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A COLUMN OF FIRE

KEN
FOLLETT



The
PILLARS
of the
EARTH

“A novel of majesty and power.” —*Chicago Sun-Times*

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Praise for the Novels of Ken Follett

The Pillars of the Earth

“Follett is a master.”

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“Enormous and brilliant ... crammed with characters unbelievably alive across the great gulf of centuries ... touches all human emotion—love and hate, loyalty and treachery, hope and despair. See for yourself. This is truly a novel to get lost in.”

—*Cosmopolitan*

“Wonderful ... will fascinate you, surround you.”

—*Chicago Sun-Times*

“A towering tale ... a ripping read.... There’s murder, arson, treachery, torture, love, and lust.”

—*New York Daily News*

“Ken Follett takes a giant step.”

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

“With this book, Follett risks all and comes out a clear winner... a historical novel of gripping readability, authentic atmosphere, and memorable characterization. Beginning with a mystery that casts its shadow, the narrative is a seesaw of tension, suspense, impeccable pacing ... action, intrigue, violence, passion, greed, bravery, dedication, revenge, and love. A novel that entertains, instructs, and satisfies on a grand scale.”

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World Without End

“[A] well-researched, beautifully detailed portrait of the late Middle Ages.... Follett’s no-frills prose does its job, getting smoothly through more than a thousand pages of outlaws, war, death, sex, and politics to end with an edifice that is as well constructed and solid as Merthin’s bridge. A.”

—*The Washington Post*

“Follett tells a story that runs the gamut of life in the Middle Ages, and he does so in such a way that we are not only captivated but also educated. What else could you ask for?”

—*The Denver Post*

“So if historical fiction is your meat, here’s a rare treat. A feast of conflicts and struggles among religious authority, royal governance, the powerful unions (or guilds) of the day, and the peasantry.... With *World Without End*, Follett proves his *Pillars* may be a rarity, but it wasn’t a fluke.”

—*New York Post*

“A work that stands as something of a triumph of industry and professionalism.”

—*The Guardian* (UK)

“The four well-drawn central characters will captivate readers as they prove to be heroic, depraved, resourceful, or mean. Fans of Follett’s previous medieval epic will be well rewarded.”

—*The Union* (CA)

“Populated with an immense cast of truly remarkable characters ... this is not a book to be devoured in one sitting, tempting though that might be, but one to savor for its drama, depth, and richness.”

—*Library Journal*

“Readers will be captivated.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

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The Modigliani Scandal
Paper Money
Eye of the Needle
Triple
The Key to Rebecca
The Man from St. Petersburg
On Wings of Eagles
Lie Down with Lions
Night over Water
A Dangerous Fortune
A Place Called Freedom
The Third Twin
The Hammer of Eden
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Whiteout
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KEN FOLLETT

THE PILLARS
OF THE EARTH



A SIGNET BOOK

To Marie-Claire, the apple of my eye

On the night of 25 November 1120 the White Ship set out for England and foundered off Barfleur with all hands save one.... The vessel was the latest thing in marine transport, fitted with all the devices known to the shipbuilder of the time.... The notoriety of this wreck is due to the very large number of distinguished persons on board; beside the king's son and heir, there were two royal bastards, several earls and barons, and most of the royal household ... its historical significance is that it left Henry without an obvious heir ... its ultimate result was the disputed succession and the period of anarchy which followed Henry's death.

—A. L. POOLE,
From Domesday Book to Magna Carta

Preface

NOTHING HAPPENS the way you plan it.

A lot of people were surprised by *The Pillars of the Earth*, including me. I was known as a thriller writer. In the book business, when you have had a success, the smart thing to do is write the same sort of thing once a year for the rest of your life. Clowns should not try to play Hamlet; pop stars should not write symphonies. I should not have risked my reputation by writing something out of character and overambitious.

What's more, I don't believe in God. I'm not what you would call a spiritual person. According to my agent, my greatest problem as a writer is that I'm not a tortured soul. The last thing anyone would have expected from me was a story about building a church.

So *Pillars* was an unlikely book for me to write—and I almost didn't. I started it, then dropped it, and did not look at it again for ten years.

This is how it happened.

When I was a boy, all my family belonged to a Puritan religious group called the Plymouth Brethren. For us, a church was a bare room with rows of chairs around a central table. Paintings, statues, and all forms of decoration were banned. The sect also discouraged members from visiting rival churches. So I grew up pretty much ignorant of Europe's wealth of gorgeous church architecture.

I started trying to write novels in my middle twenties, while working as a reporter on London's *Evening News*. I realized then that I had never taken much interest in the cityscape around me, and I had no vocabulary to describe the buildings in which my characters had their adventures. So I bought *An Outline of European Architecture* by Nikolaus Pevsner. That book gave me eyes with which to look at buildings in general and churches in particular. Pevsner got really passionate when he wrote about Gothic cathedrals. The invention of the pointed arch, he wrote, was a rare event in history, when the solution to a technical problem—how to build a taller church—was also sublimely beautiful.

Soon after I read Pevsner's book, my newspaper sent me to the East Anglian city of Peterborough. I have long forgotten what story I was covering, but I shall always remember what I did after filing it. I had to wait an hour for a train back to London, so, remembering Pevsner's fascinating and passionate descriptions of medieval architecture, I went to see Peterborough Cathedral.

It was one of those moments.

The west front of Peterborough has three huge Gothic arches, like doorways for giants. The inside is older than the façade, with arcades of regular round Norman arches in stately procession up the aisle. Like all great churches, it is both tranquil and beautiful. But it was more than that. Because of Pevsner's book, I had some inkling of the effort that had gone into this. I knew the story of humankind's attempts to build ever taller and more beautiful churches. I understood the place of this building in history, my history.

I was enraptured by Peterborough Cathedral.

Cathedral visiting became a hobby for me. Every few months I would drive to one of England's old cities, check into a hotel, and study the church. This way I saw Canterbury, Salisbury, Winchester, Gloucester, and Lincoln, each one unique, each with an intriguing story to tell. Most people take an hour or two to "do" a cathedral, but I like to have a couple of days.

The stones themselves reveal the construction history: stops and starts, damage and rebuilding, extensions in times of prosperity, and stained-glass tributes to the wealthy men who generally paid the bills. Another story is told by the way the church is sited in the town. Lincoln faces the castle across the street, religious and military power nose to nose. Winchester stands amid a neat grid of streets, laid out by a medieval bishop who fancied himself a town planner. Salisbury moved, in the thirteenth century, from a defensive hilltop site—where the ruins of the old cathedral are still visible—to an open meadow, showing that permanent peace had arrived.

But all the while a question nagged at me: Why were these churches built?

There are simple answers—for the glory of God, the vanity of bishops, and so on—but those were not enough for me. The building of the medieval cathedrals is an astonishing European phenomenon. The builders had no power tools, they did not understand the mathematics of structural engineering, and they were poor: the richest of princes did not live as well as, say, a prisoner in a modern jail. Yet they put up the most beautiful buildings that have ever existed, and they built them so well that they are still here, hundreds of years later, for us to study and marvel at.

I began to read about these churches, but I found the books unsatisfactory. There was a great deal of aesthetic guff about elevations, but not much about the living buildings. Then I came across *The Cathedral Builders* by Jean Gimpel. Gimpel, the black sheep of a family of French art dealers, was as impatient as I with discussions about whether a clerestory "worked" aesthetically. His book was about the dirt-poor hovel dwellers who actually put up these fabulous buildings. He read the payroll records of French monasteries and took an interest in who the builders were and how much money they made. He was the first person to notice, for example, that a significant minority of the names were female. The medieval church was sexist, but women as well as men built the cathedrals.

Another work of Gimpel's, *The Medieval Machine*, taught me that the Middle Ages were a time of rapid high-tech innovation, during which the power of water mills was harnessed for a wide variety of industrial applications. Soon I was taking an interest in medieval life in general. And I began to get a picture of how the building of the great cathedrals must have seemed like the right thing to do for medieval people.

The explanation is not simple. It is a little like trying to understand why twentieth-century people spent so much money exploring outer space. In both cases, a whole network of influences operated: scientific curiosity, commercial interests, political rivalries, and the spiritual aspirations of earthbound people. And it seemed to me there was only one way to map that network: by writing a novel.

Sometime in 1976 I wrote an outline and about four chapters of the novel. I sent it to my agent, Al Zuckerman, who wrote, "You have created a tapestry. What you need is a series of linked melodramas."

Looking back, I can see that at the age of twenty-seven I was not capable of writing such a novel. I was like an apprentice watercolor painter planning a vast canvas in oils. To do justice to its subject, the book would have to be very long, cover a period of several decades, and bring alive the great sweep of medieval Europe. I was writing much less ambitious books, and even so, I had not yet mastered the craft.

I dropped the cathedral book and came up with another idea, a thriller about a German spy in wartime England. Happily, that was within my powers, and under the title *Eye of the Needle*, it became my first bestseller.

For the next decade I wrote thrillers, but I continued to visit cathedrals, and the idea of my cathedral novel never went away. I resurrected it in January 1986, having finished my sixth thriller, *Lie Down with Lions*.

My publishers were nervous. They wanted another spy story. My friends were also apprehensive. They know that I enjoy success. I'm not the kind of writer who would deal with a failure by saying that the book was good but the readers were inadequate. I write to entertain, and I'm happy doing so. A failure would make me miserable. No one tried to talk me out of it, but lots of people expressed anxious reservations.

However, I did not plan a "difficult" book. I would write an adventure story, full of colorful characters who were ambitious, wicked, sexy, heroic, and smart. I wanted ordinary readers to be as enraptured as I was by the romance of the medieval cathedrals.

By then I had developed the method of working that I continue to use to this day. I begin by writing an outline of the story, saying what happens in each chapter, and giving thumbnail sketches of the characters. But this book was not like my others. The beginning came easily, but, as the story unwound over the decades and the people grew from youth to maturity, I found it more and more difficult to invent new twists and turns in their lives. I realized that one long book is much more of a challenge than three short ones.

The hero of the story had to be some kind of man of God. This was difficult for me. I would find it hard to get interested in a character who was focused on the afterlife (and so would many readers). To make Prior Philip more sympathetic, I gave him a very practical, down-to-earth religious belief, a concern for people's souls here on earth, not just in heaven.

Philip's sexuality was also a problem. All monks and priests were supposed to be celibate in the Middle Ages. The obvious drama would be that of a man fighting a terrible battle with his lusts. But I could not work up any enthusiasm for that theme. I grew up in the 1960s, and my heart is always with those who deal with temptation by giving in to it. In the end I made him one of that minority of people for whom sex really is no big deal. He is the only cheerfully celibate character I have ever created.

I got in contact with Jean Gimpel, who had inspired me a decade earlier, and was astonished to learn that not only did he live in London but on my street. I hired him as a consultant, and we became friends and table-tennis opponents until his death.

By March of the following year, 1987, I had outlined only the first two thirds of the book. I decided that would have to be sufficient. I began to write.

By December I had a couple hundred pages.

This was pretty disastrous. I had been working on the story for two years, and all I had was an incomplete outline and a few chapters. I couldn't spend the rest of my life on this book. But what was to be done? Well, I could drop it and write another thriller. Or I could work harder. In those days I used to write Monday to Friday, then deal with my business correspondence on Saturday morning. From around January 1988, I began to write Monday through Saturday, and do letters on Sunday. My output increased dramatically, partly because of the extra day, but mainly because of the intensity I was bringing to my work. The problem of the end of the book, which I had not outlined, was solved by a flash of inspiration, when I thought of involving the principal characters in the notorious real-life murder of Thomas Becket.

As I recall, I finished a first draft around the middle of that year. A combination of excitement and impatience impelled me to work even harder on the rewrite, and I began to

work seven days a week. My business correspondence was neglected, but I finished the book in March 1989, three years and three months after starting it.

I was exhausted but happy. I felt I had written something special, not just another bestseller, but maybe a great popular novel.

Not many people agreed.

My American hardcover publisher, William Morrow & Co., printed around the same number of copies as they had of *Lie Down with Lions*, and when they sold the same number they were content. My London publishers were more excited, and *Pillars* sold better there than any of my previous books. But the initial reaction among publishers worldwide was a sigh of relief that Follett had completed his crazy project and got away with it. The book won no prizes—it was not even nominated. A few critics adored it, but most were unimpressed. It was a No. 1 bestseller in Italy, where readers have always been kind to me. The paperback was No. 1 for a week in Britain.

I began to think I had been wrong. Maybe the book *was* just another page-tuner, good but not great.

However, one person believed passionately that this book was special. My German editor, Walter Fritzsche, at Gustav Luebbe Verlag, had long dreamed of publishing a novel about the building of a cathedral. He had even spoken to some of his German authors about the idea, but nothing ever came of it. So he was very excited about what I was writing, and when the typescript came in he felt his hopes had been fulfilled.

Until this point, my work had been only modestly successful in Germany. (The villains in my books were often Germans, so I could hardly complain.) Fritzsche was so enthusiastic that he thought *Pillars* could be a breakthrough book, one that would make me the single most popular writer in Germany.

Even I didn't believe that.

But he was right.

Luebbe published the book brilliantly. They hired a young artist, Achim Kiel, to do the cover, but when he insisted on designing the whole book, treating it as an art object, Luebbe had the courage to go with his concept. He was expensive, but he succeeded in communicating to the buyer Fritzsche's feeling that there was something special about this book. (He went on to design all my German editions for many years, creating a look that Luebbe used again and again.)

The first intimation I had that *readers* saw the book as something special came when Luebbe took an advertisement to celebrate the sale of 100,000 copies. I had never sold that many hardcovers in any country other than the United States (which has three times as many people as Germany).

After a couple of years, *Pillars* began to appear on the list of longest-selling books, having made some eighty appearances on the German bestseller list. As time went by, it just stayed there. (To date, it has made more than three hundred weekly appearances.)

One day I was checking my royalty statement from New American Library, my U.S. paperback publisher. These statements are carefully designed to prevent the author from knowing what is really happening to his book, but after decades of persistence I have learned to read them. And I noticed that *Pillars* was selling around 50,000 copies every six months. By comparison, *Eye of the Needle* was selling around 25,000, as were most of my other books.

I checked my U.K. sales and found the same pattern: *Pillars* sold about double.

I began to notice that *Pillars* was mentioned more than any other book in my fan mail. Signing in bookshops, I found that more and more readers told me *Pillars* was their favorite. Many people asked me to write a sequel. (I will, one day.) Some said it was the best book they

had ever read, a compliment I had not received for any other book. A British travel company approached me about creating a Pillars of the Earth holiday. This was beginning to look like a cult hit.

Eventually I figured out what was happening. This was a word-of-mouth book. It's a truism of the book business that the best advertising is the kind you can't buy: the personal recommendation of one reader to another. That was what was selling *Pillars*. You did it, dear reader. Publishers, agents, critics, and the people who gave out literary prizes generally overlooked this book, but *you* did not. You noticed that it was different and special, and you told your friends; and in the end the word got around.

And so it happened. It seemed like the wrong book; I seemed like the wrong writer; and I almost didn't do it. But it is my best book, and you honored it.

I appreciate that. Thank you.

—Ken Follett
Stevenage, Hertfordshir
January 1999

Preface to the 25th Anniversary Edition

IT'S TWENTY-FIVE YEARS since I typed "The End" on the last page of *The Pillars of the Earth*. The book was published in 1989, and has sold nineteen million copies so far. It still seems a miracle to me that readers are so fascinated and moved by a story about building a cathedral in the Middle Ages, a surprising subject for a popular novel.

I remember being intrigued, then amazed, and eventually a bit dazed as the book remained on the German bestseller list for a whole year, then two years, and finally six years. The original Spanish publisher rejected it for being too long, but another publisher picked it up, and it went on to become the most popular book ever in Spain. In more than thirty languages readers thrilled to the story and recommended the book to their friends.

I thought the story should become a long television miniseries, but producers like to have the option of making a shorter series, and two sets of negotiations foundered on that issue. Then along came Ridley Scott, who agreed with me that *Pillars* should be eight hours. Ian McShane was cast as the villainous Bishop Waleran, and a fast-rising young actor called Eddie Redmayne played Jack. The result was a really exciting, colorful television show that brought my story to millions more people all over the world.

It was a big moment when I picked up the phone and heard a voice say: "Hello, Ken, this is Oprah Winfrey." She talked with characteristic energy and enthusiasm about Tom Builder and Aliena and the evil William Hamleigh, as if they were people she had met rather than fictional characters. *Pillars* had been recommended to her by a friend, and she had enjoyed it so much that she was picking it for her Book Club.

After much thought, I decided to write a sequel. *World Without End* is a novel about the Black Death, set in Kingsbridge two hundred years after the building of the cathedral. Once again I was unsure how the book would be received; once again the enthusiasm of readers was beyond my expectations.

Many times in the last twenty-five years, I have been asked why *Pillars* has had such a big impact. There's no simple answer, because a novel is so complex. But I come back again and again to the people who built the cathedrals. Those men and women were, by modern standards, poor and ignorant. They lived in wooden huts and slept on the floor. Yet they created the most beautiful and awesome buildings the world has ever known. Human beings have the capacity to rise above mundane circumstances and touch the eternal. That is what *Pillars* is about, and, in the end, I think that may be why it has so profoundly touched the hearts of so many readers for so many years.

—Ken Follett
Stevenage, Hertfordshire
January 2014

PROLOGUE

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THE SMALL BOYS came early to the hanging.

It was still dark when the first three or four of them sidled out of the hovels, quiet as cats in their felt boots. A thin layer of fresh snow covered the little town like a new coat of paint, and theirs were the first footprints to blemish its perfect surface. They picked their way through the huddled wooden huts and along the streets of frozen mud to the silent marketplace, where the gallows stood waiting.

The boys despised everything their elders valued. They scorned beauty and mocked goodness. They would hoot with laughter at the sight of a cripple, and if they saw a wounded animal they would stone it to death. They boasted of injuries and wore their scars with pride, and they reserved their special admiration for mutilation: a boy with a finger missing could be their king. They loved violence; they would run miles to see bloodshed; and they never missed a hanging.

One of the boys piddled on the base of the scaffold. Another mounted the steps, put his thumbs to his throat and slumped, twisting his face into a grisly parody of strangulation: the others whooped in admiration, and two dogs came running into the marketplace, barking. A very young boy recklessly began to eat an apple, and one of the older ones punched his nose and took his apple. The young boy relieved his feelings by throwing a sharp stone at a dog, sending the animal howling home. Then there was nothing else to do, so they all squatted on the dry pavement in the porch of the big church, waiting for something to happen.

Candlelight flickered behind the shutters of the substantial wood and stone houses around the square, the homes of prosperous craftsmen and traders, as scullery maids and apprentice boys lit fires and heated water and made porridge. The color of the sky turned from black to gray. The townspeople came ducking out of their low doorways, swathed in heavy cloaks of coarse wool, and went shivering down to the river to fetch water.

Soon a group of young men, grooms and laborers and apprentices, swaggered into the marketplace. They turned the small boys out of the church porch with cuffs and kicks, then leaned against the carved stone arches, scratching themselves and spitting on the ground and talking with studied confidence about death by hanging. If he's lucky, said one, his neck breaks as soon as he falls, a quick death, and painless; but if not he hangs there turning red, his mouth opening and shutting like a fish out of water, until he chokes to death; and another said that dying like that can take the time a man takes to walk a mile; and a third said it could be worse than that, he had seen one where by the time the man died his neck was a foot long.

The old women formed a group on the opposite side of the marketplace, as far as possible from the young men, who were liable to shout vulgar remarks at their grandmothers. They always woke up early, the old women, even though they no longer had babies and children to worry over; and they were the first to get their fires lit and their hearths swept. Their

acknowledged leader, the muscular Widow Brewster, joined them, rolling a barrel of beer as easily as a child rolls a hoop. Before she could get the lid off there was a small crowd of customers waiting with jugs and buckets.

The sheriff's bailiff opened the main gate, admitting the peasants who lived in the suburb, in the lean-to houses against the town wall. Some brought eggs and milk and fresh butter to sell, some came to buy beer or bread, and some stood in the marketplace and waited for the hanging.

Every now and again people would cock their heads, like wary sparrows, and glance up at the castle on the hilltop above the town. They saw smoke rising steadily from the kitchen, and the occasional flare of a torch behind the arrow-slit windows of the stone keep. Then, at about the time the sun must have started to rise behind the thick gray cloud, the mighty wooden doors opened in the gatehouse and a small group came out. The sheriff was first, riding a fine black courser, followed by an ox cart carrying the bound prisoner. Behind the cart rode three men, and although their faces could not be seen at that distance, their clothes revealed that they were a knight, a priest and a monk. Two men-at-arms brought up the rear of the procession.

They had all been at the shire court, held in the nave of the church, the day before. The priest had caught the thief red-handed; the monk had identified the silver chalice as belonging to the monastery; the knight was the thief's lord, and had identified him as a runaway; and the sheriff had condemned him to death.

While they came slowly down the hill, the rest of the town gathered around the gallows. Among the last to arrive were the leading citizens: the butcher, the baker, two leather tanners, two smiths, the cutler and the fletcher, all with their wives.

The mood of the crowd was odd. Normally they enjoyed a hanging. The prisoner was usually a thief, and they hated thieves with the passion of people whose possessions are hard-earned. But this thief was different. Nobody knew who he was or where he came from. He had not stolen from them, but from a monastery twenty miles away. And he had stolen a jeweled chalice, something whose value was so great that it would be virtually impossible to sell—which was not like stealing a ham or a new knife or a good belt, the loss of which would hurt someone. They could not hate a man for a crime so pointless. There were a few jeers and catcalls as the prisoner entered the marketplace, but the abuse was halfhearted, and only the small boys mocked him with any enthusiasm.

Most of the townspeople had not been in court, for court days were not holidays and they all had to make a living, so this was the first time they had seen the thief. He was quite young, somewhere between twenty and thirty years of age, and of normal height and build, but otherwise his appearance was strange. His skin was as white as the snow on the roofs, he had protuberant eyes of startling bright green, and his hair was the color of a peeled carrot. The maids thought he was ugly; the old women felt sorry for him; and the small boys laughed until they fell down.

The sheriff was a familiar figure, but the other three men who had sealed the thief's doom were strangers. The knight, a fleshy man with yellow hair, was clearly a person of some importance, for he rode a war-horse, a huge beast that cost as much as a carpenter earned in ten years. The monk was much older, perhaps fifty or more, a tall, thin man who sat slumped in his saddle as if life were a wearisome burden to him. Most striking was the priest, a young man with a sharp nose and lank black hair, wearing black robes and riding a chestnut stallion. He had an alert, dangerous look, like a black cat that could smell a nest of baby mice.

A small boy took careful aim and spat at the prisoner. It was a good shot and caught him between the eyes. He snarled a curse and lunged at the spitter, but he was restrained by the ropes attaching him to the sides of the cart. The incident was not remarkable except that the

words he spoke were Norman French, the language of the lords. Was he high-born, then? Or just a long way from home? Nobody knew.

The ox cart stopped beneath the gallows. The sheriff's bailiff climbed onto the flatbed of the cart with the noose in his hand. The prisoner started to struggle. The boys cheered—they would have been disappointed if the prisoner had remained calm. The man's movements were restricted by the ropes tied to his wrists and ankles, but he jerked his head from side to side, evading the noose. After a moment the bailiff, a huge man, stepped back and punched the prisoner in the stomach. The man doubled over, winded, and the bailiff slipped the rope over his head and tightened the knot. Then he jumped down to the ground and pulled the rope taut, securing its other end to a hook in the base of the gallows.

This was the turning point. If the prisoner struggled now, he would only die sooner.

The men-at-arms untied the prisoner's legs and left him standing alone on the bed of the cart, his hands bound behind his back. A hush fell on the crowd.

There was often a disturbance at this point: the prisoner's mother would have a screaming fit, or his wife would pull out a knife and rush the platform in a last-minute attempt to rescue him. Sometimes the prisoner called upon God for forgiveness or pronounced blood-curdling curses on his executioners. The men-at-arms now stationed themselves on either side of the scaffold, ready to deal with any incident.

That was when the prisoner began to sing.

He had a high tenor voice, very pure. The words were French, but even those who could not understand the language could tell by its plaintive melody that it was a song of sadness and loss.

*A lark, caught in a hunter's net
Sang sweeter than than ever,
As if the falling melody
Might wing and net dissever.*

As he sang he looked directly at someone in the crowd. Gradually a space formed around the person, and everyone could see her.

She was a girl of about fifteen. When people looked at her they wondered why they had not noticed her before. She had long dark-brown hair, thick and rich, which came to a point on her wide forehead in what people called a devil's peak. She had regular features and a sensual, full-lipped mouth. The old women noticed her thick waist and heavy breasts, concluded that she was pregnant, and guessed that the prisoner was the father of her unborn child. But everyone else noticed nothing except her eyes. She might have been pretty, but she had deep-set, intense eyes of a startling golden color, so luminous and penetrating that when she looked at you, you felt she could see right into your heart, and you averted your eyes, scared that she would discover your secrets. She was dressed in rags, and tears streamed down her soft cheeks.

The driver of the cart looked expectantly at the bailiff. The bailiff looked at the sheriff, waiting for the nod. The young priest with the sinister air nudged the sheriff impatiently, but the sheriff took no notice. He let the thief carry on singing. There was a dreadful pause while the ugly man's lovely voice held death at bay.

*At dusk the hunter took his prey,
The lark his freedom never.*

*All birds and men are sure to die
But songs may live forever.*

When the song ended the sheriff looked at the bailiff and nodded. The bailiff shouted “Hup!” and lashed the ox’s flank with a length of rope. The carter cracked his whip at the same time. The ox stepped forward, the prisoner standing in the cart staggered, the ox pulled the cart away, and the prisoner dropped into midair. The rope straightened and the thief’s neck broke with a snap.

There was a scream, and everyone looked at the girl.

It was not she who had screamed, but the cutler’s wife beside her. But the girl was the cause of the scream. She had sunk to her knees in front of the gallows, with her arms stretched out in front of her, the position adopted to utter a curse. The people shrank from her in fear: everyone knew that the curses of those who had suffered injustice were particularly effective, and they had all suspected that something was not quite right about this hanging. The small boys were terrified.

The girl turned her hypnotic golden eyes on the three strangers, the knight, the monk and the priest; and then she pronounced her curse, calling out the terrible words in ringing tones: “I curse you with sickness and sorrow, with hunger and pain; your house shall be consumed by fire, and your children shall die on the gallows; your enemies shall prosper, and you shall grow old in sadness and regret, and die in foulness and agony....” As she spoke the last words the girl reached into a sack on the ground beside her and pulled out a live cockerel. A knife appeared in her hand from nowhere, and with one slice she cut off the head of the cock.

While the blood was still spurting from the severed neck she threw the beheaded cock at the priest with the black hair. It fell short, but the blood sprayed over him, and over the monk and the knight on either side of him. The three men twisted away in loathing, but blood landed on each of them, spattering their faces and staining their garments.

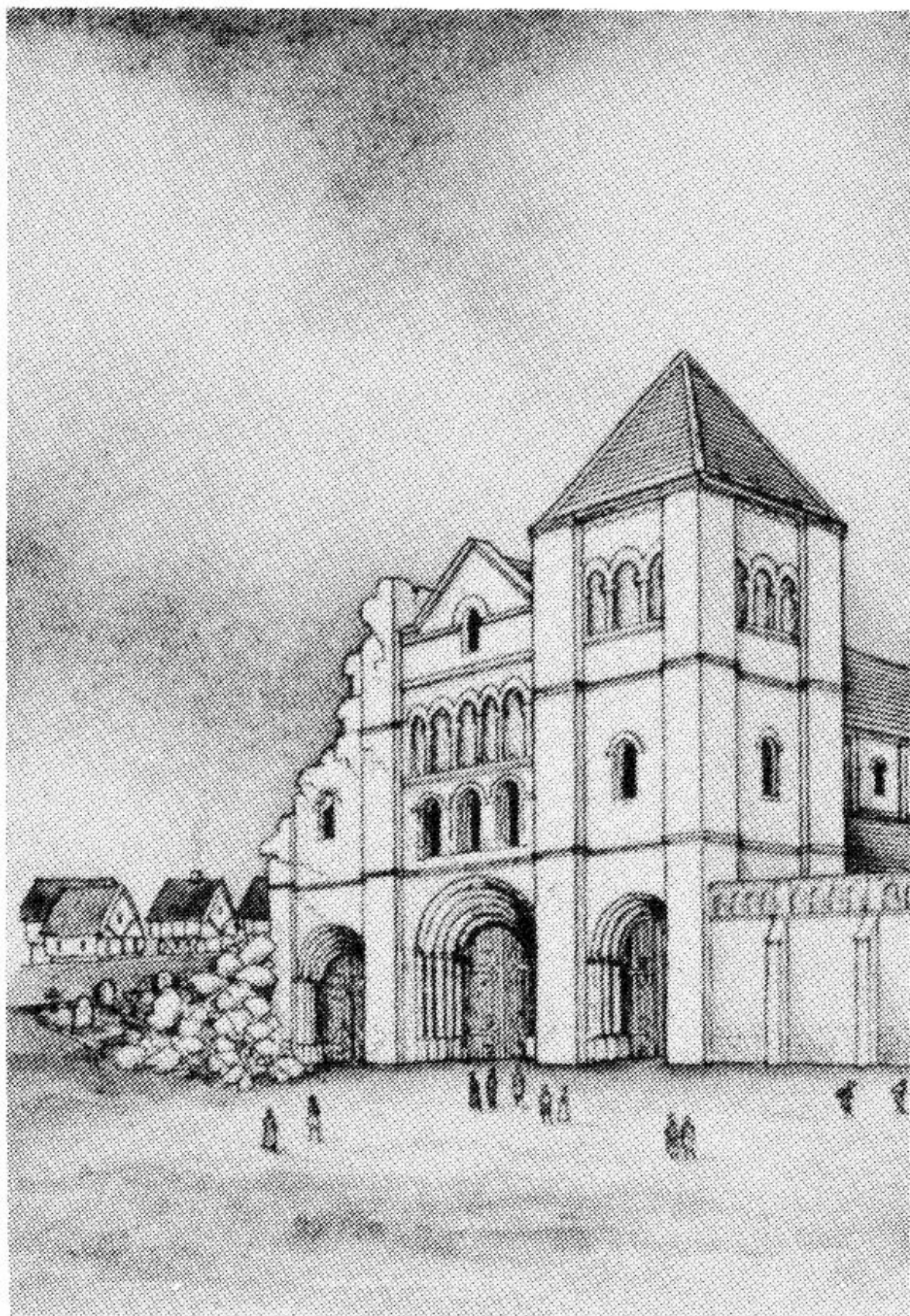
The girl turned and ran.

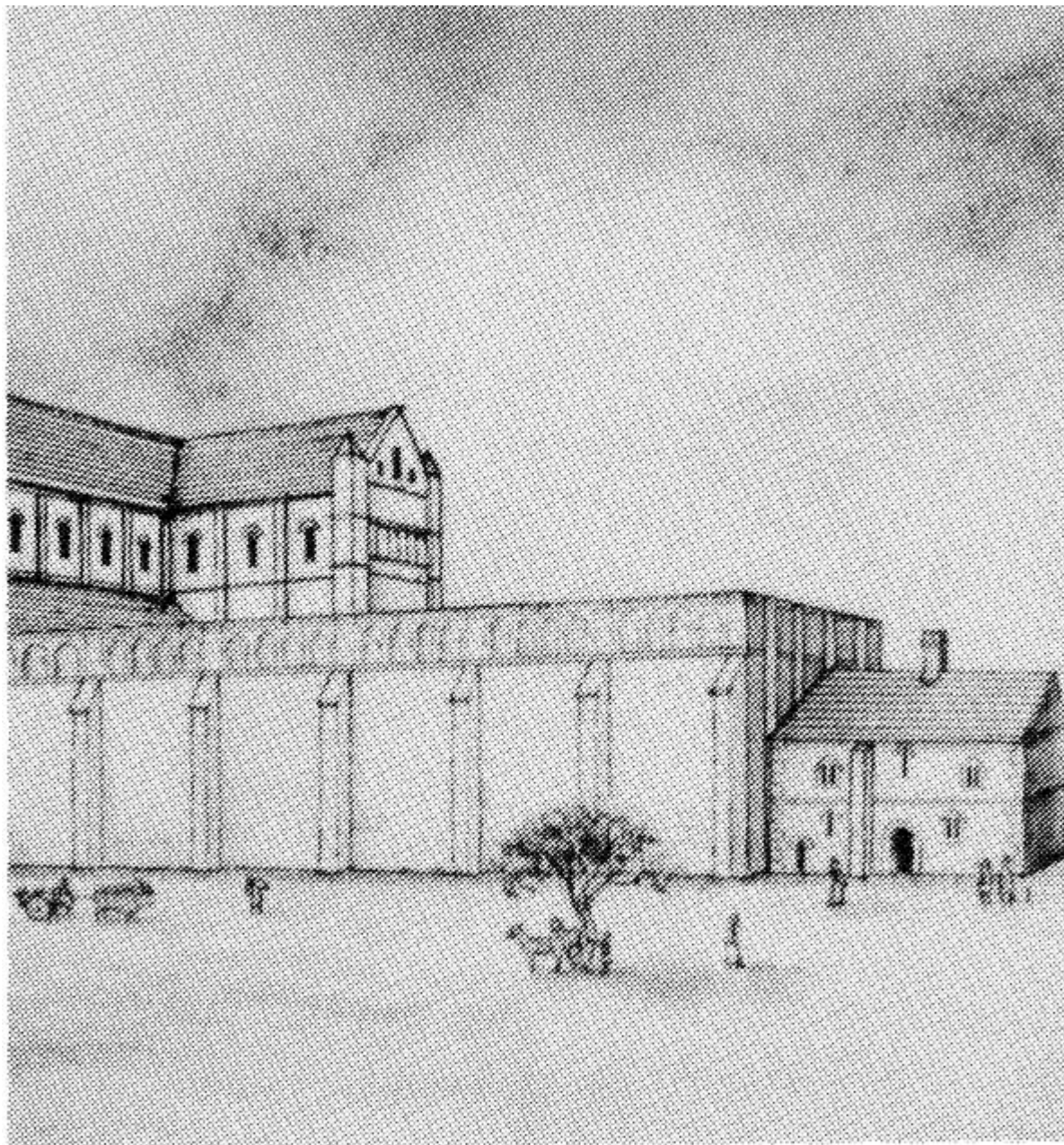
The crowd opened in front of her and closed behind her. For a few moments there was pandemonium. At last the sheriff caught the attention of his men-at-arms and angrily told them to chase her. They began to struggle through the crowd, roughly pushing men and women and children out of the way, but the girl was out of sight in a twinkling, and though the sheriff would search for her, he knew he would not find her.

He turned away in disgust. The knight, the monk and the priest had not watched the flight of the girl. They were still staring at the gallows. The sheriff followed their gaze. The dead thief hung at the end of the rope, his pale young face already turning bluish, while beneath his gently swinging corpse the cock, headless but not quite dead, ran around in a ragged circle on the bloodstained snow.

PART ONE

1135-1136







Chapter 1

(I)

IN A BROAD VALLEY, at the foot of a sloping hillside, beside a clear bubbling stream, Tom was building a house.

The walls were already three feet high and rising fast. The two masons Tom had engaged were working steadily in the sunshine, their trowels going scrape, *slap* and then *tap, tap* while their laborer sweated under the weight of the big stone blocks. Tom's son Alfred was mixing mortar, counting aloud as he scooped sand onto a board. There was also a carpenter, working at the bench beside Tom, carefully shaping a length of beech wood with an adz.

Alfred was fourteen years old, and tall like Tom. Tom was a head higher than most men, and Alfred was only a couple of inches less, and still growing. They looked alike, too: both had light-brown hair and greenish eyes with brown flecks. People said they were a handsome pair. The main difference between them was that Tom had a curly brown beard, whereas Alfred had only a fine blond fluff. The hair on Alfred's head had been that color once, Tom remembered fondly. Now that Alfred was becoming a man, Tom wished he would take a more intelligent interest in his work, for he had a lot to learn if he was to be a mason like his father; but so far Alfred remained bored and baffled by the principles of building.

When the house was finished it would be the most luxurious home for miles around. The ground floor would be a spacious undercroft, for storage, with a curved vault for a ceiling, so that it would not catch fire. The hall, where people actually lived, would be above, reached by an outside staircase, its height making it hard to attack and easy to defend. Against the hall wall there would be a chimney, to take away the smoke of the fire. This was a radical innovation: Tom had only ever seen one house with a chimney, but it had struck him as such a good idea that he was determined to copy it. At one end of the house, over the hall, there would be a small bedroom, for that was what earls' daughters demanded nowadays—they were too fine to sleep in the hall with the men and the serving wenches and the hunting dogs. The kitchen would be a separate building, for every kitchen caught fire sooner or later, and there was nothing for it but to build them far away from everything else and put up with lukewarm food.

Tom was making the doorway of the house. The door-posts would be rounded to look like columns—a touch of distinction for the noble newlyweds who were to live here. With his eye on the shaped wooden template he was using as a guide, Tom set his iron chisel obliquely against the stone and tapped it gently with the big wooden hammer. A small shower of fragments fell away from the surface, leaving the shape a little rounder. He did it again. Smooth enough for a cathedral.

He had worked on a cathedral once—Exeter. At first he had treated it like any other job. He had been angry and resentful when the master builder had warned him that his work was not quite up to standard: he knew himself to be rather more careful than the average mason. But

then he realized that the walls of a cathedral had to be not just good, but *perfect*. This was because the cathedral was for God, and also because the building was so *big* that the slightest lean in the walls, the merest variation from the absolutely true and level, could weaken the structure fatally. Tom's resentment turned to fascination. The combination of a hugely ambitious building with merciless attention to the smallest detail opened Tom's eyes to the wonder of his craft. He learned from the Exeter master about the importance of proportion, the symbolism of various numbers, and the almost magical formulas for working out the correct width of a wall or the angle of a step in a spiral staircase. Such things captivated him. He was surprised to learn that many masons found them incomprehensible.

After a while Tom had become the master builder's righthand man, and that was when he began to see the master's shortcomings. The man was a great craftsman and an incompetent organizer. He was completely baffled by the problems of obtaining the right quantity of stone to keep pace with the masons, making sure that the blacksmith made enough of the right tools, burning lime and carting sand for the mortar makers, felling trees for the carpenters, and getting enough money from the cathedral chapter to pay for everything.

If Tom had stayed at Exeter until the master builder died, he might have become master himself; but the chapter ran out of money—partly because of the master's mismanagement—and the craftsmen had to move on, looking for work elsewhere. Tom had been offered the post of builder to the Exeter castellan, repairing and improving the city's fortifications. It would have been a lifetime job, barring accidents. But Tom had turned it down, for he wanted to build another cathedral.

His wife, Agnes, had never understood that decision. They might have had a good stone house, and servants, and their own stables, and meat on the table every dinnertime; and she had never forgiven Tom for turning down the opportunity. She could not comprehend the irresistible attraction of building a cathedral: the absorbing complexity of organization, the intellectual challenge of the calculations, the sheer size of the walls, and the breathtaking beauty and grandeur of the finished building. Once he had tasted that wine, Tom was never satisfied with anything less.

That had been ten years ago. Since then they had never stayed anywhere for very long. He would design a new chapter house for a monastery, work for a year or two on a castle, or build a town house for a rich merchant; but as soon as he had some money saved he would leave, with his wife and children, and take to the road, looking for another cathedral.

He glanced up from his bench and saw Agnes standing at the edge of the building site, holding a basket of food in one hand and resting a big jug of beer on the opposite hip. It was midday. He looked at her fondly. No one would ever call her pretty, but her face was full of strength: a broad forehead, large brown eyes, a straight nose, a strong jaw. Her dark, wiry hair was parted in the middle and tied behind. She was Tom's soul mate.

She poured beer for Tom and Alfred. They stood there for a moment, the two big men and the strong woman, drinking beer from wooden cups; and then the fourth member of the family came skipping out of the wheat field: Martha, seven years old and as pretty as a daffodil, but a daffodil with a petal missing, for she had a gap where two milk teeth had fallen out and the new ones had not yet grown. She ran to Tom, kissed his dusty beard, and begged a sip of his beer. He hugged her bony body. "Don't drink too much, or you'll fall into a ditch," he said. She staggered around in a circle, pretending to be drunk.

They all sat down on the woodpile. Agnes handed Tom a hunk of wheat bread, a thick slice of boiled bacon and a small onion. He took a bite of the meat and started to peel the onion. Agnes gave the children food and began to eat her own. Perhaps it was irresponsible, Tom

thought, to turn down that dull job in Exeter and go looking for a cathedral to build; but I've always been able to feed them all, despite my recklessness.

He took his eating knife from the front pocket of his leather apron, cut a slice off the onion, and ate it with a bite of bread. The onion was sweet and stinging in his mouth. Agnes said: "I'm with child again."

Tom stopped chewing and stared at her. A thrill of delight took hold of him. Not knowing what to say, he just smiled foolishly at her. After a few moments she blushed, and said: "It isn't *that* surprising."

Tom hugged her. "Well, well," he said, still grinning with pleasure. "A babe to pull my beard. And I thought the next would be Alfred's."

"Don't get too happy yet," Agnes cautioned. "It's bad luck to name the child before it's born."

Tom nodded assent. Agnes had had several miscarriages and one stillborn baby, and there had been another little girl, Matilda, who had lived only two years. "I'd like a boy, though," he said. "Now that Alfred's so big. When is it due?"

"After Christmas."

Tom began to calculate. The shell of the house would be finished by first frost, then the stonework would have to be covered with straw to protect it through the winter. The masons would spend the cold months cutting stones for windows, vaults, doorcases and the fireplace, while the carpenter made floorboards and doors and shutters and Tom built the scaffolding for the upstairs work. Then in spring they would vault the undercroft, floor the hall above it, and put on the roof. The job would feed the family until Whitsun, by which time the baby would be half a year old. Then they would move on. "Good," he said contentedly. "This is good." He ate another slice of onion.

"I'm too old to bear children," Agnes said. "This must be my last."

Tom thought about that. He was not sure how old she was, in numbers, but plenty of women bore children at her time of life. However, it was true they suffered more as they grew older, and the babies were not so strong. No doubt she was right. But how would she make certain that she would not conceive again? he wondered. Then he realized how, and a cloud shadowed his sunny mood.

"I may get a good job, in a town," he said, trying to mollify her. "A cathedral, or a palace. Then we might have a big house with wood floors, and a maid to help you with the baby."

Her face hardened, and she said skeptically: "It may be." She did not like to hear talk of cathedrals. If Tom had never worked on a cathedral, her face said, she might be living in a town house now, with money saved up and buried under the fireplace, and nothing to worry about.

Tom looked away and took another bite of bacon. They had something to celebrate, but they were in disharmony. He felt let down. He chewed the tough meat for a while, then he heard a horse. He cocked his head to listen. The rider was coming through the trees from the direction of the road, taking a short cut and avoiding the village.

A moment later, a young man on a pony trotted up and dismounted. He looked like a squire, a kind of apprentice knight. "Your lord is coming," he said.

Tom stood up. "You mean Lord Percy?" Percy Hamleigh was one of the most important men in the country. He owned this valley, and many others, and he was paying for the house.

"His son," said the squire.

"Young William." Percy's son, William, was to occupy this house after his marriage. He was engaged to Lady Aliena, the daughter of the earl of Shiring.

"The same," said the squire. "And in a rage."

Tom's heart sank. At the best of times it could be difficult to deal with the owner of a house under construction. An owner in a rage was impossible. "What's he angry about?"

"His bride rejected him."

"The earl's daughter?" said Tom in surprise. He felt a pang of fear: he had just been thinking how secure his future was. "I thought that was settled."

"So did we all—except the Lady Aliena, it seems," the squire said. "The moment she met him, she announced that she wouldn't marry him for all the world and a woodcock."

Tom frowned worriedly. He did not want this to be true. "But the boy's not bad-looking, as I recall."

Agnes said: "As if that made any difference, in her position. If earls' daughters were allowed to marry whom they please, we'd all be ruled by strolling minstrels and dark-eyed outlaws."

"The girl may yet change her mind," Tom said hopefully.

"She will if her mother takes a birch rod to her," Agnes said.

The squire said: "Her mother's dead."

Agnes nodded. "That explains why she doesn't know the facts of life. But I don't see why her father can't compel her."

The squire said: "It seems he once promised he would never marry her to someone she hated."

"A foolish pledge!" Tom said angrily. How could a powerful man tie himself to the whim of a girl in that way? Her marriage could affect military alliances, baronial finances ... even the building of this house.

The squire said: "She has a brother, *so* it's not so important whom she marries."

"Even so ..."

"And the earl is an unbending man," the squire went on. "He won't go back on a promise, even one made to a child." He shrugged. "So they say."

Tom looked at the low stone walls of the house-to-be. He had not yet saved enough money to keep the family through the winter, he realized with a chill. "Perhaps the lad will find another bride to share this place with him. He's got the whole county to choose from."

Alfred spoke in a cracked adolescent voice. "By Christ, I think this is him." Following his gaze, they all looked across the field. A horse was coming from the village at a gallop, kicking up a cloud of dust and earth from the pathway. Alfred's oath was prompted by the size as well as the speed of the horse: it was huge. Tom had seen beasts like it before, but perhaps Alfred had not. It was a war-horse, as high at the wither as a man's chin, and broad in proportion. Such war-horses were not bred in England, but came from overseas, and were enormously costly.

Tom dropped the remains of his bread in the pocket of his apron, then narrowed his eyes against the sun and gazed across the field. The horse had its ears back and nostrils flared, but it seemed to Tom that its head was well up, a sign that it was not completely out of control. Sure enough, as it came closer the rider leaned back, hauling on the reins, and the huge animal seemed to slow a little. Now Tom could feel the drumming of its hooves in the ground beneath his feet. He looked around for Martha, thinking to pick her up and put her out of harm's way. Agnes had the same thought. But Martha was nowhere to be seen.

"In the wheat," Agnes said, but Tom had already figured that out and was striding across the site to the edge of the field. He scanned the waving wheat with fear in his heart but he could not see the child.

The only thing he could think of was to try to slow the horse. He stepped into the path and began to walk toward the charging beast, holding his arms wide. The horse saw him, raised its

head for a better look, and slowed perceptibly. Then, to Tom's horror, the rider spurred it on.

"You damned fool!" Tom roared, although the rider could not hear.

That was when Martha stepped out of the field and into the pathway a few yards in front of Tom.

For an instant Tom stood still in a sick panic. Then he leaped forward, shouting and waving his arms; but this was a war-horse, trained to charge at yelling hordes, and it did not flinch. Martha stood in the middle of the narrow path, staring as if transfixed by the huge beast bearing down on her. There was a moment when Tom realized desperately that he could not get to her before the horse did. He swerved to one side, his arm touching the standing wheat; and at the last instant the horse swerved to the other side. The rider's stirrup brushed Martha's fine hair; a hoof stamped a round hole in the ground beside her bare foot; then the horse had gone by, spraying them both with dirt, and Tom snatched her up in his arms and held her tight to his pounding heart.

He stood still for a moment, awash with relief, his limbs weak, his insides watery. Then he felt a surge of fury at the recklessness of the stupid youth on his massive war-horse. He looked up angrily. Lord William was slowing the horse now, sitting back in the saddle, with his feet pushed forward in the stirrups, sawing on the reins. The horse swerved to avoid the building site. It tossed its head and then bucked, but William stayed on. He slowed it to a canter and then a trot as he guided it around in a wide circle.

Martha was crying. Tom handed her to Agnes and waited for William. The young lord was a tall, well-built fellow of about twenty years, with yellow hair and narrow eyes which made him look as if he were always peering into the sun. He wore a short black tunic with black hose, and leather shoes with straps crisscrossed up to his knees. He sat well on the horse and did not seem shaken by what had happened. The foolish boy doesn't even know what he's done, Tom thought bitterly. I'd like to wring his neck.

William halted the horse in front of the woodpile and looked down at the builders. "Who's in charge here?" he said.

Tom wanted to say *If you had hurt my little girl, I would have killed you*, but he suppressed his rage. It was like swallowing a bitter mouthful. He approached the horse and held its bridle. "I'm the master builder," he said tightly. "My name is Tom."

"This house is no longer needed," said William. "Dismiss your men."

It was what Tom had been dreading. But he held on to the hope that William was being impetuous in his anger, and might be persuaded to change his mind. With an effort, he made his voice friendly and reasonable. "But so much work has been done," he said. "Why waste what you've spent? You'll need the house one day."

"Don't tell me how to manage my affairs, Tom Builder," said William. "You're all dismissed." He twitched a rein, but Tom had hold of the bridle. "Let go of my horse," William said dangerously.

Tom swallowed. In a moment William would try to get the horse's head up. Tom felt in his apron pocket and brought out the crust of bread he had been eating. He showed it to the horse, which dipped its head and took a bite. "There's more to be said, before you leave, my lord," he said mildly.

William said: "Let my horse go, or I'll take your head off." Tom looked directly at him, trying not to show his fear. He was bigger than William, but that would make no difference if the young lord drew his sword.

Agnes muttered fearfully: "Do as the lord says, husband."

There was dead silence. The other workmen stood as still as statues, watching. Tom knew that the prudent thing would be to give in. But William had nearly trampled Tom's little girl,

and that made Tom mad, so with a racing heart he said: "You have to pay us."

William pulled on the reins, but Tom held the bridle tight, and the horse was distracted, nuzzling in Tom's apron pocket for more food. "Apply to my father for your wages!" William said angrily.

Tom heard the carpenter say in a terrified voice: "We'll do that, my lord, thanking you very much."

Wretched coward, Tom thought, but he was trembling himself. Nevertheless he forced himself to say: "If you want to dismiss us, you must pay us, according to the custom. Your father's house is two days' walk from here, and when we arrive he may not be there."

"Men have died for less than this," William said. His cheeks reddened with anger.

Out of the corner of his eye, Tom saw the squire drop his hand to the hilt of his sword. He knew he should give up now, and humble himself, but there was an obstinate knot of anger in his belly, and as scared as he was he could not bring himself to release the bridle. "Pay us first, then kill me," he said recklessly. "You may hang for it, or you may not; but you'll die sooner or later, and then I will be in heaven and you will be in hell."

The sneer froze on William's face and he paled. Tom was surprised: what had frightened the boy? Not the mention of hanging, surely: it was not really likely that a lord would be hanged for the murder of a craftsman. Was he terrified of hell?

They stared at one another for a few moments. Tom watched with amazement and relief as William's set expression of anger and contempt melted away, to be replaced by a panicky anxiety. At last William took a leather purse from his belt and tossed it to his squire, saying: "Pay them."

At that point Tom pushed his luck. When William pulled on the reins again, and the horse lifted its strong head and stepped sideways, Tom moved with the horse and held on to the bridle, and said: "A full week's wages on dismissal, that is the custom." He heard a sharp intake of breath from Agnes, just behind him, and he knew she thought he was crazy to prolong the confrontation. But he plowed on. "That's sixpence for the laborer, twelve for the carpenter and each of the masons, and twenty-four pence for me. Sixty-six pence in all." He could add pennies faster than anyone he knew.

The squire was looking inquiringly at his master. William said angrily: "Very well."

Tom released the bridle and stepped back.

William turned the horse and kicked it hard, and it bounded forward onto the path through the wheat field.

Tom sat down suddenly on the woodpile. He wondered what had got into him. It had been mad to defy Lord William like that. He felt lucky to be alive.

The hoofbeats of William's war-horse faded to a distant thunder, and his squire emptied the purse onto a board. Tom felt a surge of triumph as the silver pennies tumbled out into the sunshine. It had been mad, but it had worked: he had secured just payment for himself and the men working under him. "Even lords ought to follow the customs," he said, half to himself.

Agnes heard him. "Just hope you're never in want of work from Lord William," she said sourly.

Tom smiled at her. He understood that she was churlish because she had been frightened. "Don't frown too much, or you'll have nothing but curdled milk in your breasts when that baby is born."

"I won't be able to feed any of us unless you find work for the winter."

"The winter's a long way off," said Tom.