

KEN FOLLETT

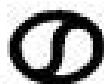
THE PILLARS
OF THE EARTH



A SIGNET BOOK

KEN FOLLETT

THE PILLARS
OF THE EARTH



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SIGNET

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OF THE EARTH



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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 Bar- fleur 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 bar- ons, 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

PROLOGUE

1123

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 stoop to kill 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 in 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 rope 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 executioner. 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 that 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 older 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 crowd

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 in 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.

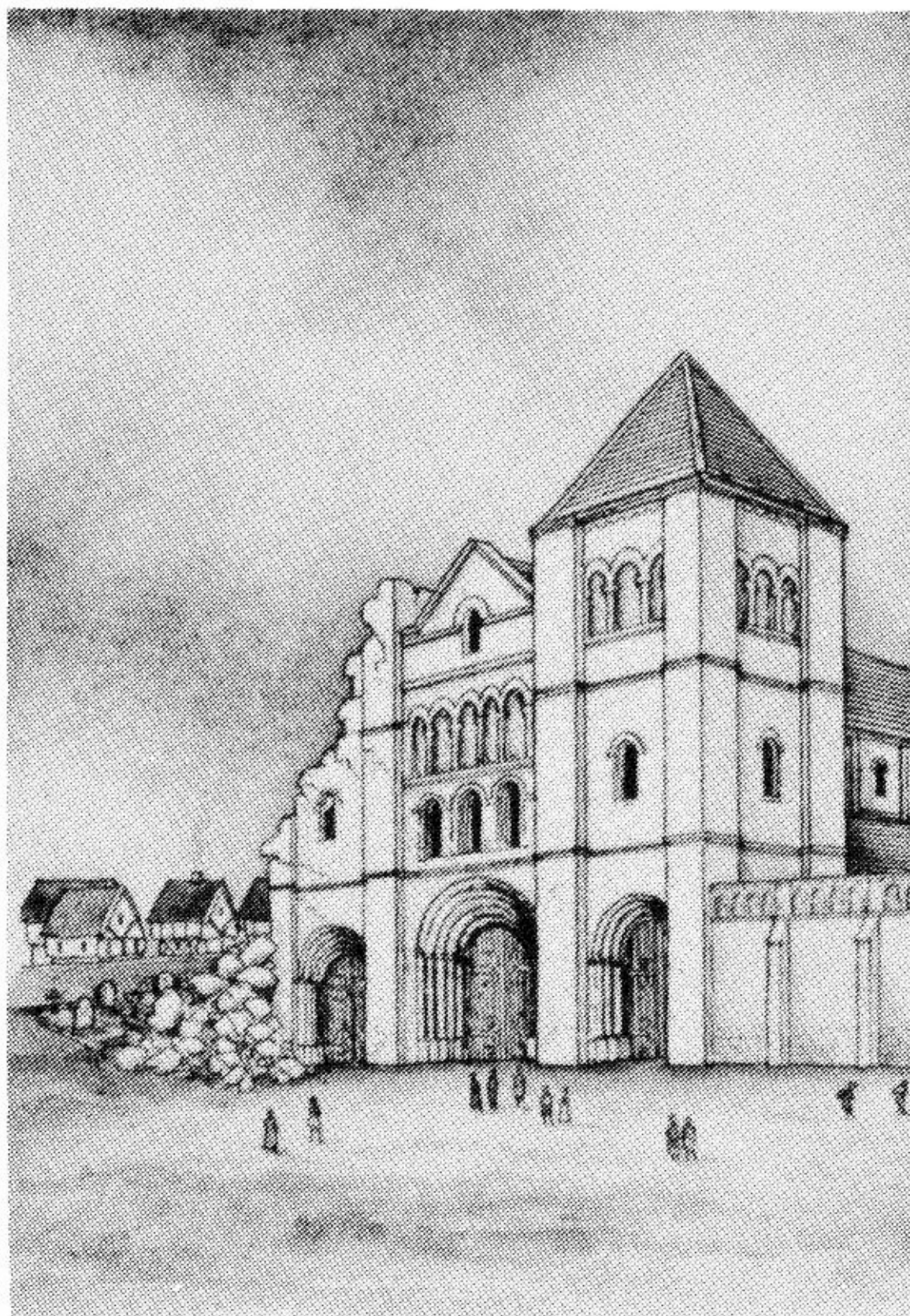
The girl turned her hypnotic golden eyes on the three strangers, the knight, the monk and the priest, and then she pronounced her curse, calling out the terrible words in ringing tones: "I curse you with sickness and sorrow, with hunger and pain; your house shall be consumed by fire, and your children 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.

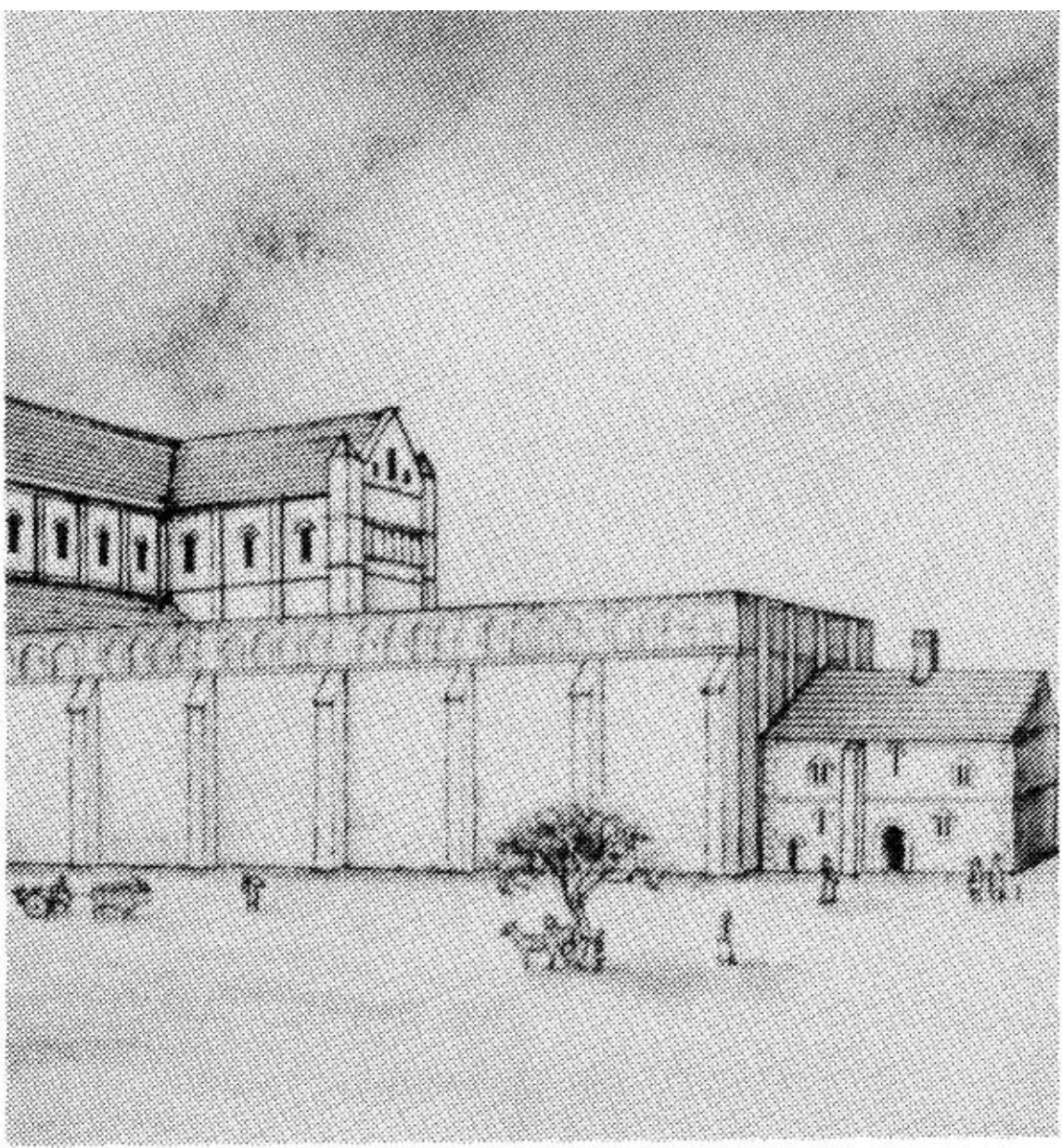
While the blood was still spurting from the severed neck she threw the beheaded cock at the priest with the black hair. It fell short, but the blood sprayed over him, and over the monk and the knight on either side of him. The three men twisted away in loathing, but blood landed on each of them, spattering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

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 laborers 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 shape of the 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 the dull job in Exeter and go looking for a cathedral to build; but I've always been able to feed them and 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 *th*

surprising.”

Tom hugged her. “Well, well,” he said, still grinning with pleasure. “A babe to pull my beard. And 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 coming 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 you 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 cathedral. 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 shortcut 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 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 the 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. No 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. It 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 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 he was scared as he was he could not bring himself to release the bridle. "Pay us first, then kill me," he said.

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