was not through any neglect of yours that the dike breached. Indeed, I cannot forget your heroism, and Ralf’s. But let us say that I might be so ungrateful, so petty, so vile as to sue you. What would it profit me, even if I won the case? Sixpence a week?’

‘You won’t have to sue me. We have an agreement.’

‘No longer.’

‘You’ve already been too charitable to me, Lord de Maepe.’

‘This isn’t charity. It’s business. Mr Caffyn has estimated the financial loss on the mill at no more than thirty marks. Mr Kenway says the bund is almost intact. The screen is largely sound. Since no machinery was installed, none of that has been damaged. The most valuable components are unmade, undelivered, or still being built in your workshop. Essentially, all that has gone is the house. While I’d rather

not have lost thirty marks, it was my own fault. I should have thought about the dike earlier.'

'We all should.'

'Quite. Anyhow, we're going to rebuild the mill. It's your project. You're the expert. We should like you to accept the position of supervisor. Salaried. Two marks a month. We need Ralf as well. One mark a month for him.'

'He's not in the Guild.'

'There is no guild of engineers. If he keeps at his mathematics he has the makings of one. That is not just my opinion.'

Grigg looked up at him across the table, his eyes infinitely weary. 'I'm obliged to you, my lord, but I don't want the job. Nor will Ralf. We'd like to go back to Alincester. Or to London. Ralf thought of trying there.'

'I respect your wishes. If there is anything I can do to help, please let me know.' All Grigg had left was his pride: that, and his excellent son. 'Will you honour me with a favour, sir?'

'What sort of favour?'

'Talk this matter over with him before reaching a final decision. When you judge him well enough. As soon as you can. Preferably by Saturday.'

'After all your loving-kindness it is churlish to refuse you, my lord, but I can tell you now what his answer will be.'

Gervase arose. He forgot to stoop and felt the top of his hat scraping the ceiling. For the first time in his life he was struck by the contrast between such a dwelling and his own. He decided to risk sending over a cord of beech-logs. During this dismal weather, during this external reflection

of their inward bleakness, the Griggs could at least be warm at their hearth.

The two men reached the door. 'I have another favour to ask of you, Master Grigg. I want no more talk about contracts or money owed.'

Unmistakably, Gervase saw a glimmer of relief in his eyes.

'Good. Thank you.'

'My lord —'

Grigg's voice was congested with emotion. Gervase had silenced him by holding up a hand, fearful that either of them might step outside the expected norms. 'My compliments to Mistress Grigg. And please tell Ralf he has our prayers for a speedy recovery.'

* * *

Once at the Hall, Gervase went directly to the steward's office. The two brass lamps were burning in their places at the head of Walter's writing slope, making a fibrous luminosity, a golden nimbus of his outline as he bent over his work. He was huddled in his warmest cloak, his feet in a strawbox. A felt cap of a vaguely Phrygian cut covered his large and thought-filled cranium. His fingers were made clumsy by scriveners' mittens thoroughly stained with ink. So absorbed was he that he did not hear his employer come in.

Gervase cleared his throat. Walter looked round and started struggling to his feet.

'Don't get up.'

He did anyway. 'It is worse than we thought, my lord.'

'Do you have a figure yet?'

‘Provisional.’

‘Well? What is it?’

‘Two hundred and thirty.’

‘Marks?’

‘Pounds.’

They sat down: Gervase because he suddenly felt the need, Walter because it was expected, and because he was very tired. He had been working on these calculations for two days.

‘Two hundred and thirty,’ Gervase repeated.

‘What of Master Grigg? What did he say?’

‘He doesn’t want to do it.’

‘One can hardly blame him.’

Everything had gone wrong at once. The reed-harvest, for example. Not only had they forfeited the receipts, but they were legally and morally liable to compensate the merchant, since he himself would now be in default on some of his contracts.

The shingle was a huge expense. The cost of barging the timber here for the boardwalks, in this weather, had doubled; never mind the cost of the wood itself, or the rope, or the skilled work needed to fix it all together. Repairing the beach was a matter of the utmost urgency. The freelance labourers for miles around knew it. Their rates had gone up accordingly. They charged by the day, but at this season there were, at best, only eight hours between dawn and dusk.

Once the shingle had been remade – and it would take at least another four days – they would turn their attention to the church dike. The damage was so severe that the whole length was suspect and needed professional inspection. An earthworks specialist would have to be called in. But the

storm had struck other places besides Mape: parts of Portsmouth, even, had flooded. Walter had approached John Ryle of Southampton, who had worked on the bund, only to be informed that he was engaged for the next fortnight. The same with two others. This morning Stephen had sent six letters to London, two to Bristol and one to Maldon in an attempt to find somebody else. And of course whoever became available would be able to name his own price.

The eastern dike was another unknown quantity. It had had no real money spent on it since the great storm of 1232.

Nearly the whole force of serfs had been set to mending the beach and dikes. There would be no income from fishing or farming while it lasted. Then there was the cost of repairing buildings. Only the worst had so far been attended to. Fallen trees had also to be cleared, which would take yet more labour away from productive endeavour.

As bad as any of this was the degradation of the reed-beds and grazing. Every day that they remained under salt water, more roots were being killed. It might take years before the turf recovered; before it would again support the optimum number of beasts. In the mean time surplus animals would have to be sold or butchered, in a buyers' market.

When the water drained away the two-hundred-acre field would prove another expense. Topsoil had been carried out to sea. That left behind was denatured and contaminated with salt, its fertility depressed. As bad luck would have it, the manor's strips had suffered most, being preponderantly on the lower ground. Some of the serfs'

had escaped altogether. The boundaries of the others' would have to be marked afresh. There would be months of bickering about that.

And at the end of it all, when everything had been put back the way it had been before the storm, the manor would still have to contend with the decline in commodity prices. Wheat, barley, oats: these were the worst, but even things like beef and salt pork were no longer holding firm.

At the lowest point of his despondency, Gervase had wondered whether the Lord had showed his hand. A tide mill might, at present, among men, be classified as profane, but its motive force was the sea, and what could be more sacred, what could be more mysterious, what could be a more obvious manifestation of the divine than that? Had God singled out Grigg, the architect of this profanity, for biblical punishment? For God was the deity who rained fire and brimstone on the cities of the plain and all the reprobates in them, who made a chimney of their sky: had he not let Mape off lightly, with a nudge, a hint of what might be to come?

Was it possible that God had frowned on the mill? Was the Church, in opposing it, really doing his work on earth?

These had been pre-dawn thoughts. At that time of the night things always seemed blackest. Gervase had considered the rumours circulating about Cardinal Pellegrini and the demands being piled on the King. He had considered the outrages being perpetrated by the Pope in the war he was prosecuting in Sicily. And, illustrated by many examples from the rich, long, and ultimately depressing pageant of his diplomatic career, he had considered the political manoeuvring and breathtaking deceit by which churchmen throughout Europe made their

temporal gains. Above a certain rank they were criminals, most of them. Worse than criminals, for they were also hypocrites. The very idea of a bishop's palace was obscene.

Yet Christ endured, sorrowing but inviolate. His teaching could be condensed into one precept: 'love one another'.

A mill helped feed the hungry. It made life better. In trying to build one, Grigg, and Gervase himself, had been following Christ's word. No punishment had been deserved or inflicted. The weather, the sea, were random and insensate. The only sin would be to lose heart and give up. God made men by testing them.

That was a conclusion Gervase had reached before hearing how much the storm had cost him.

'Let me think for a minute,' he told Walter.

Without the mill Eloise would have no duke and the manor would have no future. But at a compound rate of fifty per cent the expense of rebuilding might push her father's fortunes over the edge. Fitz Peter would not reduce his rate until he was sure there would be no lawsuit, and that could not happen until the mill was finished. No other lender would offer better terms. If anything, they would be worse.

The materials and machinery, the expertise: these could not be scamped. The labour costs, however, might perhaps be different. Instead of journeymen, they could use serfs for the unskilled and semi-skilled work. For a season, every single fief-day could be diverted to the new mill. The manor's own fields and nets would be neglected, but what of it?

He looked at Walter and was about to speak when another idea came to his mind. It followed from his

thoughts of Christ; had its origins in his teachings, in his wisdom, in his clear vision of mankind. 'Walter. Why did the serfs not come out to help us on Christmas Day?'

'Some did.'

'Those we paid. But the others. Why didn't they come? And don't say they were loath to break the festival.'

'Well, my lord. As they would see it, there was no reason why they should.'

'Exactly. They had no incentive.'

Walter began to look uncomfortable.

Gervase went on. 'Suppose yourself a serf. What drives you?'

'I don't know. I've never given it any mind. Fear. Fear of being made homeless.'

'What else?'

'They're human beings. The usual impulses must apply.'

'Providing for their family?'

Walter was looking more uncomfortable still. 'I should imagine so.'

'They work hard on their own strips, but we must watch them continually when it comes to the demesne. The mill was part of the demesne and therefore of no consequence to the serfs. They even viewed the threat to the arable with relative equanimity, since they knew they had less to lose than we did. Think about the seventeen who turned out. They've all got low-lying land.'

Walter's discomfort was developing into deep unease. 'What are you proposing, my lord?'

'In broad terms, that we make each family an offer. In return for their labour on the mill they will be allowed to grind their corn for nothing.'

'For nothing?'

‘And for as long as they reside in Mape.’

His unease had become open alarm. ‘It’s most irregular. If asked, I would not advise it.’

‘Why not? Isn’t it what we do already, with the land? With the boats and gear? With the granary and barns? The bakery too. There’s no difference at all. The serfs work some of the week for us and the rest for themselves. They need us, but we also need them. The whole manor is a cooperative venture.’

‘I must caution you, my lord. Such an arrangement would be very badly received.’

‘Not by the serfs.’

‘By the other barons. By the Church. By anyone with a feudality. Even the King.’

Gervase grunted. ‘I disagree.’

‘Yes, my lord.’

‘How much money would it save on the labour costs?’

‘A great deal.’

‘Would it make the mill more feasible?’

‘It would make it a certainty.’

‘Then I want you to work out the details. How much they must do to qualify. How much corn they can legitimately send to the mill in any one season. Whether the right passes down only through the eldest son. And so forth. Will you do that, Walter?’

‘Of course.’

Gervase knew that it was better to give than receive. He enjoyed the feelings engendered by giving things away, or even just by getting rid of them. Were he not such a half-hearted Christian he might have been brave enough to do more in that respect, but he did like his comfort, and he did like having his own way, and these were not easily attained

in a state of honourable poverty. The scheme he had just dreamt up was doubly meritorious. It produced a glow of selfless satisfaction – and it also promised all the benefits the mill would bestow.

He began to smile. He had not done that since Christmas Eve. And, meeting his eye, his loyal steward, the worthy, estimable and long-suffering Walter, was inevitably moved to do the same.

7

'Stay where you are, Ralf,' Anna said. 'I'll bring your supper in a minute, when your grandfather gets in.'

'I want to get up.'

'Stay there.'

As she rose from his bedside she noticed the table where Imogen's knitting had been. She turned her eyes away, but it didn't help: everything she saw was overlaid with the memory of that narrow, lonely box being lowered into the grave. Inside it, wrapped in a shroud, motionless, imprisoned by the pitchy dark, imprisoned by the weight of soil and ice above her, imprisoned by death, lay her second self, torn from her body, the child in whom she had invested so much. Her whole being told her that her daughter could not be there, tonight, only a minute's walk away. Then she saw again the straps being paid out, the contrast between the grave-mouth and the hard-packed snow; she saw the heap of soil and heard the thuds as token handfuls were thrown down to join the wreath on the lid. Those handfuls would have been followed by spadefuls. She had not seen them. She had not been back to the churchyard. She might never go to the church again.

Her grief had neither bottom nor bound. For a time she had supposed herself unhinged, and perhaps, during the funeral, she had been.

Ralf had become even more precious, if that were possible. His illness had terrified her. He had brought it on himself, by working on the dike in the rain and then by getting soaked and chilled in the boat.

She pictured Edwin at the front door with Imogen in his arms, confirming, beyond doubt, beyond reason, what Ralf had been trying to tell her. She could not forget that sight either.

Without really knowing what she was about, Anna returned to the kitchen, where Linsell was still hunched at the table, his head in his hands.

She went to the dresser and opened the meat safe. The mutton pottage would have to serve. They could have with it some hot vegetables. Leeks, carrots. Fennel. There had not been time to prepare anything more elaborate. Or rather, she had not thought of it. She realised again how much, in recent years, Imogen had contributed to the running of the household.

Anna was alone with those responsibilities now, just as she had been when Imogen had been small. And increasingly she was seeing the little girl rather than the young woman. Imogen was already receding down the long, curving tunnel of memory, her slender arms outstretched.

Her mother made herself fill the iron vegetable-pot with water. She added salt, fitted the lid and put the handle over the pot-hook in the hearth. 'Did His Lordship come?'

Linsell did not answer at once, making her turn to look at him. 'Yes,' he said. 'We don't have to pay.'

She was too surprised to speak.

Linsell gestured at the fire. 'He burned his contract. Says I'm not worth suing.'

They had been reprieved. An immense weight should have been lifted, but she was having trouble understanding. She could see the baron's behaviour only as an abstraction. It seemed illogical, to have no bearing on her family and herself. Perhaps that was because she and Linsell had been unable to imagine that their future held anything but ruin.

'He wants to rebuild the mill. Offered me the job. Two marks a month.'

Anna sat down opposite her husband and took both his hands in hers.

'Have you told Ralf?' she said, when he had finished describing the interview.

'He was asleep.'

'He's not sleeping now.'

Linsell pushed back his chair and started for the parlour.

While he was gone and she continued with the preparations for the meal, the baron's magnanimity came slowly into focus. He had succeeded to the title in the year before her wedding. She well remembered the needless dread with which the new young lord had been viewed by his serfs. He had been a constant presence in her life ever since, even when she had thought herself free of Mape. Without the Seigneur, she would never have been able to marry Linsell and move to Alincester. Without him, there would have been no Ralf, no Imogen; and without him, after Linsell's workshop had failed, there would have been only penury.

The last great storm had hit in 1232, when she had been twelve. It had set the manor back by years. This one had been just as bad. The baron wanted to rebuild the mill. Perhaps he needed to. That seemed likely, even certain, given the cost of the floods.

In her imagination she saw the parchment of his contract writhing, wrinkling, scorching, catching fire; she saw the two signatures, like the neatly inscribed clauses, becoming foxed, negatived, consumed by flame.

Linsell did not want to stay in Mape. Nor did Ralf, and nor did she. Everything here would remind them of Imogen, especially the mill, for it was during its construction that it seemed she had bloomed. In those months she had reached the flower of her beauty and sweetness. Her friendship with the baron's daughter was part of that, and it had come about because of the mill.

The mill-house, like Imogen herself, had disappeared into the void.

'It's as I thought,' Linsell said, coming back into the kitchen. 'Ralf says no.'

'Husband,' Anna began, thinking no longer of her daughter's coffin, but of the man who, now, inexplicably, after all these years, needed her help. 'I have something very difficult to ask you.'

* * *

Even before the dikes had been repaired, a gang of serfs, under Linsell's supervision, collected every scrap of wood from the tideline near the mill and carried it to higher ground. Much of it was fit only for fuel, but a fair amount, especially of the weatherboarding, could be re-used.

The rebuilding held no savour for Ralf. Since his third night with Eloise he had known that her wedding depended on the success of the mill.

Long before first light he would walk, alone or with his father, to the workshop and take up his tools. The windows and doors, all that was detailed and complicated, had to be made again. As he sawed and planed and measured, Ralf tried to keep his mind away from the past. To the past belonged Imogen and Eloise. To the past belonged pain. He preferred to ruminate on the day, in August or September, when the mill would be finished.

He had agreed to continue because his father had, and he suspected that his father had agreed only because he had. But it was just as his mother had said. They were indebted to the baron.

The morning after their conference a cord of quartered beech-logs had been delivered from the Hall, a stack some five feet by five by five. It had confused them for a time. Linsell had been afraid it had been sent as an inducement. Then Godric had arrived. From his talk Ralf had deduced that the baron had already been resigned to Linsell's refusal. The firewood had been an unconditional gift, yet another act of generosity.

With that, Linsell had accepted the post, but on two conditions: that the manor should charge him rent for his share of Jacob's cottage, and that he be paid not two marks but ten shillings a month, less than half the sum offered. Ralf, in turn, had refused to take more than five shillings a month.

To Ralf, finishing the job was more than a favour to be quitted. Whether it held savour or not, he was determined

to give it his best. The mill as rebuilt would be better than before.

He had discovered professional pride. His personal feelings and fate did not matter. They were of interest neither to the client nor to those who later might judge his handiwork. For the time being he was concerned only with excellence. His contribution to the mill would be his final act, his monument. It should bear any scrutiny.

This approach helped him to become more and more absorbed in his work, and that in turn helped him with Imogen. He had confided in no one his belief that she had been coming out to confront him. His guilt had to be borne alone. Even Eloise was unaware of that particular detail.

He was still resolved not to abandon Eloise. He would keep Godric informed of his whereabouts and, when summoned by the King's justiciar, would accept the consequences of what he had done.

One afternoon in February, he and Linsell were again in the workshop. Linsell spread the plan for the mill-wheel on the bench and weighted the corners with three chisels and a scratchstock. Ralf brought a lamp closer. He wanted to go more deeply into what they had just been discussing: some new ideas for the penstock and paddles.

The wheel was to be twelve feet in diameter and fifty-one inches wide, made of English oak, with steel bearings. There were to be eight spokes on either side and sixteen paddles, each having a surface area of eight square feet. Each revolution would consume about three hundred and fifty gallons. According to the present calculations, the average speed would be eight revolutions a minute.

In recent days Ralf had been thinking about the overshot wheels he had seen, especially the one at Priorsbourne.

Such wheels comprised an endless series of compartments into which the water fell. They were driven by gravity as well as the current. Compared with a conventional, undershot wheel, they were ferociously efficient.

An overshot wheel for the tide mill was out of the question. It had to be powered by a jet of water issuing from the sluice-like aperture of the penstock. Because of the rising tide, it also had to be aligned vertically. The wheel would continue turning, albeit slowly, until the sea-level reached the axle.

The paddles they had designed were flat, like those of any other undershot wheel. Ralf had begun to wonder whether some of the characteristics of an overshot wheel could not be given to this one. What if, rather than having a flat profile, the paddles were curved?

'How much curve, though?' Linsell said.

'I don't know.'

'It really would make a difference, wouldn't it?'

Ralf had explained his theory that a flat paddle would be most efficient only at a single point in its travel past the jet. For the rest of the time – perhaps as long as half a second – it would be shedding water through a range of wasteful angles. Some of this waste could be saved by making the paddle a scoop rather than a plane.

More efficiency meant more power. More power meant more speed. More grain could be ground in each shift. The lathe, or whatever auxiliary machines the manor chose to install, could do more work. The mill would earn more money.

Ralf's ideas for simplifying the drive-train had already enabled the volume of the pen to be reduced, making it cheaper to build. He had grasped intuitively the

relationship between efficiency and profit. Now he was beginning to see it as one of the fundamentals of good engineering. Besides being built for reliability, easy maintenance and the rest, every part of the mill needed to be tuned to this end.

He had been thinking not just about the paddles but the penstock too. The depth and shape of the aperture had to be designed to produce the strongest and most efficient jet, rectangular in cross-section and emerging at a precise angle, yet to be determined, with respect to each paddle as it passed.

'The calculations are far too difficult,' Linsell said. 'Maybe we could build models and use trial and error.'

'Take too long,' Ralf said, absent-mindedly, still looking at the plan; and, almost without being conscious of it, offended by the crudity of an empirical approach. Mathematics: that was the way to solve any and every technical problem. 'There's got to be someone who can tell us.'

Their talk was inconclusive. Linsell mentioned Josiah Parfett, the milling engineer. He might have the answer. There might even be an established formula for the design of curved paddles. That evening, at home, Ralf wrote him a letter of enquiry.

Ralf blotted his pen and was about to pack the writing-paper away when he thought of the library at the cathedral. He had never set foot there but he knew it to be extensive. Though it was best known for its religious and legal works, there were many others, including a large collection of classical writings as well as modern books like herbals and treatises on history and geography. The library was said to be Bishop William's particular pride. It formed

part of the Benedictine monastery. The monks had made many of its more valuable books in their scriptorium.

Few laymen were permitted to enter, never mind use, the library. The legal rolls of the diocese could be consulted on application, and on payment of a fee, by manorial clerks and others with a proper interest in them; as for the rest, it was inaccessible to anyone but the clergy.

The cathedral library might hold the information Ralf wanted, but the chances of his gaining entry were nil, even assuming the bishop's staff might be kindly disposed towards the project in hand.

Another idea came to him: Godric, Leckbourne. The abbey's library was far more eclectic and richly stocked than the one in Alincester. For works of science and mathematics it was supposed to be bettered only by the University's.

After a moment's reflection, and fully aware of his impudence, Ralf dipped his pen in the inkhorn. He was under sentence of death anyway. What more could they do to him? A grim smile forming on his lips, he began to compose a letter to his friend.

* * *

'You look strained, Eloise. Are you quite well?'

'Yes thank you, Mama.'

Since Christmas, her life had been lived internally. The affairs of the manor were a shadow-show to which she paid no more than outward heed. Just now, as though at a distance, she had again heard her father talking about the mill. His agreement with the serfs had been

enthusiastically taken up. There had been nothing more from the Molarius. The diocese had been thwarted.

Just behind her mother, she passed from the parlour into the great hall and took her place at the high table. Tonight no one was dining here but members of the family: Eloise herself, her parents and three aunts.

Having said grace, her father let the servants bring the soup, a bisk of lobster-meat and scallops served with toasted wheatbread.

'That's enough,' Eloise said, slightly raising her hand. The ladle was withdrawn. Elisabeth circled behind Aunt Mildred.

'For you, madam?'

Looking down, Eloise contemplated the unusual cinnamon colour of the bisk and the contrast it made with the brown glazed bowl. Particles of steam were rising, drifting in subtle swirls that vanished above the intimate glow of the candlesticks. Beyond the polished, oaken expanse of the table, most of the hall was in relative gloom. Like the steam, smoke from the central fire was finding its way upwards to disappear through the vent and on into the darkness of this overcast February night.

The date was the seventh. Her period should have arrived no later than the last day of January. She had missed the previous one also.

She had started to menstruate at fourteen. By the age of fifteen, her periods had become as regular and predictable as the moon itself. In all that time she had never missed a single month.

She kept thinking about Mary Ibbott's pregnancy. Mary had lost all face. So had the putative father, John Hollins, and his predecessor, Aholiab Peake. The three were treated

with undisguised contempt. The wedding had taken place before Christmas, a joyless, shamefaced, sparsely attended business.

Eloise's own ceremony was scheduled for the fifteenth of October, eight months hence.

She knew that expectant women were sometimes afflicted by morning sickness. So far she had escaped that. Otherwise she was ignorant of the signs. She did not even know how long it took for the bulge to become obvious.

There was no one she could ask without instantly giving herself away.

'Eat up, Eloise,' her father said.

She had no appetite. Having forced a smile, she spooned her soup obediently. Her terror was dominated by a single, central, overriding feeling: regret. Regret that she and Ralf had given way to their impulses and, above all, regret that she had not listened to Godric last November when there had still been a faint chance of redemption. But she would never regret meeting Ralf, or falling in love with him, or the tenderness of their time together.

Even the convent was closed to her now. She was being savagely punished and so was he.

The shock of Imogen's death could not be understood or resolved. It was made much worse by the way they had parted, with accusations and recriminations on Imogen's part and lies and harsh words on hers. Godric had helped her a great deal. After the funeral she had confided much to him, including her belief that she had known Ralf in another life. But she had not told Godric that the affair had gone on after November; and she had not told him about this.

A baby. In September. Ralf's baby.

Her mother was holding forth to her sisters and Aunt Béatrice, gossiping about the court. Eloise looked up and, inadvertently catching her father's eye, felt her heart being lanced, run through, by his affectionate and conspiratorial smile.

8

At one time Godric had looked forward to his monthly visits home. The abbey was hateful to him. The life there had drifted far from the regula of St Benedict, who in the sixth century had prescribed the ideal pattern for a monastic community. An abbot was supposed to be elected by the monks, then nominated by his bishop. Today he was almost a prince, appointed by that greater prince, Bishop William, and his power within the abbey walls was no longer absolute.

But Leckbourne was more than a monastery. Besides discharging a multitude of other functions, it took noblemen's sons and clever boys of low birth and schooled them to perpetuate the established order. Its alumni included some of the most distinguished lawyers, administrators, theologians and philosophers, not just in London and Oxford but in Paris, Rome and Bologna too. There were three lords chancellor among them, five cardinals and two archbishops of Canterbury.

In sending Godric to Leckbourne, his father had presumably hoped to launch him on such a career. Even now Godric's teachers believed he had a dazzling future in the Church.

He could conceive of no occupation meeting the Abbot's approval that would glorify God. The work of a parish

priest like Father Pickard had the potential to do so, but Godric did not dare suggest that course for himself.

His difficulties had begun in boyhood, with his first reading of St Matthew. In Judea, Christ had told an enquirer, 'If you will be perfect, go and sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in Heaven: and come and follow me.'

To Godric then, as now, this seemed a basic requirement for a Christian – that is, for one who honestly professed himself a follower of Christ.

To be sure, it was a counsel of perfection, but how could any Christian institution, still less one that claimed to train preachers, seek to amass worldly riches? What business did Leckbourne have in operating a hostelry from which the poor were turned away? What business did it have in charging inflated fees for imparting Christ's word to the young, or for treating the sick, or for hiring itself out to pray for the souls of unrepentant but wealthy sinners? How could it spend as much as it did on gold candlesticks, obscure books, idolatrous effigies and all the other rubbish that cluttered its vaults?

The physical setting of the abbey was in itself an affront to the Benedictine vow of poverty. The grounds, a place of sublime beauty, were ornamented by a lake that had been enlarged and landscaped by the monks and lay brothers, and by serfs from its manor: slaves, in other words. To improve further on God's work the various abbots had diverted the river, built weirs and waterfalls and even an artificial hill. Tens of thousands of marks had been squandered on the lawns and arboretum, the church, the chapter house, the cloister, and the abbot's quarters, which for luxury were inferior, in this diocese, only to the

bishop's palace. The infirmary with its separate cloister, the dortours and refectory, the library and school: these were architecturally equal or superior to almost anything owned by the King.

The routine of the abbey was centred on the opus Dei, the set of seven daily services that began at half-past two in the morning, with lauds, and ended at half-past seven in the evening with compline. The voices of the monks rose from the chancel to fill the church with anthems and responsories, psalms, prayers. The sacred sound radiated from the roof, the walls, and the high traceries of the west front: hypnotic, mystical, calming the air, investing the whole abbey with a sense of spirituality and peace.

When he had first arrived Godric had found it exceedingly beautiful. Now he thought otherwise. The novices and students, like Godric himself, were themselves expected to observe much of this barren ritual. Instead of providing a tool for meditation and an environment for contemplation, the chanting was little more than a waste of time. There was even rivalry among the brothers as to who sang most piously. The hours spent in the choir, Godric felt, would be better used in practical pursuit of Heaven, among the destitute.

There were other, more serious, reasons why he hated the abbey. Its hypocrisies were legion and disgusting. For the past five years he had been sustained by the lure of four days every month away from there, at home, with a blissful fortnight at Christmas and Easter.

Last Christmas had been anything but blissful, and during his January visit Godric had been more troubled still. He had dreaded coming back this time. Having arrived late in the afternoon, he had washed himself and changed

his clothes, spoken to his parents, taken a bite of food; and had then been unable to put off any longer the hour when he was again alone with his sister.

She had asked him to her room, the site of so much soul-searching at Christmas. There, cross-legged on her bed, she had just explained why she thought she was expecting Ralf's child.

Most of the room was lost in shadow. She alone was illuminated.

Godric was sitting with his back to the drapes, in the upholstered chair, looking across the rosy expanse of counterpane. Eloise was in partial profile. Lit by the oil-lamp on her bedside table and dressed in a voluminous, willow-green robe that only emphasised the pallor of her features, she seemed in the horror of her disclosure already to have abandoned the struggle for life. Just like her brother, she was damned. The place she too had arrived at bore no relation to the warm, living world of human beings.

The worst, the very worst, had happened to her, to Ralf, to both families. Godric had foreseen the possibility. He had not expected it to become real.

He knew little about women and their bodies. It took him a moment to see a further implication. At Christmas she had given him to understand that, following his warning in November, the affair had immediately ended.

She had lied. At a stroke she had undone his trust. She had negated all the hours he had spent with her after Imogen's death.

She and Ralf had continued into December. Fornicating. In the workshop, if she were to be believed. Like two serfs,

ignorant, immoral, too stupid or depraved to heed the consequences.

Godric's last communication with Ralf had been by letter, telling him that his wish to use the abbey's library could not be granted. Something in the wording of Ralf's request had struck him as unpleasant, revealing what Godric now saw as a persistence verging on the aggressive. It was of a piece with Ralf's pursuit of Eloise. The same trait had been visible in the way the mill had risen and was rising again; and in the way he had refused to stop tugging and tugging on that leather strap until the prisoner had come free from his slime.

Godric suddenly thought of Bartholomew, down by the boat-house, on a golden June evening when swarms of gnats had danced over the water. The two of them had been quite alone there, out of sight of the abbey windows.

He shut his eyes, trying to force the memory of his humiliation away. Nothing had happened except a misunderstanding, but that had been enough to make the matter overt.

He had agonised so much, spent so long in mental self-flagellation, that he was no longer even sure when an awareness of his deformity had begun. Had it been present even before he had become aware? At his first meeting with Ralf, what had been the nature of the attraction he had felt? How pure had it been? Looking up from the mud, what sort of saviour had he beheld? Well-favoured, strong, unabashedly masculine. Better, far better, if the attempt had foundered; if the miscreated wretch had been extinguished, submerged, concealed for ever by the incoming tide!

Godric had always told himself that he had not been conscious of his leanings till his arrival at the abbey, and

then not for several months. To begin with he had not understood, or wanted to understand, what some of the boys did with each other. Later he learned that their vice was not confined to the school. The Abbot plainly knew about it, knew what some of his monks got up to, among themselves and even with those boys who did not resist. He had allowed a Sodom to be made of his abbey.

Godric had studied and studied again certain passages in the Bible: Leviticus chapter eighteen, verse twenty-two; Leviticus chapter twenty, verse thirteen; Paul's Epistle to the Romans chapter one, verse twenty-seven; and, above all, chapters eighteen and nineteen of Genesis. But neither fire nor brimstone fell on Leckbourne. It continued to prosper. All that descended on it were fresh recruits, money, and an occasional visit from William of Briouze.

Godric reminded himself that this conversation was not about his worries, but his sister's. He asked, 'What do you intend to do?'

In a small voice she said, 'There are ways and ways.'

'Of what?'

'Getting rid of it. The village women know. Herbs. Groundsel, I think, and tansy. Or spurred rye. Ergot. I'm surprised Mary didn't take some.'

'Mary Ibbott?'

'I even thought of asking her.'

Impossibly, the horror of the interview was getting worse.

'You see,' she went on, 'if I have the baby, Ralf won't stand any chance at all.'

There was no sense in her speech, only the logic of a nightmare. 'You can't do that, kill a child, I mean. You can't take a life.' The whole thing was so monstrous and

repugnant that he could not believe they were even discussing it. What had she endured, in the weeks since her bleeding had stopped? What depths of suffering had she plumbed? 'Eloise.'

She turned her head slightly, to look at him full face.

'Promise me you won't.'

'I only told you because I had to. If I hadn't told someone I should have gone out of my mind. Perhaps I already have. You're the only one I can talk to. It's like a confession, isn't it?'

'I'm not a priest.'

'You soon will be.'

'I may never be ordained.'

There: he had said it, given form to the idea that until now he had hardly admitted had been growing like a tumour inside him.

She said, 'What makes you say that?'

He could simply pretend that the remark had been meant as a generalisation about the uncertainty of the future, anyone's future, but that would be mendacious. To the same enquirer, Christ had said, 'You shall not bear false witness.' Mendacity was what Godric himself had just been deploring in his sister. It was human enough. But to be perfect, to follow Christ, one had to rise above it.

And yet, to explain himself he would have to tell her everything. He would have to tell her about the corruption of the Church, its venality and lust for power, its departure from the way of Christ. He would have to tell her about simony, about the misappropriation of tithes and lands and bequests. And he would have to tell her about Bartholomew and the school dortour; and, above all, about

his commingled feelings for Ralf, diseased by denial and self-disgust.

To speak truly, as Christ commanded, he would have to explain all these things. For how otherwise could he seek any promises from her?

'What makes you say that?'

Her words were like the blows of an axe. Each one smote the hinges of the gate he had kept locked fast. He had cowered behind it for years. A few ragged fibres of wood were all that remained to hold it in place. With one slight push, the gate would open and leave him exposed.

'Godric, are you all right?'

'No,' he said, and began his explanation.

* * *

On the eve of Godric's last day, Eloise experienced, as if by miracle, the pains in her lower back that always presaged menstruation. In the early hours of the morning she started to bleed. So great were her relief and joy that she wanted to wake Godric and tell him.

Since his confession three nights ago, she had ceased to pray for herself. She had prayed for him instead. The practices he had described should have revolted her, but she could see them only as sterile and pitiable. Living as he did in that place, Godric's struggles were nothing short of superhuman.

She better understood now the nature of his friendship with Ralf. There was something pathetic in that too, a love like Imogen's, which could never be requited. She understood Godric's behaviour last June, in the stable yard

and on the dike; she understood the motives that had brought her and Ralf together.

Godric had confided in her, just as she had confided in him. A year ago she would never have believed she could be so close to her brother. In that respect she had envied Imogen, about whom she had been thinking more and more.

There had been a bigger obstacle to Imogen's love for Godric than the Church. Did she now understand how naive, how pathetically endearing, her earthbound devotion had been? And was she, resplendent, gazing down from her celestial vantage, able at this moment to see into Eloise's heart?

Looking back, it seemed to Eloise that Imogen had been one of the people she had known before, in that other existence. Was that why they had become so intimate, so quickly – had they already been friends? During the first shock of her death, Eloise had experienced further glimpses, had felt rather than seen fragments of an existence both familiar and strange.

Pine trees figured in it, and rocky cliffs, perhaps fringed with sand. Long ships, a grey sea, fire; shouting, violence, blood. Godric may have been there, with or without Imogen, married or related to her. Eloise did not know. Ralf was the only certainty. He had been her husband and something had parted them.

In the workshop she had told him about her earlier visions, expecting him to be sceptical, or even critical of her deviation from Christian doctrine; and had been amazed to find that he himself felt something similar, though less strongly. From the first he had sensed that he and Godric might have known each other in a previous

life, and later had convinced himself that he had known her too.

On some days Eloise did not think about these matters at all. On others they obsessed her. She tried to remember every particle of her dreams, sifting through the dross for any clue, but the memories came to her only when awake or half awake, and only then in times of great unhappiness.

Ralf had persuaded her she was not mad. She had learned that his own, unorthodox faith could easily accommodate the transmigration of souls.

She ached to be with him. If they were not to be together in this lifetime, why had they been allowed to recognise each other? Would there be a third chance, in another life, to resolve whatever was unfinished? Or was this the end?

That had been the chief subject of her prayers, her request for another chance, even though, according to the Bible, there could be no such thing. And she had begged for the baby not to be, not yet. In that she had been selfish. Her request had been ignored. It was only when she had forgotten about herself, and concentrated all her prayers on her poor, suffering brother, that God had been moved to act.

There was no chance to give Godric the glad tidings before breakfast, because he was the last to the table.

When the family were alone they seldom took breakfast in the great hall, which at this time of day could be cold. A round folding table was set up in the dayroom. Spread with a cream linen cloth and lit by four squat bronze candlesticks, it was already laden with food: cheese of various kinds, sliced ham and sausage, spiced eggs, smoked herring and mackerel, hot bread, milk, clabber and butter. Elisabeth had just brought a second jug of lemon tea.

Late last night, it seemed, Eloise's father had received a letter from London about the mill. Attached had been some documents in very complicated Latin. Rather than disturb his clerk, he had given them to Godric to scrutinise.

Godric had brought the parchments in with him. He waited till the maid left before he told his father, 'Your reading is correct, sir. The Molarius is not using the church courts. He has obtained a writ from the chancery addressed to the Sheriff of Sussex. Mr Chevalley says this will lead to a de postero plaint, lodged at the Court of Common Pleas. He thinks the case might end up at the King's Bench, where it would be heard coram rege. By His Grace in person.'

'But there is no case. There can be no case.'

'So Mr Chevalley says.' With a wandering forefinger Godric examined the letter, holding it towards the nearest candle-flame. 'Where are we? Here it is. "A tide mill has no stream. 'Rivus qui molam agit': this is the crucial definition."'

Aunt Béatrice asked him, 'What does it mean?'

'Literally, "a stream which drives a mill". "Rivus", a stream, "mola", a millstone or the mill itself, "agito", I put in motion. A watermill must have a millstream in order to qualify as a molendinium sacrum.'

'A what?'

'A mill driven by the wind or rain, which are held to be sacred. Only the Church can license one. Because it is driven by the tide and has no millstream, we say ours falls outside the definition. It must therefore be a molendinium profanum, an ordinary mill. That is the top and tail of the dispute.'

Eloise was studying her father. In his eyes she saw the same expression she had seen on Christmas morning when news of the flood had reached him. Her knowledge of litigation was limited to one fact: it cost a great deal of money.

He said, 'Why should the diocese use the secular courts? It makes no sense. If they were sure of their ground they'd bring me to a church court.'

'Perhaps they're not serious,' said Aunt Mildred, which struck Eloise, but apparently not her father, as unlikely.

'It wouldn't be the first time they've tried to frighten me,' he said. 'They've got no case and they know it.' He snorted. 'And even if it did go before His Grace, do they really imagine he'd find for them, against the baronage?'

It all sounded grave to Eloise. The Church was not known for its incompetence. She looked at Godric who, perhaps of the same mind as herself, was reluctant to say anything.

She asked, 'What will be the next step, Papa?

'Another summons. Depending how it's worded, I may have to appear in person next time, with a lawyer. Then there'll be a lot of arguing, followed by more writs, and summonses to various courts, until the thing ends up wherever it ends up. Before the King, perhaps, as Mr Chevalley seems to think.' He helped himself to another herring. 'Not that it'll get that far.'

'What about the costs?' said Eloise's mother. 'Who will pay?'

'The diocese, since they haven't a hope of winning.' He gestured at the parchments. 'They've already let themselves in for that little exercise. Mr Chevalley's

services aren't cheap. It's just as well Bishop William has deep pockets.'

9

The lawsuit was an enigma. Gervase twice went to Chevalley's rooms to discuss it. Chevalley said the plaint was a spoiling tactic, meant to dissuade others from building similar mills before Rome was able to change the definitions. The plaint had probably also been intended, as Gervase himself had guessed, to make him capitulate; the lawyer repeatedly assured his client that there was no reason why he should. He had analysed the meaning of every word, not only of the definitions, but also of their subordinate clauses. His conclusion was iron-clad. A molendinium aquaticum required a millstream.

There were other puzzles, none of which he could explain. Why had the diocese not used the church courts, where its chances of success would have been so much greater? It was representing its grievance as an infraction of existing law, which self-evidently was nonsense.

The case had developed its own momentum, baffling judge after judge, becoming ever more expensive. How was it managing to rise so rapidly through the court system? The claims and counter-claims should have taken years to get this far. Whose hand lay behind that?

Gervase could not help feeling apprehensive. Even had he wanted or been able to back down, it was now too late. The costs were already greater than he could comfortably afford. His own were bad enough, but Alincester was stinting nothing in its campaign.

By the end of June the mill itself was nearing completion. Thanks to the eager participation of the serfs, the earthworks had been finished and the pen made watertight. The house, sea-gates and culvert were finished. The wheel had been fitted. Master Grigg and his son, advised by Josiah Parfett, were installing the machinery.

In his life, Gervase had found that there was always something to spoil anticipated pleasure. He should have relished visiting his new mill, admiring its elevations, talking it over with the builders, finding out how it was to work. He should have looked forward to its testing, its inauguration, its first commercial run. He was paying for all these pleasures, but they were being denied to him. He even caught himself trying not to think about the mill at all.

This afternoon, deeply troubled, he had again ridden from his house in the Wooleries to Turnley Row and the sign of the unicorn.

He discovered that Chevalley had now persuaded himself that none of the lower judges, all of whom were clerics, would risk finding against the Church. That meant the case would inevitably arrive at the curia regis, the royal court, and be heard by the King himself. 'These proceedings,' Chevalley said, 'can be perceived as a contest between the Church and the baronage, which means the Church and Crown. That might be one reason why they are being so keenly prosecuted. On the face of it, the Pope —'

'The Pope?'

'His Holiness himself will be aware of the case.'

'Why? It's so trivial.'

‘To an outsider, that is how it would look. But if one accords the dispute symbolic properties, one can begin to understand what is going on. It’s a question of power. I’m beginning to think we’re being caught up in something we did not foresee.’

That was the first defensive remark Chevalley had ever made in his hearing. Gervase suddenly saw that there was a danger of losing. The ultimate ambition of the Church, which might take centuries to realise, was nothing less than the restoration of its empire. The Vatican worked continuously to undermine and supplant the monarchy, in England and right across Europe. Only by acknowledging this could one untangle the Byzantine complexity of its policies. He said, ‘If you’re so sure the King is going to try the case, should I speak to him?’

‘When?’

‘Soon. As soon as possible.’

‘May I ask what Your Lordship proposes to say?’

Gervase was not sure. The idea had occurred to him of a private meeting rather than an audience, an informal discussion between two men who had known each other for thirty-five years. Beyond that he had not thought. He had considered neither his lifetime’s service to the Crown nor the loyalty the King owed him in return. ‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘I’m not sure. I’d just … I don’t know.’

Chevalley gave what Gervase could only interpret as a cynical smile. ‘It is a good plan, my lord, provided you say the right things. May I talk plainly?’ At Gervase’s sign of acquiescence, Chevalley seemed to become easier in his seat. ‘The law has two faces. The public face is all very well, but it is the other that matters.’

Gervase said nothing. He knew what the other face comprised: undue influence, political pressure, extortion.

From outside, from the street, through the shut window, the muffled sounds of a summer afternoon were intruding on the room. The rumble of a barrow briefly drowned out the carefree, feminine conversation of two passers-by. Their hats and clothing showed for a moment as a blur of colourful movement across the glass.

Gervase found himself wishing he were outdoors. He wished he could just get up from this seat and leave. Only a step away, he could watch the Thames, feel the heat of the sun, breathe fresh air. He could stroll along the embankment to the pleasure garden and sit in the shade; perhaps meet an acquaintance or two before deciding to go back to his house. Or better, far better, back to Sussex: to the simple seaside life, to his fields and hawks and dogs, to the salt and purity of the shore.

But Chevalley was still talking. 'I've heard you are one of the barons opposing war in Gascony.'

'I am.'

'Is it true that His Grace would need the help of your faction to win such a war?'

'He could proceed very well without us.'

'But your support would make victory more likely?'

'War with the French over Gascony would be a disaster.'

'I am aware of that, my lord. I'm not suggesting that you compromise yourself or endanger the country. Far from it.'

'What are you suggesting, then?'

'I'll come to that in a minute.' Chevalley's nose, Gervase now noticed, was rather too long for his face. Earlier Gervase had been talking to Fitz Peter, extending his loan yet again. If Fitz Peter resembled a swine, then Chevalley

might have something in common with a rodent. A large and cunning rodent, none too clean, sullied by the refuse among which it busied itself. 'I hear the King's ambassador in Paris is trying to negotiate a treaty.'

'Who told you that?'

'Is it so?'

'The French are setting impossible terms. They know their own strength. We're afraid of what'll happen when the negotiations fail.'

'Enmity between kings is not something His Holiness would discourage.'

'Go on,' Gervase said, making himself concentrate, beginning to perceive Chevalley's drift.

'King Louis no doubt has his spies in our court.'

'Just as, no doubt, we have our spies in his.'

'If your faction were seen – ostensibly – to relent, would it not make our ambassador's work easier?'

Gervase suppressed a cynical smile of his own. He had not realised before quite what a scoundrel he had hired. No wonder he was so expensive. 'You have missed your vocation, Mr Chevalley.'

'I am merely pointing out, my lord, that you are not powerless in this matter. Your approach to His Grace should reflect that. When you seek your audience, do so in order to discuss the merits of the strategy I have just outlined. Bring in, if you can, the Pope's campaign in Sicily. Peace between England and France would discomfit Rome. Then, when the King's mood is right, mention your case in passing, as it were. He needs the treaty far more than he needs Bishop William.'

* * *

Ralf was working in the gloom of the wheel-pit, trying to fit the wallower to the mainshaft. This had to be done from below.

The main cogwheel, six feet in diameter, parallel to the waterwheel and driven directly by its axle, was called the pitwheel. Its ninety cogs engaged with the thirty-one of a much smaller, horizontal wheel, the wallower, from which rose the mainshaft. The spurwheel, twice the size of the wallower, was attached to the mainshaft higher up. Its cogs engaged a pinion which turned a horizontal layshaft. At the end of the layshaft was the cogged, vertical drivewheel: this turned the stone nut, which was connected to another shaft, the stone-spindle, which would drive the runner or upper millstone. Between the stone-nut drivewheel and the pinion, the layshaft also turned a plain vertical drivewheel. To this would be attached a canvas belt, to provide power for the sack-hoists and the lathe.

The gears were made of hornbeam, the traditional material. The wood was hard, resistant to wear, and could be worked to fine tolerances.

Ralf and Linsell had spent much time on the cogs. Provided they did not jam, the more closely they could be made to fit, the longer they would last and the more quietly and efficiently the mill would run.

'How's it going down there, Ralf?' said his father, from the gear-room above, where he was adjusting the tension of the drive.

'Nearly on.'

'Don't force it. We can trim it again.'

'We won't have to.' Delicately offering the wallower up, Ralf began tapping around the inner part of its socket. With each subtle blow of his mallet he was rewarded by

the silky feel of the wallower at last sliding into place.

'Done it!' he cried.

'Good work!'

Ralf reached into his pocket for a split brass cotter-pin. This he pushed into a hole in the side of the wallower socket, and on through a corresponding hole in the mainshaft. Once it was in place, he inserted a blunt knife between the emergent wings of the pin and levered them very slightly apart.

The gears were now complete. Once their tension was correct, if Ralf or his father were to unfasten the lock and turn the wheel by hand, the stone-spindle should rotate.

It had taken the best part of a day to get this right, and the best part of two weeks to decide on the best method of attaching the various cogwheels to their shafts. For reasons of strength, Mr Parfett had favoured permanent fixture, but Mr Caffyn, and Linsell himself, wanted the whole mill to be easily maintained. If one component failed, a replacement would need to be fitted quickly, so that as little turning-time as possible should be lost. This meant that the shafts and sockets had to be thicker than usual, since they were to be drilled to take brass cotters. Brass had been chosen to minimise corrosion.

Mr Parfett had come round to Linsell's way of thinking. Not only did he now concede the speed and economy of a knock-down drive-train, but he proposed to advise future clients to adopt the same scheme.

Ralf climbed out of the pit. The sun struck hot on his face. A cool breeze was blowing from the north-east. As his eyes readjusted to the brilliance of the afternoon, he stood for a few seconds facing out across the harbour.

Each morning he woke surprised that he was still at liberty. He had not been alone with Eloise since the day of Imogen's funeral, six months before. Perhaps she would say nothing till her wedding-night. October the fifteenth. A hundred and nine days away.

The suicide pact was on his mind. Eventually, one way or another, they would be together. He would be dead by next Christmas, at the latest. He might have to wait sixty years before she could join him.

'Eloise,' he whispered, looking across the mud and water to the Point. Even if he lived, he would never love anyone else. They had sat here together, just over a year ago, on midsummer's eve. The view then had been different. The dunes had changed.

He turned, passed behind the house and stepped up into the porch.

The mill was keeping him sane. When he and his father were wrestling with some technical problem, Ralf became so deeply absorbed that he could temporarily forget Eloise. He could not forget his guilt and his grief for Imogen, but even they seemed to become more bearable while he was engrossed in his calculations or working at the bench.

This new mill really was going to outdo the first. Externally the house looked just the same. Internally they had made innumerable improvements, especially to the drive. Because salt water was so corrosive, Ralf had redesigned the wheel's bearing-sleeves so that they could be sealed and packed with tallow. This alone would let the mill run for longer between services.

Mr Parfett had paid four visits to the site, the latest only yesterday. Many of the cleverest ideas were his, taken or adapted from the design of fluvial mills.

The paddle calculations had in the end proved too hard. He had been unable to help, though he had conceded that curved paddles might well provide more thrust. Ralf had not really been surprised when Godric had written to say that the librarian at the abbey had refused him access.

Soon afterwards, though, Godric had discovered there a treatise on Arab irrigation machines. The drawings were clumsy and possibly inaccurate, but some of them depicted paddles with a semicircular profile. He had made a copy of one for Ralf.

It had immediately been obvious that this was the solution for a tidal wheel. As the tide rose, its lower section would be progressively submerged. A semicircular paddle would both maximise the effect of the jet and minimise drag as the array of paddles rotated through the surrounding water.

The width of the wheel was known. The radius of the paddle curve, ten inches, had been dictated by the height of the penstock outlet. This in turn was a function of the volume of the pen and the period, about five hours, it would take to empty its nine hundred thousand gallons into the sea.

The penstock had also undergone radical change. By means of a geared turnscrew, its sliding gate was now operated from the hurst, so that the miller could adjust the flow, and hence the speed of the runner, without leaving his stones unattended. The penstock inlet was bigger than the outlet, increasing the force of the jet; and the lip of the outlet had been extended with an extra course of ashlar, to reduce turbulence and deliver the water closer to the paddles.

Beyond the wheel was a fan-shaped chute, the tailrace. The design of this too had been improved, broadened, and longitudinal ribbing had been incorporated in the stonework, to carry the exhaust away more quickly.

'Tension's about right,' Linsell said, when Ralf came into the gear-room. 'Do you want to risk it?'

'A test?'

'What else?'

So much effort had been poured into the drive, and so close was the promised completion date, that Ralf was hesitant, even nervous.

Seven other men were working on the site, two carpenters upstairs and five serfs from the village, who were busily scrubbing the granary floorboards. At Linsell's invitation they all crowded into the hurst room with his son, while he himself climbed down the iron inspection-ladder into the culvert.

'Get ready!' he shouted.

The steel shaft of the stone-spindle was as yet unfinished by the cross-shaped rind that would support the upper millstone. It emerged from a neat hole in the flour-chute.

Ralf imagined his father releasing the lock and putting his shoulder to the waterwheel. By means of six precision-cut cogwheels, by means of the bearings and the layshaft, its axle was now linked to the spindle. When the wheel turned, so should the spindle. If it didn't, or if the wheel wouldn't budge, then there would be something amiss: perhaps something minor, such as an oversized cog. Or it might be something major, such as a catastrophic oversight in the whole design.

Ralf's throat was dry. What had he been thinking of, last spring but one, when he had blithely assumed they could

build an engine as advanced and complicated as a full-sized mill?

His father must have tried pushing the wheel by now. Ralf's gaze had not left the spindle. In the suspended silence of the sun-warmed hurst room, the tiny imperfections in the metal remained obstinately still, unmoving, stationary. Only one thing was being transmitted from below: failure.

Then there came an intricate, multiplying creak of hornbeam on hornbeam. Before his eyes, with all the inevitability of mathematics, counter-sunwise, and exactly fifteen times faster than the wheel, the stone-spindle began to revolve.

* * *

On the afternoon of Friday, the first of July, Gervase was granted his request to see the King in private. They met at Westminster Palace, in the Tapestry Room, where the luxuriant hangings covered every wall. The shutters of the three windows, looking out on the Queen's Pleasance, were rarely opened more than a little, for fear of damage by sunlight.

Though the room was intended as a gallery where the King's most treasured tapestries could be displayed, he also liked to use it from time to time as a dayroom. Half a dozen comfortable seats surrounded a low, circular and highly polished table upon which a lavish arrangement of flowers had been placed. Gervase identified the curious foliage of spurge, making an apt background for the pink and white blooms. The scent of the flowers, together with the dim light of the room and the King's quiet, measured

conversation, were almost conspiring to make him forget how important, how pivotal to his family's future, this meeting might prove.

One fragrance in particular, clove-like, drowsily seductive, was doing its best to distract him. His knowledge of gardening, unlike Margaret's, was scant, but even he knew the gillyflower, frothy pink, with greyish stems and leaves. 'Sops-in-wine', as many called it, was used to flavour drinks, and could usually be found in ale-house gardens. He recognised two or three of the others: alison, he thought, and Solomon's seal, but the name of one especially tall and showy variety had escaped his mind.

The King fingered his beard, a half smile remaining on his face. Gervase had just put forward Chevalley's scheme, at which his eyes had briefly lit up, with surprise, or scepticism, or relish at the intrigue. He was now, at his leisure, scrutinising his guest. He might reply; he might not; but as yet his silence had not become dangerous.

Henry would be fifty-two in October. He was four years younger than Gervase and remarkably well-preserved, considering he had occupied the throne for most of his days. Perhaps through his love of hunting, he had retained his figure and a youthful posture. Gervase had never known him to overeat or let himself become fuddled, unlike his father John. His wits, if anything, had become even sharper as the years had passed.

'Will you allow yourself to be seen with Lord de Braux?' he asked at last, though this was not a question, but a command.

'I will.'

‘A little at first, then more. Don’t be too visible for a week or two. Then we can spread the word by other means. De Braux is one of your most bothersome opponents, is he not? Worse than his late father, God rest his soul.’

‘May I say that we express our fealty by different means?’

The King’s smile became benignant. He ruled absolutely, by divine right, but he was also constrained by the baronage. Nothing ever happened if the barons opposed it. Much of his energy was spent in trying to control them. He was well aware of the flux of opinion, the alignments and realignments, the unadulterated plotting, that went on in his court.

Gervase decided it was both unnecessary and impolitic to mention the Pope. He had learned this week that Henry had altogether barred Cardinal Pellegrini from Westminster and would deal with him only by letter.

With an inward smile of his own, Gervase recalled the name of the showy blooms on the table in front of him: sweet william.

‘Do tell, de Maepe, how is your dear wife? We haven’t seen her for a while.’

‘She is in good health, thank you, liege.’

‘And your daughter …’

‘Eloise?’

‘Your youngest, set to marry Hugo Ingram’s boy.’

‘She also is well and, may I say, greatly looking forward to the ceremony and her presentation at court.’

‘A notable beauty, engaging and quick-witted besides. At least that’s the word Hugo brings from his son.’

‘Margaret and I are very proud of her, liege.’ Gervase hesitated. ‘Though I have to say that the marriage may be contingent on the affairs of my manor.’

‘How so?’

‘I am building a mill.’ As economically as he could, he explained the position.

‘Ah,’ Henry said, when he had finished. His smile was now as cynical as Chevalley’s had been. ‘It sounds intriguing. We should like to see it.’

The King was known for his fascination with the new-fangled. Gervase was instantly on his guard. A royal visit – especially as part of a progress – would be enough to wreck his finances altogether. The King had been to Mape once before, but informally, and only for hunting the few wild boar that still lurked in the reeds and oakwoods. ‘We shall of course be honoured should Your Grace deign —’

‘Don’t worry, Gervase. That is one honour we shall, for the present, spare you. But as a matter of fact, we shall be for a day or two next September with your neighbour, Lord Angmer. There may be a chance to look at your tide mill then.’

Gervase remembered what Angmer had told him about the King lusting after Asug, his principal goshawk. By now she would be fully manned, and a very valuable bird indeed. Henry’s passion for short-winged hawks even exceeded his love of riding to hounds.

‘If this ludicrous case ever does come to our bench, it would be helpful for us to have examined the bone of contention.’ His amusement had returned in full. ‘Lord de Maepe.’

‘Yes, liege?’

‘We forbid you to look so downcast. You know we’d never dream of disappointing Hugo’s boy.’

10

Gervase could not remember when he had last felt so pleased with life. He was sleeping all the way through the night, every night, and waking refreshed. His appetite had improved. He viewed the antics of serfs and courtiers alike with paternal forgiveness. His burden had been lifted. A fortnight after his deliverance by the King, he realised that his twenty-five years of worry had been a test of character. He had survived it and emerged intact on the other side. He was more than intact. He was rejuvenated. And, to his astonishment, he found that he was also happy.

The verdict was a foregone conclusion: as the days passed and the mill drew ever nearer to completion, he wondered why he had ever doubted it.

He visited the site often when he was at home. He liked being there, talking to Master Grigg or to Ralf, discovering the way his mill was to work. He liked musing on future profits, the wood-turning venture, the novel participation of his serfs. Above all he liked musing on the bishop’s reaction on that fast-approaching day when the verdict would be handed down. Sweet William, indeed!

In the third week of July the paired burrstones arrived from Antwerp aboard the *Ooievaar*, a Dutch barque calling at Rushton. Grigg supervised their transference to a coastal barge and travelled with them to Mape. It took twelve serfs to manhandle each one from the derrick, over the dike and up into the hurst room. The stones were fitted and the

millstone crane installed. Parfett made a final inspection and, satisfied, presented his account.

On August the ninth, eleven days before the inauguration, Gervase got up before dawn to see the screen opened. The empty pen had grown rank with weeds. Before Grigg would let any water through the penstock, the pen had to be repeatedly filled and emptied so that the weeds would be killed and any debris flushed out. To this end the two great sea-gates, hinging upwards and attached to the inner wall of the pen, were now locked open.

The morning was chilly. Gervase shivered, wishing he had eaten more breakfast. Thick mist hung over the marshes. Except for a faint, pinkish glow on the eastern horizon, the sky was grey. Summer was already waning. Though the harvest was at its height, reaping would not begin till the dew had dried, so there had been no shortage of volunteers to help with today's task.

Gervase remained on the dike with Master Grigg. Ralf led the team of serfs charged with dismantling the wall of sandbags. Armed with knives, they made short work of the tarred netting, which was bundled up to be taken to the village by oxcart. It would be used to start the Hallowmas fire. The sandbags were removed one by one, passed in a human chain down the foreshore and twenty yards across the firmer mud, then slashed open and the contents emptied out. The bags too, like the canvas barrier, would go back to Mape to be burned.

As far as cereals went, the manor would very soon be self-sufficient. Gervase would be obliged to no one to have his grain made into flour. He would no longer have to trust the integrity of strangers, for he would have his own miller, chosen by and responsible to Walter and himself.

Advertisements had been sent out to town-guilds as far away as Dorchester. Walter had already had one reply and would be interviewing the candidate next week.

'Did you know, Master Grigg, that the Church is trying to make me buy a licence for your mill?'

'No, my lord. I didn't.'

'The dispute has gone to court. But they haven't a chance of winning. Not one. I have it on the highest possible authority.'

Apparently Grigg was unsure how to answer. He remained silent.

Gervase did not know why he had said something so indiscreet. The words had arisen from the growing sense of joy filling his breast. They had formed themselves unbidden and had demanded to be imparted to this most reliable, conscientious and self-effacing of men.

'I'm no friend of the bishop,' Grigg announced, after a long pause.

'Why is that?' said Gervase, taken aback.

'He ruined us. When my children … when Ralf was little, he ruined us, right enough.'

Gervase had not forgotten the bishop's comprehensive hand-washing over the timber-merchant, Acklin, who had been hanged for stealing the King's oaks. Pontius Pilate himself could not have done a better job.

'Ralf was in the cathedral school. He was on course for Dorley. He'd have been at the University by now. Bit better than being a woodsmith.'

At the end of this last sentence Grigg's voice cracked, just as it had when Gervase had released him from his contract. Gervase had never suspected him of such deep and long-held feelings: of such rage. In an instant he

understood the genesis of the mill. For Linsell Grigg, it was an act of revenge.

From here, sideways on to the screen, they could see Ralf clambering about on the sandbags, directing the serfs but also working with them, as hard as them, making sure that all went smoothly.

'He's a fine boy,' Gervase said, thinking with a twinge of envy about his own sons. It took all of them to muster the qualities – manly independence and intelligence, dogged industry, radiant health, physical beauty – invested by the Almighty in that one favoured, almost luminous, being.

'He is.'

'I'm glad you were brought to Mape,' said Gervase, and again the words were coming of themselves. 'Despite the bishop. Because of the bishop.'

By the time the last bag had been emptied, the tide was already dispersing the sand. Ralf and his men returned to the dike.

The harvest called the serfs away. Presently there arrived the two carpenters who were helping to finish the interior of the house. The Griggs joined them and Gervase was left alone.

Knowing he should return to the Hall, knowing there were sundry matters claiming his attention, he yet remained to watch the tide.

For the first time in a year, it found ready passage through the threshold of the screen, foaming and swirling through the gaps between the spruce-trunks. It reclaimed the foreshore and reached the edge of the ashlar tailrace below the wheel. It encroached on the sloping stonework, progressively wetted the lowest paddle of the wheel itself, and started climbing the low sill of the sea-gate wall.

Gervase had never before heeded this miracle. He had never observed it closely or given thought to the lunar mystery that lay behind it. How did it work? Why had God ordered it so? Without tides the oceans would be a lifeless expanse of water moved only by the wind. The moon was their breath. The cycle of inhalation and exhalation approximated to twelve and a half hours, so that high water crept a little later each day and never recurred at the same time and at the same height for months or even years together. By making the cycle irregular, God maintained in the motion of his seas the infinite variety of his whole creation.

It was wonderful, truly wonderful. No man could conceive of the weight of water, the raw power being eternally squandered on the beaches of the world.

Through native genius, Master Grigg had captured a speck of that power and turned it to the welfare of God's children. If any mill in Christendom deserved the name 'sacred', this was it. What arrant nonsense were the laws of men!

Gervase moved to the other side of the dike. There he witnessed the very first pulse of salt water spilling through its designated gaps in the wall. Feeble as it was, it took the unsuspecting forest of groundsel by surprise, splashing it, darkening and being at once absorbed by the dusty soil of the pen. The weeds were doomed. That wave was followed by one lesser, and a lesser yet, and then by a greater, which produced as it fell an authentic swash of the sea.

He looked up, half expecting to glimpse a face at the dormer window – Ralf's, for some reason, had suggested itself to his mind – but he, more sensible than the lord of

the manor, was so certain of the tides and his father's skill that he did not even feel the need to watch.

A moment later Gervase heard hammering inside the house. With one last, excited glance at the pen, he descended the shallow stone steps beside the cart-ramp, to the hitching-rail by the work-shed and his waiting horse.

* * *

High tide on the day of the inauguration was due at half-past two in the morning. Unobserved in the night, the sea-gates went on admitting water until just before the tide turned. Their own weight then resisted any further inflow. As the sea-level dropped, the increasing differential pressure of the water in the pen clamped the gates harder and harder against their frames.

So well had they been finished that, by morning when the spectators began to arrive, the leakage amounted to no more than fine spray, shaped and angled in various directions according to the imperfections in the wood.

The gates were made of seasoned oak, caulked and tarred like the hull of a ship. Ralf thought that the millhouse, fronting the calm expanse of water in the pen, was itself like some odd sort of vessel, now waiting to set sail. With a single revolution of its ashwood tommy-bar, the penstock turnscrew would start letting water through the jet. With three more, the jet would be operating with maximum force. While the millhouse remained stationary, the rotating wheel and runnerstone would make their own linked but separate voyages; and send their gushing wakes down two chutes, one into the meal-bin and the other out to sea.

By the time of the morning's second bell, the sun had come out and there were well over a hundred people on the dike. The baron made a short speech, imperfectly heard by those furthest away, but no one seemed to care. They had come not for speeches, but to see the wheel turn.

To Ralf's surprise Father Pickard blessed the building and sprinkled holy water in the porch. And then the baron called attention to the lintel there.

Ralf had not been sure about the last-minute, private commission the baron had given him, to carve a wooden plaque without his father's knowledge. A few minutes ago, while his parents had been elsewhere, Ralf had hung the plaque from some temporary hooks.

He had made it from a flawless blank of heartwood yew, as blond as her hair. The style and sequence of lettering had been most carefully specified by the baron. The words were not to be in Latin, still less in courtly French, but in English:

IMOGEN'S MILL

Ralf had feared his parents might be upset. He had been wrong.

'Are we all ready?' the baron said. 'Shall we start the wheel?'

Ralf felt a restraining hand on his shoulder. He had been about to go inside and open the turnscrew, as arranged. His father had stopped him.

'My lord,' Linsell said. 'Let the honour go to your own daughter.'

This notion met with the approval of those in earshot. Not without a reluctance that perhaps only Ralf perceived, Eloise came forward. She was wearing a summer dress in

cream linen, adorned by a small brooch in amber and gold. Her hair had been woven, with a cream-and-brown ribbon, into the single long plait he liked so well.

Without speaking, they climbed the iron ladder to the middle floor and the silent stones.

The spring and summer had been kind to Eloise. Except for the trouble Ralf saw in her eyes, she looked as lovely now as ever she had. She could almost have been the same girl he had seen in the Long Barn, moral and pure, a maiden, her life unruined.

'Hello, Ralf,' she said, once he had helped her from the ladder.

He did not answer: he could not.

'What … what am I supposed ..?'

'That handle. Turn it. No, the other way.'

While the village waited below, he watched her slender hands gripping the bar. Her knuckles whitened as she struggled to make it move. She was not strong enough.

Ralf stepped behind her and took hold of the bar himself, enclosing her body with his own. With a tumbling rush of recollection he inhaled her perfume and the freshness of the rosemary rinse she used in her hair.

'Ralf, don't!'

'Run away with me. We'll go anywhere. Abroad.'

'You know we can't. I can't.'

Having started the bar turning, he moved back and let her continue. Below, unseen from here but visible to the onlookers, the penstock shutter had begun to rise. Under the pressure of four thousand tons stored up behind, the culvert became a maelstrom of deflected spray. A solid sheet of sea-water was pummelling the first of the waiting paddles. To avoid it, the paddle moved away even as the

sheet deepened to a torrent; and as it moved away it committed its following neighbour to the same treatment. The same again, and the same again, and the same again, and slowly the wheel was coming alive. Cheers rose from the watching assembly. Gaining momentum and shedding waste water as it went, the wheel performed its first full, its first magnificent revolution, transmitted across and upwards, through the gears and shaft and spindle to the rind and its stone: faster, yet faster, and faster again.

While the damsel rattled against the shoe, Ralf brought the tentering-screw to the mark. The speeding runner descended a sixteenth of an inch. He reached up and opened the bin-sock, in which a pint or two of last year's wheat had been placed. The grains slipped down through the hopper and shoe and on into the eye. Almost at once, flour began cascading from the gap between the stones.

'Be my wife.'

It was hopeless. Her brown eyes did not need to tell him that.

'I'll always be your wife.'

With that she headed for the ladder. Ralf let her go. The last of the sample had already been ground. Raising the stone, he gathered a handful of flour from the chute, went into the sack-room, opened the external door, and was just in time to see her emerge from the porch and rejoin her father.

Everyone seemed to be talking at once, but the roar of the penstock made it impossible for Ralf to make out any words. Waiting for him, Linsell looked up.

Ralf opened his hand and, as he had with Eloise, let the puff of flour go. It drifted a yard or two and vanished in the wind.

Linsell emphatically clenched both his fists and grinned. Ralf made himself grin back.

He returned to the stone-room. Their labour had been rewarded, and now it was over. Nothing more than finishing and tinkering remained to be done. Six weeks from today his parents would be leaving Mape.

His eyes unfocused on the wooden floor, Ralf put his hands where hers had been and began to turn the bar in the opposite direction.

11

Chevalley had been right about the bishop's case. It had been referred upwards yet again and now could go no higher. Subject to the usual procrastination and delay, it was scheduled to be heard on the twenty-third of September.

The hearing might last fifteen minutes. Gervase was not required to attend and he had no wish to make a special journey to London in order to do so. His time was better spent at home, where the preparations for Eloise's wedding in October were under way.

The harvest was in and being dried, ready for grinding. A miller had been chosen, an agreeable widower named Pegg, who had previously worked at a priory in Kent. Stephen had sent letters to every lord within carting reach, detailing the most reasonable terms on offer at Mape. Gervase himself, in person, had invited Frederic Angmer to bring his corn there, using, he realised afterwards, the phrase 'my mill' rather too often.

Angmer had disclosed that the King was to visit him for hawking on the eighth or ninth of September and stay one or two nights.

The date approached. Gervase was left wondering whether Henry would act on his whim and inspect the mill. Finally, on the third, a note came from Westminster. In a week's time the King would spend an hour at Mape.

He arrived at midday, attended by Lord Angmer and their retainers. Having taken refreshments in the Hall, the party mounted up again and rode out for the mill.

Gervase had kept news of the visit to his own household. Early this morning he had let Master Grigg in on the secret, and had asked him and Ralf to be sure they were at the site from noon onwards, since it was likely that the King would want to discuss the structure with its builders. He had also told Pegg not to open the penstock. Two or three shifts of grain had already been ground; the mill was in its final stages of testing and refinement.

Luckily the tides today were more or less right, and the weather could hardly have been better, warm and calm, with no more than a sheen of high cloud. The mood of the King was just as sunny. To judge by Angmer's disguised air of glum resignation, it seemed that his sovereign had become the new owner of Asug.

The visitors, accompanied by the astonished obeisance and following stares of everyone they passed, left the village and started down the staith-track. The party comprised seventeen horses, nine in the brilliant silks of the royal livery. Rarely had so many Arab stallions been seen together at Mape, snorting, now and then exuding dung, their trappings clinking and glittering as the train passed in and out of shade. Crossing the bridge, the

disharmony of hoof-falls became loud and hollow, then dull again as the riders turned into the broad chalk-track across the two-hundred-acre field.

As host, Gervase was riding beside Henry at the head of the column. The talk so far had been trivial but now the King's manner became more businesslike. 'Our ambassador in Paris is close to an agreement,' he said. 'Your stratagem may have had an effect. It certainly did no harm.'

Gervase expressed his genuine pleasure that war looked like being averted, with Gascony remaining in English hands.

As the topic changed, he was left to reflect on Eloise. From a political viewpoint her union with Sir Robert might no longer be necessary, but it was in every other way desirable. Her father had done as well as he could by his two daughters: one a countess, the other soon to be a duchess. Five weeks hence, to the very minute, in the solemn, echoing splendour of Westminster Abbey, witnessed and approved by the flower of England's nobility, the ceremony would be taking place.

'We hear you have made a covenant with your serfs,' said Henry, as the mill came into plain view.

'That is so, liege. We needed their help with the works. If you remember, the storm —'

'Why didn't you borrow more?'

'I … it was not —'

'The lower serfs too?'

'Yes, Your Grace. All classes.'

'They are not your property. What right did you have to make such an agreement with them, still less promise them free milling?'

The manor belonged to the King. Its lord was nothing more than his tenant. Gervase tried to explain his reasoning, that the mill could be regarded in the same way as the fishermen's boats, the communal buildings or the fields themselves.

'That's enough,' Henry told him, interrupting. 'You have exceeded your authority, Lord de Maepe. We are displeased.' The work-shed, the cart-ramp, and the black elevations of the mill, topped with thatch, were drawing near. 'However, on this occasion we shall overlook your mistake.'

'Thank you, liege.'

'In the unlikely event of a change in tenancy, we trust the serfs of Mape won't regard your pact as anything other than worthless.'

* * *

Ralf watched the King disappear into the mill, together with the baron and Mr Pegg. He felt the need to pinch himself. His work, his father's work, their joint effort, was now being inspected by the most powerful man in England; one of the most powerful men on earth.

Like his father and Mr Pegg, Ralf had been presented to the royal party. He was too stunned to remember precisely what had been said, mere formalities, very brief and succinct.

Ralf reminded himself that there was no longer a need to stand quite so stiffly upright. He looked at his father, who gave him a little smile.

Yes, as far as his family knew, there was nothing left to worry about. Eventually they might even begin, outwardly

at least, to recover from their grief. In three weeks' time they would be going back to Alincester. With their savings, and Ralf's, there was enough to rent a small house and yard and begin again. They had offered to buy Jacob's freedom and take him to the city, just as, it seemed, they had repeatedly offered before, but he insisted that he wanted to live out his days in Mape.

That was the plan. Ralf had not demurred. How could he tell them there was yet more grief in store?

Eloise's wedding would take place on the fifteenth of October. By the sixteenth her husband would have discovered the truth about his bride. Soon after that, very soon, the Justiciar would come for Ralf.

The penstock opened and the wheel began to turn. Ralf pictured the scene in the dusty, sunlit stone-room: Mr Pegg operating the machinery, the baron explaining, the King looking on as flour showered from the furrows of the runner and bedstone. The odour of new meal had now become mixed with that of the pale, planed wood of the walls and ceiling and floor, with the dry, mineralised smell of the millstones themselves. The room's rhythmic noise, underlaid by the bass roar of the culvert and the dulled splashing of the wheel, operated on the senses like a sleeping-draught. After a while one became lost in thought, or half-thought, a dream of contemplation in which the hours dissolved. Ralf understood the appeal of a miller's life, the satisfaction of taking in raw grain and sending out bulging sacks of perfect flour. The flow of wagons to and from the place would be another form of tide: a stream of human labour saved, of time released for better things than kneeling at the quern.

There was no nobler profession than engineering. With all his heart Ralf wanted to pursue it. He wanted to find out what extraordinary service it could render to the world of men. But he never would, for he had last autumn treasoned the tall, neat-bearded, and extremely arrogant figure who had just reappeared on the dike.

The King was talking animatedly to the baron. They came nearer, passed by Lord Angmer and the line of retainers, and stopped in front of Ralf and his father.

'We congratulate you, Master Grigg. Your mill is a remarkable achievement.'

Linsell made a second bow. 'Your Grace, much of it is due to my son.'

The King's gaze was concentrated for a second time on Ralf. 'So Lord de Maepe has been saying.' He turned to the baron. 'You say the design of the paddles is particularly fascinating, do you not? Will you show us, young man?'

During their examination of the wheel Ralf began to forget a little of his awe, though he was careful not to show it. In his enthusiasm for mechanical things, the King was just a man, after all, and in that respect not unlike Ralf himself. He appeared to understand the value of science and mathematics and to be excited by their potential for practical application. His many questions, searching and to the point, revealed that he was far more knowledgeable in those fields than a commoner might have thought.

'Arab irrigation machines?' he said. 'Where did you learn about those?'

'I have a friend at Leckbourne, Your Grace. He came across some drawings in the library there.'

Ralf had just explained that a half-cylindrical paddle reduced turbulence in the culvert and minimised energy

lost through deflection. Because it presented a far greater surface-area than a simple plane, such a paddle was not only more efficient, but placed less mechanical stress on the supporting structure of the wheel. The only difficulty was in fabricating the curved shape, and he and Linsell had solved that by making each paddle from a half a dozen overlapping boards.

'And you say a semicircle gives the best profile?'

'We don't know that for a fact, but it seems obvious.'

'Are there no calculations you could have done?'

'No, Your Grace. Not that we're aware of.'

'Portsea would know,' the King said, but did not elucidate, and Ralf dared not ask who Portsey might be. 'Have you read Leonardo of Pisa? Fibonacci?'

'Neither, Your Grace.'

'They're two names for the same man. A mathematician. You ought to study him.'

The consultation came to an abrupt end, as though it had suddenly struck the King that he had stayed longer than planned. Leaving Ralf feeling dazed as well as deflated, the royal party returned to the horses and, setting out along the access-track, soon dwindled into the liquid shimmer of half-ploughed stubble and the variegated, serf-dotted strips of the two-hundred-acre field.

* * *

For the next few days Ralf tried and failed to reconcile his memory of that meeting with his vision of the monarch as the remote authority who would soon be signing a warrant for his death.

On the second Thursday following, an official packet arrived at the Hall, from London via Alincester, addressed to Ralf. Hubert brought it over.

When Ralf saw the mark of the Clerk Royal he felt his heart stop. He could not understand why the warrant had been sent already, and to him, before his arrest. His parents were not in the room: that was one relief.

He broke the seal. The wording was in Latin. By command of Henry, by the grace of God king of the English … Mr Ralf Grigg, freeman, was invited to bear this document to the Round Fort at Portsmouth, and there present it to the Officer of the Guard, who would conduct him to the Under-Comptroller of the King's Ships, with a view …

Ralf twice read the letter before he had understood the irony it represented. He was to be conveyed initially not to the Tower of London but to the Round Fort, the headquarters of the under-controller of the Navy. Instead of torture and death, he was to face assessment by the under-controller's staff. If they concluded that he was suitable, he would be offered a place in the Portsea school of naval architecture at the Royal Dockyards.

Ralf had not known that such a school even existed, though now it was plain that it must. Ship-design in the English Navy was the most modern and dynamic imaginable, driven by the race for superiority with the French. Its ravenous demands had ever to be kept supplied with new men and ideas.

The letter said nothing about fees. There would presumably be none, unless paid by the Crown. And how long would the schooling last?

It did not matter. Even assuming he passed their tests and got in, he would not be there for more than a week or two.

The irony grew as he detected the baron's influence in all this. What had he been saying about Ralf, inside the mill, to the King?

Whenever he thought about the baron, Ralf felt guilty. Compared with the guilt he felt over Imogen this was nothing, but still it was hard to bear. Ralf's betrayal of the baron had been intimate and unforgivable. His guilt was made the more acute when he reflected on the baron's past kindness towards him and his family.

Holding the King's parchment in his hand, Ralf saw the baron as a model of God and Mape as a model of the world. Just as the King, in his rule, derived his authority from the divine, so did the baron hold feudal sway within his manor. He supervised its workings and within its ambit allowed his people free will. On that November night when Eloise had come out to the mill, Ralf had been free to prevent matters going further. He could have prevented Imogen's death. But he hadn't.

Eloise was committed by birth to the marriage her father had contracted. It was part of her duty to him and to the country. By failing to exercise his free will as his conscience had directed, Ralf had betrayed her even more thoroughly than he had betrayed his own sister.

He loved Eloise. He would love her as long as he drew breath. He should have mastered himself and left her in peace. Now, for his sake, she faced execution.

The lesson was hard, and it had been learned too late. The god of the Bible was supposed to be capable of forgiveness. Through Christ's atonement on the cross, that

god held out the promise of redemption. His earthly counterparts, like the pagan god of the marshes who had seized a frightened and vulnerable boy, did not.

Ralf would go to Portsmouth and afterwards perhaps even to Portsea, but only as a means of bodily removing himself from his parents. He had already, at length, worried about the distress they would be caused when the Justiciar's men appeared at their door. He had given them suffering enough.

'What have you got there, Ralf?' his mother said brightly, as, with a trug of late beans and Michaelmas daisies, she came in from Jacob's garden.

12

To reach Portsmouth, Ralf walked to Rushton and caught a coastal cog which put him off at the civilian West Jetty. There he asked directions and within a few minutes found himself at the Round Fort, straight across the harbour channel from the grim groynes and blockhouses of the Haslar emplacements.

The interviews lasted for nearly two days. He was shown over the school at Portsea, which stood a little inland from the Fort. Though each student was made a naval officer, the school was small and informal, and subsequent service in the Navy, while hoped for, was not required. Unknown names were mentioned, of shipmakers and engineers who had learned their craft at Portsea and gone on to eminence in civil life.

The teaching was free and a salary would be paid. He was told he could expect to be there for three years, and

was finally offered a place, which he accepted on the spot. He would start within the fortnight.

On the return trip Ralf arrived in Rushton in the early evening, too late to contemplate the walk. Having secured a room at one of the cheaper inns, he strolled down to Master Brocq's yard and reacquainted himself with the people there. It was good to see them again. Diccon, in particular, wanted to hear about the tide mill, and he invited Ralf to take supper with his family.

That had been last night. For a time, in their tiny and convivial house, Ralf had been able to forget about the Justiciar. But later, at the inn, lying in his damp, prickly and lumpen bed, listening to the muffled oaths and guffaws rising from the pot-room, he had pursued a lonely meditation that had lasted the best part of the night. He had decided to make his peace with Father Pickard – with Joseph – and subsequently confess. When the arrest came, he would at least be in a state of grace.

Ralf's meditation had continued this morning on the familiar seven-mile walk along the road to Mape.

As far as personal ambition was concerned, Portsea was all he could ever have dreamt of. For that he knew he had to thank the baron.

Were it not for the fact that his future was now irrelevant, Ralf's impulse would have been to decline the offer. Imogen's death had concentrated his thoughts on the importance of family. He would not have wanted to be separated, for three years, from his parents. He would have preferred to join them in Alincester as planned. But that did not take into account their selfless love for him. Their reaction to the King's letter had been one of unalloyed

pleasure. They would have been disappointed if their son had insisted on going with them to Alincester.

On the Sunday of his visit, Ralf had been shown the slipways and dry-docks, the forges and sheds where the King's galleys were made. The scale and professionalism of the works dwarfed the imagination. They most forcefully articulated the threat from France. Until then Ralf had not understood the marriage Eloise was about to make, nor the reality behind it. Perhaps the baron was indeed, after all, a father very much like his own.

The morning was cool, autumnal and grey. As he passed between the untidy mounds of gorse that here enclosed the coast road, Ralf realised he might be seeing them for the last time. He would never sleep in Rushton again, or talk to Diccon, or look out across the harbour from Brocq's Yard, or glimpse, miles away across the Solent, the misty outline of Bembridge and the Isle of Wight. He would never live through another August, or rise at dawn to work on the mill, or sit with legs over the edge of the dike while he and the other fellows ate their lunch and talked; while he, with one ear, listened out for the greenshanks' cries.

From Eloise his thoughts turned to Godric. Intense memories of their childhood illuminated his mind: the hobby, their exploration of the manor. He remembered their day on the Point. Onward from that confessional hour in the dunes, Godric had been his brother.

Something made Ralf look up from the rutted mud of the road. Sooner than he might have expected, he had reached the outskirts of the village. Ahead, just beyond the white-railed bridge, as if condensed from the ether of his thoughts, he saw their subject approaching him.

Ralf wondered what Godric was doing at home. And what was he doing on foot, walking away from the Hall? Why was he dressed in travelling clothes, and why was there a bundle on a staff over his shoulder?

The bridge spanned an arm of the village pond which, beyond the road, dwindled into the marsh. They stepped on the boards at almost the same instant and met near the middle.

'Hello, Godric. Where are you off to? You look like a pilgrim.'

His manner, his whole mien, had undergone a profound change. Ralf noticed the coarse weave of his cloak and the heaviness of his boots. He had never before seen Godric, or any member of the baron's family, in such lowly attire.

'Smile for me,' Godric said, observing Ralf's expression. 'I'm happy at last.'

'What are you talking about?'

He indicated the landward rail. Side by side, they half sat, half leaned against it.

'I've left the abbey,' Godric said.

'But —'

'I'm going to Rushton. Then, a barque to the Netherlands. After that, south. Wherever God sends me.'

'On foot?'

'Of course.'

'How will you live?'

'You've heard of the lilies of the field.' There was an entirely new light, a transcending serenity in Godric's eyes. 'Sounds mad, doesn't it?'

'What are you going to do?'

'Christ's work. Simply that. I must follow him.'

'I see.'

‘Do you?’

‘Yes. Yes, Godric, I think I do.’ Ralf was overawed. He had not known that Godric possessed such courage. The path he had chosen was the hardest imaginable. It was also, once embarked upon, the easiest. He had given himself to Christ. He had taken the gospel at face value and become a disciple. ‘That’s wonderful,’ Ralf said. ‘Really wonderful,’ and he saw that the seeds of this had been in Godric from the first.

‘How did you get on at Portsmouth? Your father told me you were there.’

When Ralf had told him, Godric said, ‘That’s wonderful, too.’

‘Except it will never happen. You know why.’

Godric merely smiled. He stood up and Ralf did the same.

‘I ought to be going if I’m to catch that barque,’ Godric said. ‘I’ve left you a letter. I didn’t think I’d see you. But I’m glad I did. Very glad.’

‘Me too.’

‘So. Goodbye, Ralf.’

Ralf felt tears coming to his eyes.

Godric was still smiling. ‘We two shall never meet again.’

‘I wouldn’t be so sure about that.’

‘You’re right. Anything can happen, can’t it?’

‘Eloise believes —’

‘You do as well. She told me.’ Godric held out his hand, just as he had done, years ago, on the evening of their first meeting, under the yew. Ralf began to respond, but it was not enough: he flung his arms round his friend.

Godric was the first to draw aside. ‘My letter is quite brief. I may as well tell you what it says. The manor is lost.’

‘What?’

‘My father lost his case. You know about the case?’

‘A little … something. The Church …’

‘We got the verdict three days ago. The King ruled against him. He’s penniless.’

‘That’s terrible.’

‘No, it isn’t. It’s God’s will. You taught me that.’

‘Did I?’

‘I offered to stay and help, but he gave me his blessing. My earthly father, I mean.’

‘Even so,’ Ralf said, trying to picture Mape without its baron.

‘I can see you haven’t understood yet.’

‘Understood what?’

‘He can’t pay the dowry. The wedding has been cancelled.’ Godric’s smile was continuing. ‘You are acquainted with my sister, I believe?’

‘Eloise?’

‘Yes, that’s her name.’ His smile broadened even more. ‘She’s at the Hall. She won’t be there for ever.’ He picked up his bundle and hefted it over his shoulder. Head turned, holding Ralf’s gaze for a final moment as he moved away, he said, ‘You won’t find a better one, Ralf. Don’t let her go.’

* * *

Gervase, seated at the desk in his private office at the Hall, was surveying the disarray of papers and parchments, the folios and rolls, spread out in front of him.

He had returned yesterday, very late, from London, where he had gone to consult Chevalley and to try to salvage something from the wreckage. The house in the Wooleries would by now be on offer for sale, no doubt to some other notable desirous of being close to the centre of things. Gervase had slept his last night there.

He slipped the ribbon from another roll and scanned the contents. This one also was of no importance. He tossed it on the floor to join the others.

All this nonsense had to be got through. All these affairs had to be wound up; all these outstanding matters had to be dealt with; and yet, and yet, as he worked, he found his mind centred not on the manor itself, or on his children, his own kith and kin, but on Hubert. Who would look after Hubert, once the de Maepes had gone? Who would feed him? Who would let him ring the bell? Without his bell, Hubert would pine away and die.

Gervase would write a note of recommendation for the next lord of the manor, whoever that might be; to whom it might concern. But perhaps Henry would not grant Mape to another layman at all. Perhaps the rumour was right and he would gift it to the Church, provided enough prayers were promised for his royal soul – loud and fervent prayers, to expiate the lengthy and various catalogue of his crimes.

It seemed that, for eighteen months or more, despite the remonstrances of Cardinal Pellegrini, he had not been paying His Holiness quite enough for Sicily. The Pope was out of pocket. His patience had finally snapped. He had threatened the King with excommunication.

For fear of their own excommunication, the barons would withdraw their fealty from a king who had been cut

off from the sacraments. If the Pope carried out his threat, Henry would lose his crown.

Frenetic efforts were being made to repair the damage. These did not include displeasing the Vatican by finding against them in some pettifogging molar dispute.

Chevalley had done his best at the hearing, but the Church had saved their deadliest weapon till last. Their man had produced a quotation from Ovid. Since Ovid was one of the pantheon of the most infallible authors of classical Latin, every word he had committed to posterity was regarded as chiselled in stone.

In a poem called *Remedia amoris*, or *Love's Cure*, some wily scholar in Alincester, or Rochester, or Rome, had unearthed these immortal lines:

Ipse potes riguis plantam deponere in hortis,
Ipse potes rivos ducere lenis aquae.

Roughly translated, by someone with as little interest in poetry as Gervase de Maepe, they could be rendered thus:

You can bed out plants in the moist soil of your garden,
And make little channels of fresh water to flow through it.

The noun 'rivus', in antiquity, therefore, had unequivocally owned, besides its primary sense, the meaning 'channel, artificial water-course'. What better example of an artificial water-course could one adduce than a culvert and its tailrace?

Rivus. A single five-letter word. No sane man with even a smattering of Latin could now doubt that the tide mill was sacred. His Grace had even, most considerately, coined a new name for it: molendinium aquaticum maritimum, and henceforth thus would all sea mills be termed.

Gervase suspected that William had held his friend Ovid back till the last and most expensive moment. He had wanted to make an example of a baron who had presumed to slight him. In the later stages there had obviously been close coordination with Rome, so that, on the day of the hearing, Henry's nose could be appropriately rubbed in it. And now both the baron and his king had been humbled. They had been crushed in the clutch of a greater and more unscrupulous power.

Gervase could not blame Henry. That was the way politics worked. He had forgotten its golden rule: at court, there was no such thing as loyalty, or even friendship.

The Treaty of Paris had just been ratified. The pacifist faction had already fallen apart. For nothing. All for nothing. His years of expense and manoeuvring had been for nothing.

Godric's decision to leave Leckbourne had been reached coincidentally; fortunately, really, since Gervase no longer had the funds to keep him there. Margaret was still in a lather about it. She did not yet understand.

Gervase paused in his work, thinking with pride and affection about his youngest son. Aged only nineteen, he had found the contentment that had eluded his father all his life – till now.

How did the popular saying go? 'Every advantage has a disadvantage, and every disadvantage has an advantage.'

Someone else could worry about the manor. Someone else could pore over the ledgers, chase after the serfs, and fret when the weather turned bad. Someone else could run back and forth from Sussex to Westminster; could tolerate the bores and lickspittles at court; could plot and plan and hatch pointless intrigues to prostitute his wife and

daughters on the altar of country. Someone else, in short, could be the lord of Mape.

He did not know where the family would go. His son-in-law, Warwick, would probably insist on taking them in. He might also want, for honour's sake, to settle the rest of Fitz Peter's bill. Warwick lived far from the coast. The sea was one thing Gervase would very much miss; so would Eloise.

Matilde had a house, not grand, where she might think of repaying a fraction of the hospitality she had enjoyed at Mape. Mildred and Béatrice could go there. They would not starve; they would not be cold. Genteel poverty was the worst that would befall them.

Earlier, in this very room, wearing an old cloak and dressed for the road, Godric had spoken of the sixth chapter of St Matthew's gospel. 'And why do you take thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.'

Gervase thought of the last time he had seen Bishop William, at Pellegrini's reception. How drab, how polluted and verminous were his garments, compared with Godric's! They were fit only to be thrust with poles into the heart of the Hallowmas fire.

A father never stopped worrying about his children, but Gervase's other sons, too, were big enough to make their own way. Both were young and strong. A little impecuniosity might do them good.

All that remained to be settled was the question of Eloise. On this point only did he still feel unduly anxious and helpless. He had no dowry to give her. Unless she could find a groom who was prosperous as well as kind, or

unless she could make a love-match with a young man of prospects, she might remain a moneyless spinster like dear Mildred. The bloom of youth was fleeting. Whatever Matthew might think, a rich father greatly improved even a pretty girl's chances of happiness.

'Ah, my daughter,' Gervase sighed, cleared a space, and began writing his letter for Hubert.

Anno Domini 1321

On a frosty January afternoon an elderly, distinguished-looking man dismounted from his warmly caparisoned horse and left it browsing near the lich-gate of the churchyard at Mape.

Entering the empty, sunlit church, he made the sign of the cross, approached the altar and with great difficulty knelt to pray before the rood. Then, having spent a minute examining the interior of the building and the image in its stained-glass window, he paused by the porch to drop ten gold coins into the poor-box, took one last look at the altar, and went outside.

It was hard to find the graves of his grandparents and sister, but find them he did.

Some of the lime-trees in the churchyard had been cut down and the others pollarded. The old yew was still there, one of its limbs supported on a crutch. A split in the trunk had been filled with mortar.

He latched the first gate behind him.

The middle of the path was of hard-frozen mud but, from the bruised footprints in the hoary grass to either side, he could see that people had traversed it today. He was hoping to have the dike to himself.

In keeping with the other improvements he had noticed, the stock-gate had been replaced with a better one and a new fence had been erected along the southern side of the churchyard. Other than that, he thought, the feel of the place was little changed. To his left lay exposed saltings

and the harbour. Far ahead, at the end of the dike, rose the greyness of the beach. To his right spread the marsh, though the reed-beds were less extensive. More drainage ditches had been cut and the area of grazing enlarged.

The grinding pain in his chest had grown much worse. His journey here had not helped. Last night, at the inn, he had feared that he would be left with too little strength to cover the last few miles.

But he was here. After sixty years' absence, he had come back.

His progress along the dike was necessarily slow. He made frequent stops to catch his breath and to wait for the pain to subside.

During one of these stops he heard a distant roar of wings. To the west, against the extravagance of the sunset, the sky had blackened with a host of birds which he knew to be geese, wigeon, pintail, shoveler, teal, lapwings, golden plover, starlings, and whatever else had been put up by the appearance of a fox or peregrine, something big enough to flush the whole marsh. The swirling, chaotic flocks towered, trying to redistribute themselves. Some landed. Others, anxious not to be too soon, did not. A skein of seventy brent geese swept over the dike, directly above his head, so low that he could hear the rush of their pinions and their conversational calls. They continued out across the saltings and in the gathering gloom settled on the dark waters of the harbour channel.

He thought again, as he had while kneeling, of Godric, of whom, some thirty years before, they had been given word. He had died among the lepers of Padua.

The birds were quieter now. He had nearly reached the end of the dike. As the sun disappeared, a biting breeze got

up, and as the breeze got up the reed-rustle increased: vitreous, chattering, the kind that sets in just after Christmas and stays unchanged till February.

Almost exhausted, he climbed the shingle bank in the afterglow. Subdued, calm, and devoid of colour, the sea was breaking in skewed crescents far down the shore. He still knew how the currents ran.

He stiffly turned. No one could be seen on the dike. He descended past the strip of sand and struggled from his clothes.

The air, intensely cold on his skin, smelled and tasted salt, like the brine he now angrily wiped from his eyes. There was no longer cause for it. Having been four years without her, he had written his letters, left his instructions and remade his will to help their son and three daughters, their grandchildren, and the others who in turn would come to bless the world. For the past year of his bereavement he had been given warning, in the growth of this pain, of how his body too would fail; warning, and with it grace.

Leaving his garments in a pile, he first sat and then reclined, shivering, arms wide, on the freezing shingle. He was wearing only his wedding-ring and a length of ribbon, wound round his right wrist. Once deep-red, it had faded and rotted now. To it he had attached a tiny silver crucifix.

As his warmth seeped away, as the replacing cold penetrated his substance ever more thoroughly, the shivering stopped. His hands and feet became numb. The cold crept along his arms and legs, proceeding towards his trunk, his heart.

The first stars of Leo had appeared. To the south-east, a slip of moon lay above the sea.

He closed his eyes. Just as he had wanted, just as he had planned, he could hear the incoming surge, and with the faintest, sweetest smile realised he had not even glanced towards the mill. Perhaps it was no longer even there.

The smile remaining, this Ralf Grigg slipped ever nearer to his end.

In the church, kneeling before the rood, his troubled request for forgiveness had been answered not with silence, but benign intimation – of four souls still separate, four lives yet unfulfilled.

Gently, peacefully, leaving sorrow and the flesh behind, now at last it began, ascending, accelerating: the rapid, longed-for return, to Eloise, Godric, Imogen, and the light.

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