



PAUL BANNISTER

CRUSADER

"Full of action, intrigue and historical insight." ~ Richard Foreman

Crusader

Paul Bannister

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Chapter I - Oxford

1165 AD

To my nine year old's eyes, Oxford was a fortress for giants and I stared, awestricken, as we rode into view of the walled city dominated by a high-mounded, battlemented castle with seven menacing stone towers.

My father called our little troop to halt and waved a leather-gauntleted hand. "There it is Frederick," he boomed. "There's your future. The king's court eagerly anticipates you."

At that moment, I believed it, but when I turned to face him I saw the twinkle that revealed he was teasing me. I stiffened my neck and tilted up my chin. "Yes, sir," was all I could say. I was too excited even to join in the gentle jest. I was going to become part of a royal household.

Today, I may be a scarred and veteran soldier, but those days and that journey with all its hopes and fears are as vivid and freshly green in my mind as if they were just days ago. It was a time of promise near-unimaginable to a small boy from Brotherton-on-Douglas. That was home, a sleepy backwater where our family had lived for the hundred years since Duke William of Normandy crushed the English army and seized a nation.

The story of our clan was as familiar to me as the timber and thatch of Bank Hall, the de Banastre manorial home in the northwestern corner of England. It had been ours ever since our ancestor Robert Banastre had been given a land grant by his king.

Father had told me the story passed down through our family, of the day in William's palace at Winchester when the commanders, the elite of dukes, counts, seigneurs and barons who provided the men and horses, the ships, silver and supplies for the bold venture to seize a nation met with their lord to share the spoils of victory.

The names rolled from his tongue, as listed as a litany. Guillaume de Bacon, Sire de Mora followed by the Sire de Bailleul, then the brothers Guinebaud and Hamelin de Balon had stepped forward one by one to receive the deeds to their land grants. Next, it was the turn of Robert Banastre to kneel, put his hands between those of his king and again to swear his fealty. In return, William gave him the rich northern desmenes of Newton, Waleton, Munslow, Aston and Brotherton as well as a great stretch of coastal territory and its hinterland, the peaty, fertile plain of the Fylde which marched south of the River Lune and the forbidding castle of Lancaster that stood sentinel over the region.

Like all of England, those Lancastershire lands were taken from King Harold's vanquished earl and proud magnates who were executed, drowned, banished or incarcerated after their defeat at Hasting

The Conqueror had also granted to our clan a tract of northern Wales, where at a place called Prestetone we had built an oaken bailey wall and tower on top of a steep-sided earth mound. Over the years, the motte and bailey stronghold had been reinforced with stone, but now both the castle and its holdings could be lost, my father said grimly, as the Welsh threatened doom for the incomers. When King Owain arrived with his mountain warriors, the small fortress could not hold out long, he forecast.

Privately, I was glad that the Welsh rebels did not know about our comfortable Bank Hall, far from their mountains. You could almost wade across the moat, and I didn't think that our huntsmen were such practised warriors that they could withstand an attack by the fearsome Gwent bowmen, whose arrows, Father said, could pierce wrought iron.

The beset de Banastres of Prestetone – nobody quite knew where the 'de' came from – had petitioned King Henry and he had promised help. To seal the pledge, he offered a place at court for a boy from the family to be a page and a companion for his own small son, Richard. I was that boy. "You'll be educated and trained and you'll be a knight by the time you're 16," Father told me, "and it will not hurt to have the king's influence behind you."

So, I had been scrubbed, polished, prinked and equipped, fussed over by Mother and the women of the manor, given advice by everyone from my tutor down to the falconer until my ears ached and I, finally, relieved but nervous, was sent off with Father and an entourage on the long days of travel to the king's court.

I had expected we would ride to fabled Winchester, but Father explained that by custom the monarch and his great train of courtiers, administrators and servants travelled about the kingdom to visit the many royal estates and live off their produce. At those times the king, who seemed to rule from horseback so much did he travel, would make grants, assign deeds, charters and writs and dispense justice, holding assizes at each location to judge criminal and civil trials.

"He travels to meet his people and monitor matters, he travels to feed his court. It's difficult to transport crops and farm animals, easier to go where they're produced when you have a hundred more retainers with you," said Father, "so Henry's back in Oxford for the third time in a decade. He called us barons, bishops and earls to a great council there just three months ago. We had a whole pavilion city set up outside the walls. We met, conferred and feasted in the castle, but slept in our tents. Eventually, we left, but the king has stayed on."

Father looked curiously sidelong at me, sensing my question. "He has his reasons to be there, including two hunting lodges that he likes, and the queen resides at one of them with the princeling Richard. The boy was born at Oxford and has spent his life there, though I heard he visited France with his mother last year. She has great land holdings, she's the Queen of Aquitaine."

It all sounded impressive and I wondered if I could keep up when I joined the court, but I was resolved to try. I grasped my knife hilt for courage. I also wondered vaguely who lived at the other hunting lodge that Father had conspicuously not discussed. Then I turned my attention back to my

horse, which wanted to stop and graze.

This day, we were riding the last miles to Oxford and its castle, following a ridgeway road between two rivers, passing through a wood of hornbeam and yew, with the occasional thorn bright with its red haws. We had for company a wool merchant who had seized the chance of an escort when, a few nights before, we had stayed at the same tavern somewhere along the great Roman road of Watlington Street.

He had asked to join our little troop, our half-dozen men at arms on their coursers, plus two cope and trailing with the sumpter horses that carried our goods. England was generally a peaceful place under the stern Norman rule, but there could be footpads or masterless men who might think of robbery, especially if they spied a plump merchant with his goods travelling alone. Mindful of the dangers, the wool broker rode with us, and for mile after mile, he had chattered on, telling us tales of the places we had passed, of the places we would see, of the great men whose deeds shaped the nation, while my father grunted and I soaked it all up.

I learned that Oxford was once called Ohsnaforda and was at a crossing point of the Thames river, that it had a mint and the silver coinage with Ohsnaforda stamped on it was not to be trusted as it was too often a Danish copy and underweight.

I also learned that Robert D'Oyly was a Norman nobleman who had built the fortress on the Thames. He had ordered a quarter of the town razed to site his castle above the river crossing with the fine stone bridge that it guarded, bringing security to the invader's new territory. The merchant added that D'Oyly had been a greedy despoiler of churches until he was converted, when he became a devout man who built the church of St George right inside the curtain wall of the keep.

Father had long before told me much about castles, and he added that the Oxford garrison, like all others, needed a safe supply of water. D'Oyly had ensured this by building inside the walls a vaulted brick-lined well whose shaft went miles deep from the top of the castle mound all the way to the Underworld. Or so Father solemnly assured me. I could not wait to see this wonder, or to sniff the sulphur fumes that he told me came straight up from Hades.

That link to the Underworld may be why the old Norman had also built a church to protect himself, I thought. The garrulous wool merchant nodded importantly when I mentioned this. Oxford, he said, was a great place for churches. Some few decades before, the crossroads settlement had been one of England's largest cities, and with more than 1,000 houses and a dozen churches, had been second in size only to places like London, York and Winchester, all of which he, the wool merchant, had visited many times.

But, he said, as we clopped along the metalled Roman road to the creak of leather and jingle of harness, a great fire and flood laid waste to more than half of Oxford's timbered houses and only in the past decade or so had the town been rebuilt. Now it was again thriving as a centre of the wool trade, dealing in the shearings from the Cotswold flocks west of the town walls as well as in cloth

leather and corn.

“I do much business with the clergy, as they own wide lands,” he said proudly, “so I know the churches and monastic houses. The most important is St Frideswide’s priory, which received its charter from the great king Alfred himself, and no king dares enter Oxford uninvited since the saint’s molester was blinded by God.”

I must have gasped, because the fellow added hastily that the saintly princess Frideswide herself cured the man’s blindness, and the offerings at her shrine included generous ones from the pilgrims and royals who had built their hunting lodges in the area.

My father, who had been on the Crusade that drove the Moors out of Lisbon and had strong religious beliefs, was frowning at news of a saint being molested. The merchant swiftly changed the subject to his gabble about the good nuns of Godstow and the holy monks, all of them Augustinians like those at Frideswide’s of Oseney Abbey, and their skill at doctoring. He paused in an awkward silence, then gratefully found a distraction and pointed out the still-extant walls of a Roman pottery that we were riding past.

We were approaching Oxford from the northeast, having made a tiring, dusty journey from Brotherton to the old Roman stronghold of Chester, then on the legions’ Watling Street, where the mileposts stood to advise us just as they did those long-ago foot soldiers how many paces remained before we would reach Towcester, or Lactodurum as they called it when it stood at a frontier of Britain. There, we passed inside the walls with their brick towers, hoping for accommodation at the Norman castle, but the place was unready for us, and we spent the night in a flea-infested tavern that was all the town had to offer as accommodation.

Next morning, after a breakfast of barley bread, cheese and some apples, we turned south for Alchester, still on solid Roman roadway.

The merchant knew all about the roads, it seemed. “The Caesars built these roads to last,” he said. “Six feet deep, layers of gravel, sand and stones, with iron ore for the top layers where they could find it. The ore rusts together, never crumbles, you see.” I glanced up at my father on his big battle-trained destrier Sinner, the beast champing as he paced alongside my smooth-gaited palfrey Traveler. Usually, Father would have ridden a rouncey or courser, not his expensive war horse, but we were going to a royal court and I understood that he wished to present himself at his best. Father caught my eye and nodded. The man told the truth. I put my hand to the hilt of my small dagger, feeling proud and grown up. My father’s approval did that to me, he treated me like a man, an equal.

The merchant was still talking. “They didn’t build a road through Oxford,” he said. “I suppose it wasn’t much of a place then. The last part of our journey is on a much rougher track. Alfred had the burh built, but he didn’t know much about roads.”

We followed that rutted track until we came through a copse of trees and to a small brow and there was the city imposing itself on the rolling countryside, all steeples and towers with the loom of the

great castle on its western mound. The sight stopped us in admiration. Square, turreted towers, several of them, stood in a rectangle of immense stone ramparts, with a gatehouse on each side, the merchant said.

“Twenty years ago, King Henry’s mother, the Holy Roman Empress Matilda, who was crowned in Rome by the Pope himself, was besieged there for months and months by her cousin Stephen,” he said. “They were fighting over who was to be ruler.”

That sounded puzzling, and my father caught my look. “There was a time of anarchy, a war; the fortress fell and the queen was trapped,” he said, bringing the information down to my level. “One night, by treachery, Stephen’s men broke into the castle during a snow storm. The empress was almost captured in her bed, but she slipped out through a small postern gate, wearing a white cloak over her night dress to conceal herself. Somehow, she crossed the ice of the frozen river, slipped through Stephen’s military lines, walked through the snowstorm to Abingdon and reached safety.”

I liked the story and nodded understanding.

“Was she a queen or an empress?” I asked.

“She was an empress, it’s a more important rank,” said Father, “but she made sure her son became the king of England. That’s King Henry II, whose son, Richard, you are going to meet.”

Chapter II - Castle

We smelled the night soil stench of the town long before we arrived at the limestone walls. After days of inhaling clean, sweet country air, it drifted to our keen nostrils on the warm wind, a cloying mixture of dung, smoke, a sweetness of brewing barley, and the sharp urine stench of a tannery, all of it overlaid with a whiff of blood and offal from the butchers' shambles. We looked at each other sniffing like air-scenting dogs, wrinkling our noses. So this was Oxford.

In front of us, the northern barbican's double-towered gatehouse was being rebuilt, the heavy ancient oak timbers being replaced with stone. The gatehouse was overtopped by the blunt belfry of a church whose windowless outer side formed part of the city wall. Later I found that the house of worship was that of St Michael, the archangel who cast Lucifer down to hell, as our tutor had told us. I'd always admired the stained glass window in our own chapel, portraying the dominant archangel with his fiery sword, so knowing that he was in Oxford cheered me.

Outside the walls was a cleared strip of land, about a bowshot wide, through which ran a scummy moat called the Canditch. That water barrier was interrupted by a timbered causeway that gave access to a gatehouse in the walls. Later, I'd find that the moat continued around the castle inside those walls and was flushed by the River Thames, which ran west of the castle.

The wool merchant, sensing his last opportunity to unburden himself of knowledge before we parted company, waved at a tall stone structure to our right. "That's the King's lodge," he said. "Beaumont Palace. There are king's houses inside the walls, but that's his lodge. The queen's probably there."

Instantly interested, I twisted in my saddle to look. Maybe she was at a window, wearing her crown. A handsome, chimneyed mansion with arched doorways and a round window whose stained glass glinted colourfully in the afternoon light was a few hundred yards away, standing far taller than the high stone walls which surrounded it.

"It's not in the town, Father," I said.

"Outside the walls," he agreed briefly. "It's a hunting lodge. Henry has another, north of here. The king say he's there right now."

The wool merchant caught his eye. "Aye, and he hunts a pretty prey at that hideaway," he said, licking his lips.

Father frowned, and the merchant hurriedly went quiet.

"Let's get into Oxford," said Father. "There's enough chatter here for a convocation of fishwives and nuns."

We clattered over an oak drawbridge that spanned the stinking green waterway, under the raised iron

grille of the yett that stood before the gate, then passed below the ominous murder holes in the vaulted arch above. These were apertures that could be used to throw down rocks or dump boiling oil on unfortunate intruders trapped between the outer and inner gates, and I had seen their like in Lancaster Castle's square tower.

Oxford's high ramparts were of dressed stone, not wood like most of the baileys I had seen, were pierced with arrow slits and buttressed with rectangular reinforcing columns called pilasters, just like the ones at Lancaster, where Father had taken me last year. The lounging men at arms of the gate guard straightened up at the sight of Father and left him and us respectfully unchallenged as we entered a busy streetscape thronged with men and animals.

The buildings overhung the stone-set street, which was lined with stalls and shops, all bustling with people, and so noisy with vendors' cries so that I asked Father if it was market day?

He grinned down at me, saying no, this was how big towns were every day and I nodded. I noticed that, big town or not, people made way for Father on the formidable black stallion Sinner, and proudly admitted to myself that this northern baron was an imposing sight: broad-chested and powerful, in a dark blue wool cloak and richly-embroidered tunic over breeches and soft ox-leather calf-boots. He wore his great sword at his hip, and had his gauntlets in one hand to swat away the flies.

The wool merchant pulled up his horse and bowed in the saddle to my father and myself. "Thank you, gentle sirs," he said, "for your company and security. You made my journey most pleasant." Father grunted and nodded his head, "May your travels be safe and the saints watch over you," he said formally. I wriggled sideways in my saddle and bowed, the man saluted and left.

Father looked down at me. "No word, Freddy, about the king hunting 'pretty prey'. That's men's business and not chatter for fools who could find themselves in deep discomfort in an oubliette if it came to the wrong ears. You didn't hear it."

"Yes sir," I said, not understanding at all. Then I asked, because Father was always willing to explain: "What's an oubliette?"

He smiled grimly. "It's a place where they lock you up and forget about you."

I turned to view the street ahead. Most of the people in it were English, distinguished by their humble flat bonnets, but the others' clothing was unfamiliar to me. I looked up at Father and asked him.

"The students at the colleges here are clergy, not ordained but secular," he explained, "so they wear clerical dress like those fellows do." He pointed to a chatting group in wide-sleeved tunics worn over fur-hooded robes. One had pulled his hood up over his head like a Saracen's turban, the others wore square caps.

They bowed respectfully as a dignitary strode past them in a round cap and be-furred robe. "A doctor," said Father briefly, for he was turning his horse away from a great pile of offal that had spilled across the cobbles from the open stall where a meat cutter worked.

I had seen a street like this not far from home, at Waleton le Dale. It was a shambles, where butchers hacked and sawed at huge pieces of meat, where the deep-dug gutters, properly lined with stones, ran red with blood.

The air seemed thick with the blood-stench and several lean grey curs growled and tussled over something unspeakable until one of our attendants lashed at them with a crop and drove them from our path.

We were heading down the Northgate and crossed the Great Bailey and the High Street, which continued each other – the names were painted on a board – and we entered the sea-smell of the fish market. A man trotted by carrying a great basket of elvers, shouting: “Young eels, tender young eels!” in an accent I found hard to understand, then we were passing stalls where water-filled buckets contained swirls of trout. In other wicker baskets, damp scaly tails peeked from under heaps of swathing wet greenery that kept the catch fresh. I saw a heap of grey stones on display and wondered at it, looking to Father as always. He nodded at me.

“Oysters, boy, good eating on feast days when meat is forbidden.”

Our little troop was turning right at a church, headed into a garden-lined street and we were facing the great rise of the castle, which stood proud on its mound, higher even than its curtain walls. “A brave sight,” said Father appreciatively. I sniffed the aroma from a bakery and eyed a table heaped with floury bran loaves. That looked even finer, for I was hungry. We passed a dyer’s stall with its jars of soapwort, saffron, tartar salt, madder and nut gall, the ingredients he mixed to create the bright linens and silks worn by wealthy merchants’ ladies, but I was more interested in the wares of the country people who were selling smoked fish, butter, apples, cooked chicken, sausages, cheese, honey and nuts, wondering when we would have something to eat.

We clopped up the cobblestones of the approach ramp to the castle’s drawbridge and barbican. There, under the leopard banner of Normandy we were met by a hard-faced soldier in steel helmet and mail coat who brusquely demanded our business.

“Not with you, but with the king,” said Father, imperiously.

The soldier eyed him warily and conceded, “He’s not here, but I’ll get you an escort.”

And we were led into Oxford’s castle.

Chapter III - Richard

The great hall was chilly despite the cheerful oak-log fire at one end; it was draughty, despite the tapestry wall hangings and the occasional carpet that had been laid over the floor rushes, and the whole place gave off whiffs of sewage from the garderobe which emptied down an outside wall into the moat. The place was noisy, too, with heavy doors banging and the clatter of iron-shod feet sounding on the stone floors and stairways, plus the reverberating voices of squabbling serfs. It all added to the cacophony of shouted military orders and clatter of iron and steel weapons in the courtyard. Still, this third castle in my experience was much more impressive than the one at Clitheroe, where there was neither latrine nor fireplace in that small stone tower, and Oxford's stronghold overtopped even Lancaster's fortress, so I was excited.

A constable came forward to greet Father and in a short time we were installed in a chamber with a small window that overlooked the courtyard. "The king's at his hunting lodge again," said Father dryly, in a tone that told me he knew something I did not. "We may have to wait a day or several." I did not mind, it was comforting to have Father's presence before he left me alone at court, and besides, I could learn something about living in a castle that was so much bigger and more imposing than our manor house.

A tall, slender man in an cleric's academic gown came into the chamber, bowing. His hair was cut short, Norman-style and had a kindly air about him. His fingernails were bitten blunt and his hands had ink on them. "The constable sent me," he said briefly. "I am Adam of Lonsdale, and I am to be Frederick's tutor." Father grunted and nodded. "Make a leg, boy," he growled, and I gave Adam a deep bow, as I had been taught. "Good," he said. "I like a well-mannered boy."

Father grunted again. "Keep him this way," he said. "He will be an important man one day and he'll need to be mannerly in the circles in which he will walk, but don't sissify him." And with that instruction and half-promise, he turned on his heel and left me to begin my new education.

Adam looked disconcerted, then started at the beginning. Castles, he explained, waving vaguely around us, had several roles. They were a nobleman's home, or one of them, and they were military bases. They could serve as a place of security for the community in time of emergency, would house the king on his royal progresses and were often the place of justice and incarceration.

The Normans had made castles into a weapon, he said, using them as bases from which mounted knights could storm out to control the region, typically for a radius of about ten miles. This was a reasonable distance for a day's expedition that could return by nightfall, and the fortresses thus helped to cement a noble's hold over his territory.

“King William the Conqueror knew their importance. He built a castle right there on the battleground at Hastings in the week before he met and defeated the Anglo Saxons,” said Adam. “He conscripted Saxon labourers to make a castle mound, called a motte, of earth and stones and topped with a palisade of green oak. Inside that, he built a tower. He brought the wood pre-cut from France so he could build a stronghold in just a matter of days.”

Castles, I learned, were intended not just as refuges, but to dominate the land around them and were regarded with awe and even terror by the local peasantry, as they were places of punishment and imprisonment. “The English have to be kept disciplined,” explained my tutor, “as only 6,000 of us Normans have to control a million people here. Every single transgression must be met harshly, to discourage others from bad behaviour.” He pointed across the courtyard to the stocks where a man sat held fast by the feet in a hinged wooden trap. Several passers-by were taunting him, and a boy of my own age was pelting him with horse apples while the man tried to protect his face.

A wretched-looking woman with long grey hair was fastened by the head and hands in the attendant pillory where she had been given a whipping. Her dress was half ripped away to reveal her bare back and buttocks, which were striped with weals from the lash. Her face was crusted where a split eyebrow had spilled her blood and she was wailing feebly. “She stole from the kitchen,” Adam said briefly, gesturing to a notice by her head that said simply ‘Thief.’ “A few days locked in there will mend her ways.”

He resumed his lecture about castles. Not just anyone may build a castle, he said. The king had to approve each one, and an adulterine, or unauthorized castle would be slighted, that is, destroyed. “King William approved building more than 200 castles in England in the 40 or so years after his conquest, but he also destroyed many more that rebellious barons had built without permission,” said the tutor, stifling a yawn. “Do you have any questions?”

I asked about the kitchen skivvy in the pillory. Adam looked impatient. “She’s lucky she didn’t go to the head crusher,” he said. “At least she’ll survive a whipping or two and if that doesn’t teach her she’ll be branded or have her ears cropped.”

It seemed wiser to continue to ask about the castle. Oxford’s fortress was built on a high motte at the western side of the town. “Inside the walls, we have all the usual appointments,” said Geoffrey, ticking them off on his fingers. “Great hall, which acts as a dining hall, court room or meeting place, chapel, guardrooms, chambers, stores, smithy, barracks, stables, living quarters for craftsmen, all the kind of thing.”

The well, I asked. Could I see the well? Adam frowned. Before he could ask why that was my wish, a boy of about my own age rushed into the room. I am tall for my years, but this boy was taller, with long limbs. He had striking red-gold hair, long to the shoulders, and startling blue eyes that shone from his pale face. He wore a white linen tunic that had a vivid splash of blood on the chest and a matching splash across the sleeve of his tunic above the wrist where he’d wiped his bloodied nose.

Adam bowed deeply. "Prince," he murmured. "What have you done to yourself?" The boy shrugged. "Oh, just a nose bleed. Robert caught me with a stick while we were fighting."

He looked at me. "Who is this?" he asked.

"Ah," said Adam, "this is Frederick de Banastre, son of Baron Thurstan de Banastre of Brotherton, vassal of the de Poitou. He is here to become a squire, and possibly your companion, lord."

Richard turned his attention to me. "Can you fight?" he said.

I was about to bow and murmur something polite, but the challenge in his tone stiffened my back and put a new recklessness into my soul.

"I'll fight you," I said. "If you want." Even to my ears, it sounded blunt and aggressive.

Richard looked slack-jawed at my contemptuous tone, then let out a great laugh. "You are a true Norman!" he shouted. "You'd fight me, although I can have your lips sewn together out for your insolence!" He turned to Adam, who had turned a light shade of green, and said: "I like him. He will be a great warrior just like me. He's no milksop courtier. He'd fight me!"

Caution made me mumble: "Only if you want to, er, prince." I glanced at Adam, who seemed to have stopped breathing. "Boys, gentlemen, enough of this talk of conflict. Richard, meet Frederick properly. Frederick, meet your prince, Richard."

We stepped forward and shook hands in the old Roman way, clasping wrists. I looked at the trickle of blood from Richard's nose. "It isn't broken," I said authoritatively, although I had no real idea. "You must be a good fighter."

Richard shrugged and put an arm around my shoulders. "Come and see my swords," he said.

It was the beginning of a life's friendship, and, now, a weary old Crusader, I still miss the boyhood friend and youthful comrade in arms who became my king.

Chapter IV - Duties

Over the next few weeks, I learned about life in a castle, in a royal court. All activity revolved around the great hall, which occupied two whole levels of the structure and served as everything from a dining hall to common room.

One end was walled off and contained the king's bedroom, a place where my duties as a page would often take me, but which was then still unknown territory, as the king and queen were not in residence. That fine room with its tall windows and tapestry-hung walls faced south and was called the solar, and Richard said that his mother, Queen Eleanor, liked to sit on the window bench sewing, reading or sometimes painting, in the company of one or two of her ladies.

My duties, I learned, would include helping the king to dress – he rose at daybreak – to bathe him, wash his hair and fetch his clothes. I was one of a handful of pages he called his 'leopards' because we raced about to carry out his wishes and, he joked, we were not easily spotted. We also carried the two leopards of Normandy on our official tabards on the special occasions when we were required to wear them, and I fingered the stiff linen and felt I could not wait to be so uniformed.

I would find that Richard had a few duties like ours, but was not pressed to perform them, and frequently slipped away to the stables or to the yard where the soldiers were doing weapons training with a veteran old warrior called Ranulf.

"I am a prince, not a servant," he once told me loftily, with a dignity far beyond his nine years of age, but I wrestled him to the ground and pummelled and tickled him until he gasped for mercy. He was taller than me, but not as strong.

Publicly, though, I treated my friend with the respect due to his rank.

"You may be king one day," I said.

He shook his head. "I will never be king," he said, "because Henry my brother is older and that will be his role, but I am to be Duke of Aquitaine and Count of Poitiers." He insisted that our tutor Adalard call him 'lord,' and I did the same, at least during public affairs. In private, we were just two boys, 'leopards' of the king, and we fought, shared and ran together like young wild cats.

We slept with the other pages on benches along the walls of the great hall and I learned that I would be expected to wait on the king and queen at meals, when they sat at the top table which stretched across one end of the chamber. That table was a permanent fixture and formed the crosspiece of a giant 'T' at which the rest of the household sat for meals brought by servants. The long leg of the 'T' was formed of trestle tables which were usually cleared away during the day because the hall then became an administration centre where taxes were levied, justice was dispensed, jugglers and

musicians performed, pleas were heard, rents were paid and laws passed.

During the morning, after breaking our fast with watered wine, porridge, bread and fruit, most of the boys had lessons while a couple of pages would attend the king as he inspected the soldiers, stable knights and weapons, or rode out hawking for a few hours. By late morning the cloth-draped trestle tables were in place again for the main meal of the day. For now, the big throne-like chairs of the monarch and his queen were empty, but everyone else was squashed companionably hip to hip on benches.

The kitchens were in a separate building in the inner ward, so the food for those seated below the sa usually arrived cold. I had duties as an attendant at the top table, where a few senior members of the court and the favoured guests ate. They included my father, who was awaiting the king's return. At the midday meal, the pages didn't stop to sit and dine, but we usually filched slices of hot meat like venison, pigeon, partridge, or even heron from the great platters the servants brought, and there was always bread, cheese, butter, salad, wine and beer and fruit, so although I was usually as hungry as any other active young boy, the food was plentiful and good.

I especially liked the great smoking joints of beef that arrived for the diners to hack at with their personal knives, and each of the distinguished guests had their own trencher of hollowed-out loaf which acted as a platter into which they'd pile the beef and which soaked up its delicious juices.

Soon, I learned that nobles, having digestive systems that are more discriminating than those of the peasantry, need finer foods, so where a labourer would make do with coarse bread made from barley (and often containing tooth-breaking bits of grit from the millstone) with beans and salted pork, the baron needed finely-ground and sifted wheaten bread, fresh game, lighter meats like chicken, and almond-milk-thickened soups and stews.

On certain religious days, we were not allowed to eat meat or animal products like milk, cheese, butter or eggs, so we ate salt or smoked fish, herring, sprats, oysters and the like. Richard told me that because the restrictions extended to about one-third of the year the clerics had decreed that the definition of 'fish' had been extended to some merely partially-aquatic creatures. For extended periods of meatless days, such as the 40 days of Lent, creatures such as seals, whales, puffins, and even beavers could be consumed. Or so the churchmen said.

"The monks eat well," Richard told me, "The king says that some orders, like the Benedictines serve as many as 15 or 16 courses during certain feast days." Our tutor Adam interrupted. "They sometimes have, er, certain generous interpretations of canon law, lord," he agreed. "The abbots can make exceptions from fasting, and give dispensations to children, the sick, the old, pilgrims, beggars, workers and others. In fact, some orders contend that fasting restrictions apply only within monasteries and refectories, so many monks will simply eat their meals elsewhere in the abbey."

Our conversation was interrupted by a series of trumpet blasts and the sound of hurrying feet on the stone floors and stairways. Someone was shouting: "The king is returning!" and Adam stood abruptly and muttered to us and hurried away. "He's gone to put on a better gown," said Richard, adding

irreverently: “He’ll have to make report to King FitzEmpress on how we and the other squires are progressing.”

We ran out onto the ramparts to see the royal entourage arriving. A double column of armed horsemen came first, then King Henry himself on a white palfrey with several brightly-clad courtiers riding alongside and a jester in cap and bells prancing on foot ahead of them. The jester, a dwarf, was waving a pig’s inflated bladder on a stick, using it to hit out at bystanders, who screamed and pretended terror. The king, I could see, was laughing at the show.

Behind Henry came a lumbering wagon that carried the queen and several of her ladies, and behind that marched a double file of foot soldiers, closely followed by huntsmen and whips who walked with the king’s leashed hounds and greyhounds. Two heavy wagons followed the dogs, each with a chained mastiff guarding the vehicle’s covered contents, then came a knot of expensively-mounted *familiar* the king’s close counsellors and administrators, who trotted their steeds with an air of disdain. Behind them was a swarm of servants and craftsmen, and bringing up the rear was a train of sumpter horses laden with packs. Finally, several ox-drawn wagons and a half-dozen more spearmen formed the rearguard.

Soon, the courtyard was filled with the arrivals and we were avidly watching the bustle from above when Richard’s nurse Hodiema found us, grasped him by an ear and scolded him.

“You should be washed and in good clothes to meet your father,” she said. Then she eyed me, “You too, young master. Away, the pair of you scamps, let’s get you fit to be seen in public.”

Chapter V - Henry

Henry Plantagenet, king, duke and count, was in his castle and I was to be presented to him. I rolled his titles around my brain, silently mouthing what I had been taught as if I were about to be tested on them: “King Henry the Second of England, Duke of Normandy and Aquitaine, Count of Anjou, Maine and Nantes, Lord of Ireland, master of Wales, Brittany and Scotland.”

The hall was half-full with clusters of the king’s friends, counsellors, and barons, lean and hungry-looking clerks, pompous junior bishops and a brace of senior, fat abbots. There was the dwarf jester I’d seen from the battlements, a minstrel with his harp and several perfumed whores. Most of the assembly were chattering animatedly or flitting from group to group like brightly-coloured birds, although the two dignified, bejewelled prelates stayed aloof, their heads close in murmured conversation, though I noted that those princes of the church both stole frequent glances at the whores. I saw several squires and pages whose faces I knew and one winked at me, entirely comfortable in his surroundings, as I was not. A large white hound got up from the expensive-looking carpet in front of me, stretched and moved away.

Adam led me forward and the king, who was seated on a throne-like chair draped in furs, turned from the pretty courtesan with whom he had been conversing and stared at me with a focused, unnerving interest. Swiftly, before I knelt and bowed my head, I took in his appearance. He was a handsome man, stocky rather than tall, with a large head of red hair, heavy eyebrows like my own and a freckled complexion that was reddened rather than browned by the sun and wind. He had strong white teeth with no gaps, and I later noted, was bow-legged. I had expected fine robes, furs and jewels, but this king was bare-headed and carelessly dressed in a stained tunic and scuffed leather jerkin. The only kingly things I could see were a large gold ring on his right hand, curiously indented with the image of a leopard, and a great lozenge of amber on a thick gold chain around his neck.

From my humble position, kneeling, head bowed, I could also examine his finely-made but worn and muddy riding boots.

“Up, boy, up,” he was growling. “Let me take a look at you. Frederick, is it?”

I nodded and felt Adam, who was standing behind me, poke my back. “Yes, lord,” I said, and swiftly went mute. The king had piercing eyes that slanted like a wolf’s.

“A de Banastre, sire,” said Adam, prompting me again with a finger poke. “One of the Earl of Chester’s vassals.”

Henry shifted in his seat. “Yes, they’re having trouble in Wales, we once again must stop this ruffian Owain.” He turned to a tough-looking man standing behind his shoulder. “What do you know about

the old de Ruelent lands? Do we have capabilities up there?"

The tough-looking man leaned forward to whisper and Henry nodded. "That bad, eh?" I heard his murmur. He turned back to me, "Well, my new leopard," and he jabbed at the insignia on my tabard. "we'll have to do something for your family. In the meantime, learn your duties and carry them out well, as does your father, who was one of the few to bring success to the last Crusade."

Father was standing to one side, and heard the compliment, so bowed. "Sire," he said.

The king inclined his head. "You never did tell me much about the crusade led by my cousin Louis," Henry said.

"Not a lot to tell, sire," said Father and I blinked. He had told me stirring tales of gallant soldiers and fierce Saracens, of the dusty Holy Land, perfidious Turks and the fall of the first Crusader state.

The king cocked his head in query and, thus commanded, Father began to tell how the fleet of Norman, Scottish, English and Flamand soldiers had stopped on their way to Damascus to join the Portuguese army and expel the Muslims from Lisbon. "It was 20 years ago, sire, and my memories fade," Father said apologetically.

Henry waved a hand. "That was our only real success," he said. "We'll have to try again, we must push out those Saracens and regain the Holy Land."

Adam was tugging me away, nudging me to bow again and we were safely out of the orbit of the throne where a petitioner now had the king's interest.

"It could have been worse," he murmured. "At least he wasn't in a bad temper. Rosamund must have been on form last night."

A hand clapped me on the shoulder. It was Father. "Well done, Freddy," he said. "The king approves and I'll be away north, first thing in the morning, at wolf light I'm afraid, so stay in bed. I have urgent business in Flint with your uncle Robert. Meanwhile, if you need anything, our cousin Alard Banast is Sheriff of Oxfordshire. I've told him all about you, and he'll visit you here, soon."

I flinched inwardly. I was being left alone here, but they had told me that was what would happen. I steeled myself and that night, I resolved not to cry, although I did feel homesick.

So Father rode away and I settled down to my lessons, my duties and my training. Happily, I made several friends among the other pages, and Richard was a great support. He appointed himself my tutor in the court etiquette, protocols and procedures that I had to learn, although we still wrestled and pummelled each other happily.

Our fights were the play of boys, but sometimes we saw real violence. One time, as we were in the courtyard being drilled in the use of swords, guards brought up a manacled Saxon from the dungeons under the western tower. They addressed a bearded trooper named Geoffrey de Campana, a tall, quiet man who smiled often and who sometimes playfully showed us boys certain fist-fighting techniques.

"There you are, Geoffrey," said one of the guards. "We were looking for you. This one's for a *caes* lesson." Geoffrey's smile vanished, and tight-lipped, he went to rummage in a wicker basket he

placed against the courtyard wall. “He’s to survive,” said the guard. Geoffrey acknowledged the instruction with a curt nod.

Richard and I, and two other pages who had been at practice with us, lowered our weighted, wooden swords and watched. The guards saw us and one said: “Aye, you lads pay attention. It’s trial by combat. This malefactor claims he did not kill one of the king’s deer, so he is to be tried.”

Geoffrey was back, now carrying two pairs of caesti, a kind of leather gauntlet. I saw that one pair was reinforced with metal, including some small blades or spikes that protruded; the other pair looked to be innocent of anything but leather.

The prisoner had been unshackled, and the guards ordered him to don the leather gloves which Geoffrey was wrapping his fists and forearms in the straps of the metallated pair. Soon, both men had been stripped to the waist and were armed with what I later found was Roman boxers’ equipment, the vicious, man-crippling ‘battle gloves’.

The guards pushed the Saxon forward. Geoffrey wasted no time. He feinted with his right hand, then punched hard into the man’s abdomen with his left, and blood oozed. The Saxon swung wildly, looping a right at Geoffrey’s head, but the Norman swayed slightly, evaded the blow and jabbed his own lethal fist into the Saxon’s face. When the man reeled back, his cheekbone was torn open.

Geoffrey’s next two blows were also to the head, splitting the man’s eyebrow and closing his left eye. By now the Saxon was near-blinded by blood he could not wipe away quickly enough, and he had only connected a single blow to his tormentor’s body. Richard laughed. “Even a blind squirrel can sometimes find a nut,” he said.

The Norman moved lightly, circling his victim, and the metal plates across his leathered knuckles went from bright to bloody but the sickening punishment continued nonstop for several more minutes until Geoffrey glanced at the guards and one nodded. It was a signal to finish the Saxon, and the Norman boxer took it. He moved in behind a flurry of jabs, then two straight rights, and finally a crunching left hook to the temple that dropped the Saxon like a sack of grain.

The guards manacled the unconscious prisoner then dragged him, feet bumping across the cobbles, until they bundled him back to his dungeon. I never did find out what punishment he would receive and when I asked Richard about it, he shrugged. “He’ll be blinded, or hanged. It was probably deserved,” he said indifferently.

His attitude was one I had not met before, and I was to witness it often enough later. Norman nobility was a warrior class that sought victory above all. Its young men were mostly illiterate, were trained to war and wanted little else. The English, and although my great-grandfather from Etamp had landed with the Normans, I considered myself English, had long since discovered the values of peace and literacy, too.

In Lancastershire, my father the baron treated his serfs well. Not for him was the branding, blinding, hanging or mutilation that many Norman lords imposed on their terrified subjects. At Oxford

however, I saw those practices, because when the king held an assize, we pages were in attendance. In some places, a jury system was used, when men would come forward to testify to the innocence of the accused, but mostly, it was still the old trial by ordeal of water, fire or combat which determined innocence or guilt.

Trial by water usually took place in a church. Fires lit in pits outside were used to boil water, and bandages were readied. Those who would speak at the trials must have fasted for a day and must not have slept with their wives the previous night. The priests blessed them with holy water and held the Gospel book for them to kiss. Then the accused had his arm bandaged. A stone was dropped into the boiling water and the accused had to pluck it out.

After three days, the bandages were publicly removed and if there was evidence of scalding, the man was found guilty.

A man accused of more serious charges was given trial by fire. He was made to walk three paces while holding a red-hot iron bar in his hands. His wounds were then tightly bandaged and left alone for three days. If, when the wrappings were removed, healing had begun, or if the blister was smaller than the size of a walnut, he was judged innocent. If his wounds were putrefying, not only was he punished with a flogging or worse, but he would likely die anyway of stinking gangrene.

The other squires and pages followed Richard's lead in the matter of brutal discipline for serfs. "We are few and the English are many. We cannot be weak with them," he declared, and the others chimed in with their agreements. I knew, however, that peasants who for centuries had the rights of pannage to forage on acorns, chestnuts and beech mast to feed their swine in England's extensive forests, post-Conquest found those rights removed and were left to starve. Woodlands were now exclusive hunting preserves of the Normans. Routinely, trespassers or poachers were blinded, hanged or drowned, and even the serfs' bigger dogs had their paws crippled so they could not run to bring down the nobles' deer.

Time after time, I saw men and women brought before the court, accused of hiding wealth from their masters. They were usually imprisoned and tortured to reveal the trove, and their punishments were carried out publicly, to deter others. The offenders were hung upside down over smoky fires, strung up by their thumbs, whipped, garrotted with knotted cords around the skull, crushed under heavy stones or forced into the *crucethus*. This awful instrument was a shallow, short and narrow chest filled with sharp stones, and weights were loaded onto it until the bones of the trapped prisoner snapped.

One much-feared torture instrument which Richard and I examined with fascination was a massive weighted beam attached to a sharp iron collar. It immobilized the prisoner so that he could not sit, lie or sleep and had to bear the whole weight of the ghastly thing. Another was the Chair of Punishment, a sharp-pointed pyramid on which the bound prisoner was seated and fastened. If he relaxed or moved, the point worked its way up into his body. Strong men took days to die on it, in horrible agony.

"The king allows all this?" I asked Adam incredulously.

"He is God's anointed," he replied. "His actions are usually carried out after receiving the advice of his council."

and consent of the archbishops, bishops, abbots, earls and barons, so they must be right in the eyes of God. There is justice. If a man kills another, his life may be spared if he pays the murder price of 120 lbs of silver.” Adam did not add that a sum of that magnitude could never be found by a serf, or even by an ordinary merchant, so it essentially gave only the nobles free rein to kill.

Even the clergy could be brought to trial, although not by ordeal. They were subject to ecclesiastical courts where the usual penalty was to do penance. In serious cases, the accused was set to kneel before the altar while a prayer was made, asking God to choke him if he were guilty, then the errant cleric was given bread and cheese to eat. “God would stop his throat if he had committed the crime,” Adam assured me.

“Anyway, most can plead Benefit of Clergy, even to murder.” This, my tutor said, would be accepted as a plea against execution if the accused could prove he was educated enough to read a few texts from a holy book. Adam added thoughtfully that some bribed jailers had been known to teach an illiterate to memorise a passage which he could gabble back as evidence of education. I thought it was an easy way out, easier even than the nobles got with their silver murder price.

Sometimes, I did see nobles imprisoned. They were usually debtors confined until payment was made, and once, I met a German knight who was held for ransom. He was a gloomy fellow but I taught me a few phrases of his language which I once repeated, and shocked King Henry, who understood them and told me to forget those words, for ever.

A few prisoners had the freedom to walk about under close watch and slept as comfortably as an attendant in prison chambers with an arrow slit for light and air. Other unfortunates were dropped into an *oubliette*, a dungeon which could be reached only through a hole in the ceiling.

There was such a cell in the base of the great tower in Oxford Castle and you could hear the feeble cries and pleas of those incarcerated there, but the seneschal seemed not to hear, and perhaps he did forget them, as the dungeon’s name suggested. When I asked Adam about people dying in there he shrugged. “About all they can do is change their names,” he said, “so that when the Angel of Death comes calling for them he won’t have them on his list.” And he laughed.

Chapter VI - Plantagenets

Two years went by in a welter of lessons both martial and clerical, in horsemanship and hunting with hound or hawk. I was growing fast in strength and size, and was learning the complicated code of chivalry, the honour that called for nobles to be loyal, brave protectors of the weak, although the code seemed not to apply to their treatment of the English peasantry.

Hunting was an opportunity to improve oneself both physically and mentally, chivalry was a display of social standing and there was rigid etiquette of defence of the weak, generosity to all and careful politeness that was applied equally to courtship, jousting and war. I was big for my age, and strong enough that I could match boys four or five years older than myself in the lists or in the arena. I had killed my first boar, been blooded by the huntmaster and wore one of the beast's tusks as trophies around my neck.

A few weeks before, after dark, I had been accosted by a footpad as I walked down Oxford Northgate. I'd realized the man's intent and had warned him off, but he persisted and I had flattened the thief with my ash staff. I felt I was becoming a man and a warrior. I was 12 years old. Then word came from the north. My uncle's castle in Wales was under siege, and King Henry was asked to help.

By now, I knew much about the king, who had abundant energy, a vile temper, a volatile nature and a drive to enlarge his possessions in France. Adam explained that Henry's plan was simple: to unite the royal family of England – Henry's own Plantagenets – with their overlords the royal family of France the Angevins. That way, the two sets of royals could run a great part of Europe as a connected family business. The key was creating the connections.

"Think of it as a spider web," said Adam. "It has several main strands. The first filament is Henry, the ailing king of England. He wanted to secure the throne for his son Henry, so, while he was still alive and reigning, he had Young Henry crowned as king, too. There was a difficulty with this because he didn't have the permission of Pope Alexander, so could not have the coronation performed by the rightful archbishop – Canterbury – because he had quarrelled with the king and was in exile.

"Henry simply enlisted the archbishop of York to do the job, and ordered England's ports closed so his Holiness would not be able to send letters of prohibition from the papal palace in Montpellier until it was too late. The son was crowned, became known as Henry the Young King, and was married to the daughter of the King of France. It was all done before the Pope knew about it and could interfere."

My friend, the prince, Richard was another important strand in the web. His mother was Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine, and she had gone back to France to rule the vast demesne which Richard would inherit. He had already visited the fief and the agreed plan was for him to marry Alys, another

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