

KING JOHN'S MEMOIR

(chapter 1 of "Me and King John," by William Ramsay)

I wasn't wanted from the beginning. Yes, I was obviously an afterthought: my mother, the great Eleanor of Aquitaine, had already produced three healthy sons, she didn't need any more. Besides, at the time of my appearance, she hadn't been getting along with my father, King Henry II, for some time, and she blamed her pregnancy with me for completing the wreck of her marriage. So on that Christmas Eve of 1167 in Oxford, England, I started out my own life by ruining my mother's. Apparently I was slated to be a Christmas present only to myself. Just as I was fated to rely on myself, John, and only myself, all the rest of my life.

I wouldn't want you to think that I was asking for your sympathy—no, no. I don't whine, I don't whimper, I don't snivel. I'm proud at having been in a sense my own parent. After all, I did grow up to be John, King of England, Duke of Normandy—and a terror, I assure you, to all my enemies! May they rot in hell!

My boyhood was spent in France. I was raised by the brothers in the abbey at Fontevrault in Anjou. I have good memories of the abbey, of playing in the golden, sunlit meadows along the Loire River. My sister Joan lived there too, she was two years older; and there was also a cousin, Rupert Montgomery, who was my age. Even then I was showing my royal stuff in the way I handled those two. Joan was of course a girl, but I felt free to give her a casual slap if she didn't do what I wanted her to—like pulling up her tunic and showing me what she looked like underneath. It wasn't all that interesting, I remember thinking—I still maintain the female private parts are an acquired taste. As for Rupert, he was blond and snub-nosed, and bigger and huskier than I. He thought that he should be able to dominate me with his size, but he had no spirit; he was a coward at heart.

Our snowball fights during cold winters were like tournaments, him against me. Rupert would try to be king of the mountain, standing atop the little ice-covered hill in the abbey garden, but I would go at him, arms swinging wildly. I'd knock him down and grind snow into his face, turning his cheeks good and red, until he gave up. I later made Rupert justiciar of Wales—I always liked to have people around me that I know have been well-trained. But it turned out badly. At what was to be our final interview, he stood before me sitting there in judgment, his big blue eyes shifting here and there. He had had the nerve to come before me wearing a robe of the finest red silk, bedizened with gold chains—finery bought with money stolen from me!

"I only did what those before me also did, sire."

“Ah no!” I said. “The last justiciar took bribes from my friends, people I would have helped anyway. You took money from my enemy Sir Odo.”

Rupert smiled winningly. “But Sir Odo is in exile now, in France.”

“Yes, where he’s busily plotting against me. I think, Rupert, I’ll make you king of Cardiff castle. You can keep a lookout for Sir Odo’s ship when and if he returns from France.” And I ordered him chained to the topmost ramparts of the castle; I had his fetters made up by melting down all the gold chains and other precious jewelry he owned. I ordered them to give him water and bread, and I hope he lasted long enough up there to repent his sins—he was, after all, one of my old playmates.*

At the abbey, I learned fast from Brother Ambrose, who taught me rather quickly to read and write French and Latin—no one has ever called me dimwitted. The good brothers also tried to instill some religion into me, but there they had a little difficulty. When I was six years old, just before I left Fontevrault to live with my brother Henry, I was supposed to be learning my religion from Brother Emmanuel, a tall, gaunt fellow with a rasping Flemish accent. At the time, one of the other friars, Brother Pierre, was dying. He was in pain, and he had been throwing up the broth of chicken and leeks that the old cook had prepared especially for him. I recall one night his screams of agony echoing off the stone walls of the basement dormitory, keeping me awake as I lay on my hard cot in the corner cell behind the altar. Restlessly tossing about, I wondered why the good Lord let such things happen.

The next day Brother Emmanuel was giving me my lesson in the little office off the main nave. I could hear the choir practicing their plainsong, the sweet tones echoing from the great vaulted ceiling. I asked Brother Emmanuel about Brother Pierre.

We all pay for our sins, said Brother Emmanuel. But Brother Pierre was such a good man, I said, always willing to do a kindness. He had caught an injured sparrow, I said, nursed it back to health, and given it to me. So why him? I asked: Was he really, secretly a bad person? Brother Emmanuel shook his head. No, he didn’t think so. So why then?

Brother Emmanuel made a face but said nothing. For a moment my question seemed to hang in the silence under the cold stone vaults of the church. Finally he shrugged. He said that the Lord moved in mysterious ways.

But why does He keep it all a mystery? I said. What’s the point?

Brother Emmanuel shrugged, his face scrunching up comically. He said: I don’t know. But He is God, after all.

A funny kind of God, I said. A stupid God, I think.

Brother Emmanuel’s head snapped up. He shouted at me that he should make me drink a cup of vinegar to drive the blasphemous thoughts out of my

* This is admittedly rather disturbing material. I suppose the best one can say is that the business with the golden chains shows some sense of *flair* on the king’s part.

head. “Blasphemy.” A new word for me. For weeks after that I thought “blasphemy” meant cleverness. In fact I remember running around thinking that God couldn’t have very much “blasphemy” himself.

I never changed my mind subsequently about religion. Perhaps being raised in an abbey tends to do that for you. You see too many religious people—and you get a picture of how things really are, the real truth. I have, however, found religion a most useful concept during the course of my career. Other people believe in it, so it’s important for a ruler to know how to deal with the kind of idiots who immerse themselves in the chanting, praying, and lighting of candles.

All during these childhood years, for me the big event of every year was Christmas. Christmas was much more important for me than for other people. First of all, Christmas Eve was my birthday. But also Yuletide was almost the only time that I got to see my father. He was a big man, hearty, clever, full of jokes. How I admired him!

I remember one year he said, “Come here, John, and tell me what you’re learning.” He wore a plain linen singlet: he prided himself on dressing simply, while his courtiers strutted about garbed like peacocks.

“Well,” I said, “*amo, amas, amat*, for one thing.”

“Very good, very good! And what do those words mean?”

“I love, you love, he loves...”

He laughed and held up one giant finger—a habit of his—and said, “Or ‘*she* loves!’ Remember that, my boy. Those are very important words.” And he pointed at the beautiful young girl at his side—he had a different one every Christmas in those days—and said, “Does *she* love me?”

And I said, “I don’t know.”

He said, “And I don’t know either!” and he laughed and laughed.

“But,” he said then, “*Ego te amo, fili*. Do you know what that means?”

All the courtiers laughed, and I nodded and felt embarrassed. But I also experienced a feeling of warmth, because I knew that he did love me—even if he never had much time for me.

Of course the part about him and the beautiful young girls was only later, after I had turned eight. Before then, my mother would have been at his side at the Christmas court. Everybody always told me how wonderful she was, and indeed she was a phenomenon—Queen Eleanor, Duchess of Aquitaine in her own right, a strong female ruler in a world of men.

My mother the queen may have been rather casual in her own love life, but she had too much pride to put up with her husband flaunting *his* girlfriends in public. But that was then, before the fatal year 1174, when she helped my brothers start a rebellion against the crown. The rebellion fizzled, and my father had my mother immured in a succession of castles and convents for the next fifteen years or so.

I don’t remember much about her from those earlier years before her imprisonment. She was never too interested in me, nor in any of us—except my

brother Richard. “Come here, Son,” she would say to him. “Tell me what you’ve been doing.”

“Yes, *maman*.” And he would tell about his latest adventures, or perhaps his lessons in swordplay, swinging his arms about to show how he could smite some imaginary heathen warrior.

She would then pull back the veil on her headdress, smile in that complacent way of hers, and give him a careful, loving kiss—while the rest of us looked on. Lucky Richard.

So you can imagine that family rebellion was a watershed in our life. I was too young to understand everything that was going on at the time. All I knew was that afterward, my father readily forgave my brothers, Henry, Richard, and Geoffrey—but not my mother. And after it was over my sister and I were sent to live in the household of my brother Henry.

Henry was eleven years older than I, so when I was eight and went to stay with him in his palace in Rouen, he was nineteen and almost a man. He lived in fine style with scores of servants and hangers-on. He treated me initially like a mascot, which was a definite step up from being yelled at and bullied by the friars.

How did I get along with my rat-faced brother Henry? Well enough. He was slender and good-looking, and he had the reputation for being clever—but I can’t say that I found him so. He prided himself on being able to read other people’s faces, but I found him rather gullible. He would preen himself, strutting about on his short legs, showing off his elegant clothes and his jewels. But I knew our father kept him on a tight tether, and he hungered after praise. I quickly discovered how to butter him up and get my way with him; knowing how to cater to a man’s vanity has always been one of my strong points.

It was in Rouen a few years later that I recall seeing an event that sticks out in my mind, my first bear-baiting. The bear was positioned inside a big round pit and tied to a stake by a long chain. He was a deep, brown color, the hue of a roasted chestnut, and thin, only half-grown. The hound seemed to be almost as large as he was, with a gigantic head and a large, slobbering mouth. The two beasts sparred back and forth, each frightened of the other. Seeing such cowardice made me angry—me, a wispy little boy, can you imagine? I shouted “Fight, fight,” and others began to take up the cry. Finally my brother Henry motioned to his tall, ungainly fool, Osbert, and Osbert snatched up a javelin from one of the guards and jabbed at the dog’s haunch, drawing blood. The dog yelped and then leaped at the bear ferociously. The bear struck him in the snout with his claw and a gob of blood spurted out. But after a few more attacks, the hound’s jaws connected with the forepaw of the bear. The bear howled and began a mad dance of pain and fury.

Drops of blood spattered, one almost hit me and landed on the railing in front of me. I stuck my finger in it and sucked it. It tasted warm and salty, and the distraction kept me from seeing the hound mangle the bear’s hind paw and I only

looked up to see the bear collapsed at the foot of the stake. The hound jumped in for the kill. But a moment later he yelped and fell back. He limped away and I saw his guts swinging down from his belly. He lay down in a pool of blood and howled. The cheering was deafening. I leaned over the railing to watch the death scene. The hound lay still after a few minutes but the bear rustled around, groaning and making an unearthly screaming noise. Finally a soldier jumped into the ring and swung his sword, crushing the big animal's skull. It was all extremely thrilling. Joan hid her eyes and wouldn't watch the end—but she was after all only a girl.

Henry asked me to join him at the table that night, even though I was a mere boy. It was the first time he had given me much notice.

“You'll be a fighter, John.”

I nodded and smiled.

“A very small one,” said Osbert

“Oh, he'll grow up,” said Henry. I was short then, and I've never grown to be more than middling height. It doesn't matter, but it is after all extremely bad manners to tease people about such things.

“In any case, he can always enter the dwarves' tournament,” said Osbert.

Osbert thought he could get away with saying anything he wanted to—I was the younger brother, no titles to my name, no future. He could forget about me—especially since a few years afterward Osbert left us, going off to Paris to try his luck at the court of our enemy Philip.

But in the long run the poor fellow miscalculated—he like many other people had underestimated me. My memory is excellent, as many have learned to their sorrow. Later, after I became king, I asked Philip as part of the treaty of Le Goulet to hand Osbert over to me. For a time, I kept Osbert prisoner in a castle in Yorkshire. Then I had him racked as a suspected spy; he had, after all, been a long time in the enemy's camp. The evidence brought before my royal court duly determined that he was guilty; and I ordered him hanged, but just partially so, drawn while still alive, and quartered. Come to think of it, though Osbert had been well over six feet tall, after he was without his legs, much less his head, he ended up being much shorter than I.*

In 1182, the king decided I was old enough to get a serious masculine education, and I was sent to Oxford to be under the care of Sir Ranulph Glanvill. Sir Ranulph was a pompous ass, if you ask me, but a good-hearted fellow, and I liked him in spite of my better judgment. For I have found in life that it usually doesn't pay to get too involved with dull-witted people, even the nice ones: stupidity can be dangerous. But I was only fifteen then, I had no friends, or very

* I had to wonder at this point if the king was likely to run into old acquaintances like Osbert on the Other Side. And if so, what would the outcome of the encounter be? Would they still be carrying weapons? Would Osbert be carrying his head, too? (The more I thought about “life” over there, the more puzzles tended to arise.)

few of them, and how was I to resist someone who was as sweet-tempered and patient as Sir Ranulph? I didn't trust him—I don't believe in trusting people—but I couldn't help leaning on him when the world pressed in on me.

"John, don't be sad," he said one day when he caught me in one of my pensive moods, looking out the narrow mullioned window into the mists of an English spring. Several of his men had been bragging about my brother Richard's latest victory in some tournament, and Sir Ranulph had seen the look on my face.

"It's nothing, Sir Ranulph."

"There's a place for all of us in God's scheme of things." He nodded his narrow, egg-shaped head slowly, pursing his narrow lips.

I nodded. What kind of place? I thought.

He leaned over me, kissed me, and said, "Be of good cheer. You never know what might happen."

Well, he was right about *that*. Two months later my brother Henry died of a sudden fever. Tears ran down Sir Ranulph's cheeks at the news, and he blew his nose loudly between his fingers. But did I perhaps detect a slight change in the way he looked at me? Of course it was Richard, not I, who now took on all the fancy titles of Duke of Normandy and Count of Anjou and so forth. And already as the second son he had been styled Duke of Aquitaine, my mother's realm; I imagined Mother readily consoling herself for Henry's loss.

And then there was always Geoffrey: Henry without Henry's capabilities. He loved jousting and drinking and women—it turned out he was indeed not much good for anything else.

It was my Father who the following year got the idea of sending me to be "lord"—in Latin, *dominus*—of Ireland. So, boy that I was, he had his faithful William, William the Marshall, get together a group of knights and send me off to carry out my first adult task: to deal with the wild, rebellious Irishmen.

For they are indeed wild. They eat off leaves, they don't like to wear shoes or cut their hair. Or their beards. Everybody made a colossal fuss because a bunch of my boys, good fellows all, got to giggling over the whiskers on the Irish "nobles" who greeted us when we landed in Waterford. I'm nothing if not diplomatic when I can see it's called for. But if the Irish nobles, clods like the MacCarthys, the O'Brians, and so on, want to be taken seriously in the modern world, they can very well learn what a razor is and how to use one.

"Who's that hiding behind that bush?" I had asked my friend Gerard.

"I don't know, one of the O'Brians is missing, maybe he's the one concealed there somewhere, milord," said Gerard.

The bearded Conan O'Brian frowned and muttered something in Irish; it didn't sound very polite. Then he turned and stalked away on his dirty bare feet, his long curly locks swaying from side to side. So the wild Irishman didn't think our English joke was very humorous. Well, there you are! I thought at the time.

Our faithful assistant justiciar, Hugh de Lacy, slapped his glove repeatedly against his hand and frowned at me. "That could be trouble, Your Grace."

I wasn't used to being called "Your Grace," and I got excited, nervous, I experienced an unfamiliar feeling of power. I told de Lacy that we could handle any trouble these fellow could give us. I saw myself suddenly as a hero, the Pacifier of Ireland. I began to dream about building myself a palace in Dublin.

But I was wrong and de Lacy was right. Soon everywhere we went in Ireland we started to hear about complaints, unrest, cattle robberies. They told me I needed to send out punitive raiding parties into the countryside. We tried without much success to recruit help from our Norman barons. We ended up having to draft criminals and other riffraff to fill the ranks for our forays into the interior; then before we had even covered thirty miles, we'd find out that half our contingent had gone home or deserted to the enemy. And then all those Norman Irishmen who had failed us would complain to Father, who then went to William Marshall, who came and bawled me out in his well-bred way. Tsk, tsk. Tsk, tsk, he would say, shaking his head, his jowly cheeks wobbling.

And all this took place in 1185, when I was only just seventeen. In fact, most people, if not my father's pig-headed minions, would have seen that it was expecting too much of a lad my age, who despite everybody's good intentions had been clumsily raised in what I can see now was a rather sheltered environment.

It's true that I had been taught to ride, how to handle a sword and a lance, even how to make love to a woman. Ah Bridget, I should by rights have forgotten a sad little person like you. Despite your cheap perfume, you still smelled of the stable, but you were young and more or less innocent, I guess, and sweet. I loved the way your long brown hair fell down over your cute little breasts. Yes, sweet. At least your flesh was sweet enough to a boy who could hardly contain his erection without spilling his seed all over the straw floor of the castle storeroom. Thank you, William Marshall, for providing at least that part of my warrior's education. I'm sorry if I slapped you about too much, little Bridget. But after that bad start, when I came before I could get inside, I wasn't about to be cheated out of my first experience.

Anyway, Ireland was a nasty lesson but a key part of my education. I thought long about the treachery I had encountered there. I can promise you that after that I was never, never surprised by the double-dealing nature of mankind. And I made a vow to rely only on myself from then on. In the days that followed my return to England, I held my head high, I refused to be ashamed about the Irish debacle. After all, I realized that my father, who knew what was what, had sent me to Ireland because he trusted me but didn't trust our people over there. Indeed, a few years later in 1186, my father was about to send me back to Ireland. Affairs over there needed attention again when good old Hugh de Lacy found himself missing his head one day after an unfortunate encounter with a burly Irish axe man. Yes, I was waiting with my force of armed men at Chester, the fleet was ready to sail. To tell you the truth, however, I wasn't looking forward to the

Emerald Isle and facing those barbarians again. But then a miracle of sorts happened, and my father needed me at home. The miracle: my stupid brother Geoffrey got unhorsed in a tournament, and instead of giving up like a rational person and getting helped to his feet, defied his opponent and got himself trampled to death.

And now there were two.

Yes, the “miracle” of Geoffrey’s death had left just the two of us. Myself, and my heroic brother Richard. And our father, who was now getting to be old and showing it. We had all quarreled over lands and titles when there were four of us sons; you would think that with just two, there might be enough territory and status to go around. I certainly could have been happy enough in Richard’s place. But not my brother: his horizons were always limitless. He decided that he would insist on what he called his rights, and he looked for help in obtaining them where English malcontents often do—in France.

He tried to recruit me that spring of 1188 in the great hall at the palace in Angers. The hearth fire was burning merrily, but the dank wintry air still made me shiver.

“King Philip will help us get our rights, John,” he said earnestly, his large eyes glistening..

“If he isn’t too busy helping himself to whatever he can plunder from us,” I said.

For I wasn’t having any of it, not if it involved teaming up with Philip II of France. I had grown up knowing that Philip could be expected to continually cause trouble for both our realm and our family. I had not yet grasped the concept that Philip was to be the first great nemesis in my life; that realization would come soon enough. At any rate, in the fight that was shaping up, I chose to stick with my father, not with my rebellious brother. And the two of us might well have prevailed, except for the old man’s failing health.

“Son,” my father said to me at Fontevrault, just before the crisis in his last illness. “Be loyal to the family. You’ll find your real strength there—in the blood of your blood.”

The poor deluded fellow died shortly thereafter; now nothing could be done about it: the great King Henry was dead, and Richard ruled. Well, I was more than a little doubtful about my future at that point. In the stillness of the night, I squirmed in my bed and cursed my arrogance. I should have taken Richard’s part after all. Why hadn’t I changed sides before the old man died?

So I was apprehensive as I stood there that first time, in front of my brother the new king, as he sat proudly on the throne in the great chamber of the Tower. But he looked down on me benignly. “The past is over, Brother. All is forgiven. We are Plantagenets together now.” He not only forgave me, he gave me a new title and deeded some valuable properties to me!

Thank God, he had turned out to be a bigger fool than I!

Well, you might have thought that Richard would have been glad enough

to have been king—at last. But not him, he had other plans. He wanted to go off with his fine friend Philip to the crusades and gain untold glory by killing a lot of unsuspecting Saracens. So now he only planned to stay long enough in England to sell everything in sight in order to raise the money for his expedition to the Holy Land.

“I’d sell London, if I could,” he said once, his big reddish face creased with a self-satisfied smile.

Now. Richard appointed a clerk and a bishop to administer the kingdom in his absence; he also had to make some provision for the succession, in case some heathen in Palestine accidentally sliced off his head. Well, it turned out he didn’t trust me all *that* much. He was cautious enough to make my nephew, Geoffrey’s son, Arthur, his heir to the throne instead of me. But I wasn’t so worried about this naming of Arthur. Arthur was just a skinny little child and he was off out of the way in Brittany, playing tag or pick-up-sticks. Arthur’s only real asset in any power struggle was his mother, my harridan of a sister-in-law, Duchess Constance. On the other hand, *I* was in England, at the center of things, a grown man with money and lands, making many friends.

And since Richard vastly preferred boys to girls, I thought it likely that eventually, in the course of nature, I would become king the easy way.

Then, another miracle; or so it appeared at the time. Richard, instead of coming home from the Holy Land through Marseilles, decided he didn’t trust his old friend Philip after all and decided to avoid France and travel via the northern route. And—surprise—he got himself captured by the German emperor, who asked for a little item of 100,000 marks as ransom.

Who was going to come up with such a gigantic sum? I couldn’t believe the English people could or would. It seemed obvious to me that only someone like Philip of France might be able to raise the money. Well, I say it was obvious to me, but it wasn’t at first. I have to credit my little friend Clemence with showing me the way. The day she first mentioned his name, we were in bed, and she was rather pregnant with our daughter Joan—who, despite being illegitimate, has made quite a name for herself since then as the wife of that Welsh rascal Llywelyn. Anyway, Clemence this time was on top, moving quite nicely under the circumstances.

“Oh, sire.” She gasped.

“Yes, Clemence,” I said, a little short of breath myself.

“Philip—Oh—Philip.”

“Yesss, yesss,” I said, and then I came.

She collapsed, squishing her lovely breasts on my chest. She was a clever girl; Joan is too. Anyway, Clemence whispered in my ear that day that I shouldn’t let my distrust of the French king get in the way of saving my brother—and also keeping the French crown out of the lands that would someday be *my* realm. She was right, I knew it. So I swallowed my pride and my disgust at having to deal with the man I was gradually coming to picture as a nemesis. I made inquiries to

see if I could get Philip to supply the money to free Richard for his return to England. Philip would only do it for a price, of course.

Philip looked up at my agent from his backgammon game, his milk-white face sporting a grim smile. “The French crown would like to see the return of Normandy to the monarchy,” he said. Then he laughed.

I sent back word that maybe a section of Touraine would be more like it, or maybe a small slice of Gascony. And for making these reasonable suggestions, I was accused afterward by evil-spirited people of trying to sell out Richard, even of trying to bribe the emperor to hold him captive forever. Slander, that’s what it was, probably bruited about by Philip’s agents. I have only myself to blame for trusting that French beast even to the extent that I did then. Nemesis, indeed!

Then, despite all that had gone before, Philip didn’t come up with the money after all; he was a skinflint at heart, despite all the fine talk he was always spouting about the grandeur of France. Never mind: confounding expectations, the English people fully demonstrated their loyalty to the crown. Patriotism swept the land, orphans donated their groats, peddlers their pennies, rich men their marks and pounds. They all came through with money for the ransom, and my swollen-headed brother was returned to us.

A joyous day for England when he returned, of course. But a nervous time for me: I was sure that Richard had swallowed all the accusations about me that were floating around. So I was hard-pressed to keep my voice from quivering as I greeted him for the first time on his return, in the grand hall at Windsor, under the tapestry depicting an especially bloody boar hunt.

Richard, his long hair tucked under a gold coronet decorated with diamonds, surprised me by the heartiness of his welcoming kiss. His ruddy cheeks glowed with bonhomie. “John, I know you were misled. You are still almost a child. I forgive you heartily.” He smirked and preened himself, just like the empty-headed peacock he was.

“Oh, thank, you, thank you, Richard.” My left leg felt damp; I had been terrified of his possible wrath. Thank goodness the concept of *family* had won out once more in his mind! But as I left his presence, I knew I would never forget or forgive the humiliation I had just experienced.

So Richard ruled England again. But he loved fighting more than ruling, and he spent a good deal of time trying to beat recalcitrant vassals into submission. Fortunately for England, he carried out all his violent deeds of derring-do in France. I myself spent the next few years making friends, looking forward hopefully to the day when Richard, still childless, would pass the kingdom on to me.

Finally, one day in 1199, Richard neglected putting on his armor one day and received a fatal crossbow bolt in the neck. At last! The English barons, after some soul-searching, got together and proclaimed me king: a fourth son wins through to his place of glory. In France, however, those quarrelsome, short-sighted barons in Anjou and Touraine tried to put up Arthur for the throne

instead of me. Of course my cousin Philip happily went along with them. I had to raise an army and do battle with that French scoundrel's forces, and when it was over, I had secured my kingdom and all my French possessions—at the cost of ceding a few bits of territory to that criminal in Paris and paying him a good deal of money besides.

So I had won, but I was still a little uneasy about my nephew Arthur's being still at large. In fact, his harpy mother Constance—that nasty, foul-mouthed bitch—had taken him to hole up at the French court. From my point of view, that was a dangerous place for him to end up. Unfortunately for him, though, the French rashly decided to try their luck again. Within some months they were backing Arthur's claim once more, and soon I was once more at war with Philip and his new puppet, my nephew. Fortunately I was lucky enough during the fighting to be able to capture Arthur himself.

I greeted him in my palace in Rouen, in Normandy.

“Welcome, Nephew. I'll do my best to make you comfortable here.”

He was a good-looking lad, and he knew it. And no fool. Well, he was intelligent, but not clever, if you know what I mean. He smiled boldly at me.

“If right were being done, it would be I sitting in your chair, Uncle.” He really was a charming-looking boy, he had whitish blonde hair and a winning smile. But what a cheeky idiot!

“I'm sure you would have been very decorative in this seat, Arthur. But as it happens, you are there and I am here.”

“My uncle Philip will ransom me, and then we'll see.”

“You young fool,” said Gerard, my faithful factotum. I didn't blame Gerard for getting annoyed. Arthur was a most maddening young idiot.

I wagged a finger at Arthur. “Oh no, I don't think I will give up your company for any price. No, not for five hundred thousand marks.”

Yes, I made a vow right then that he would only leave that castle feet first. And I kept my word. One day some months later, one of his insolent remarks finally got to me, and I struck him with my mailed glove, several times. He didn't move afterward, and I don't know whether those blows finished him off, or whether he was even dead by the time my men tossed him into the river, but he had certainly joined the angelic choir by the time his body floated on down to the sea.

So I did away with that particular threat to the Angevin domains.

He shouldn't have talked to me that way.

The Scribe Has His Doubts

Wait a minute, wait a minute! At this point in the MS, I said to myself, I could certainly put up with quite a bit of violence and ruthless behavior, but really! I thought the whole idea of this project was to improve John's karma coefficient over on the Other Side. But what did we have here? First Rupert and the golden chains, then Osbert with his body all chopped down to size, and now

Arthur getting knocked around with the mailed fist. And frankly, I wasn't too happy about Bridget's getting slapped around either; but I could see that a macho man like John wouldn't know what I was talking about on that one. Still, the idea of bringing up all this brutality! What could John have possibly been thinking? I needed to talk to him—badly.

But having a talk with the king depended on finding a means of communication. He could e-mail me, but as his e-mails announced in the warning message at the bottom, I wasn't allowed to send a reply.

For a long time I was stumped. Then I thought: he found me, he knows what I do, what language I speak (and don't speak). He also knew where to find me even if I didn't know where to find him. So I posted what I had written so far of the memoir on my Ramsay website and waited.

It took three weeks, I don't know why so long, but I suppose time is seen differently on the Other Side. Anyway, I was ready to despair, but suddenly an e-mail arrived in my inbox. As before, no cloak-and-dagger stuff at all, it was signed with his name, and it went straight to the point:

E-mail

Dear Scribe:

I am having difficulty restraining my impatience. "If thine eye offend thee, pluck it out"; and stupid Rupert, treacherous Osbert, and arrogant, grasping Arthur were all worth less than one small mote in either of my eyes. One must be harsh with one's enemies, that's the way of the world, that's the only way for a strong man to survive. Restrict yourself to doing the writing, Mr. Ramsay; you're obviously not competent to judge the actions of great monarchs.

John, Rex Angliae

Well, take that, I thought. Told me off, didn't he? I was finding out that it was going to be no picnic collaborating with an autocrat, no indeed! I'd do well to think twice before I spoke up again, I could see that. I was really annoyed.

I pulled up my little wire book holder and took out the next page of the Ye Olde Frenche translation. "At the space of several years, by 1204, the most vicious Philip...contrived a deception..." I took a glance at the absurd wording and suddenly lost heart. I got up from my desk and opened the door to the outside. The night was warm and there was no fog for a change. The stars were bright. I could see Jupiter in the southern sky, right in the heart of Taurus. I thought about the king, out there on the Other Side, beyond Jupiter, beyond the red star Betelgeuse, millions of light years away. But then, I had been trained as a physicist, and I realized, that according to Einstein, the universe was finite but unbounded, analogous to the surface of a globe in two dimensions. If one went out there far enough you'd eventually end up right back here! No, it was obvious the Other Side wasn't out there. It could have been anywhere—or nowhere.

Indeed, as far as I knew for certain, the Other Side could have been just some phenomenon of cyberspace. The mystery persisted.

Well. Those thoughts made me look at the garbled mess of prose sitting by my computer in a fresh light. Wherever that domineering, stubborn intelligence was located, its story was worth telling. Talk about unique! At last I felt that I was onto a project that the critics, bless them, wouldn't find it so easy to despise.

I put aside my resentment and returned to my task.

John's Memoir (continued)

A few years later, in 1204, that crafty fiend Philip managed to trick me into losing the gem of our French possessions, Normandy. He suborned several of my Norman barons—the Norman is notoriously avaricious—and they surrendered their castles and towns to him. And then he undertook to wage a campaign in the winter time! No one campaigns in the winter. It's almost un-Christian; nobody would do it but a blackguard like Philip. And then, there were my precious English barons! I tried to raise an emergency force in England to relieve the siege of the vital fortress of Chateau Gaillard, and what happened?

"We won't send our knights on a campaign overseas, not again," said the earl of Sussex, twirling his long, curly mustache.

"You owe the service to me personally as Duke of Normandy, not to England as such."

The earl of Huntington threw up his hands. "*My* lands are all in England. But I might be able to raise a force for service in the home counties, later in the year."

"I'll accept a money fine instead," I said. In fact, I preferred if he would pay a scutage, that is, a fine so that I could hire mercenary troops.

Huntingdon shook his head, waving his beringed hand. "We've already paid scutage twice in the last four years. Excessive, quite excessive. Your father never did such things."

Furious, I dismissed them. I knew that my father's vassals would have done their duty when the realm was in danger. But not my cowardly, traitorous barons.

Predictably, Chateau Gaillard fell, and eventually Normandy with it.

But I'll have it back yet, I will, I will. Yes, indeed, Philip!

Well, in 1206 I finally got a little revenge; I tweaked that devil's nose! I landed an expedition at La Rochelle, routed the local louts, and promptly managed to repossess my territories in the south. My ambassador told me that he encountered the great Philip Augustus in his bath, having his back soaped. His long brown hair was drawn up in a fine net—he was renown for fussing over his personal appearance.

"Why doesn't he go home to England and abandon his pathetic efforts to hold onto French provinces?" He slapped at the bath water in a pettish rage. "It's ridiculous to have half of my country subject to the English king."

My ambassador stopped and tried to think what to say. “But he has his feudal rights, Monseigneur.”

Philip sniffed through his misshapen aquiline nose. “Oh, bother! Let him try to enforce his rights—if he can.”

So, my fine friend Philip, I did enforce them—at least some of them. I may not have recovered Normandy and Anjou, but I did get back my mother’s realms in Poitou. People always used to tell me some things couldn’t be done. Poitou couldn’t be recovered. Gascony was lost—irretrievably, they said. No, no, no! It has always infuriated me to have ordinary people trying to tell me what was possible and what was not. How do they dare to tell me, John, grandson of Matilda the Empress, that something can or cannot be done? Enough! Enough! How much must one suffer from the unwashed and the ignorant!

I *can* say that it was my bad luck to have had so many powerful enemies. But really, when it comes down to it, what can you expect? When a person has extraordinary abilities, naturally all the idiots and cretins in the world are going to jump in and start criticizing and questioning every action.

Peter Fowler, who used to be a clerk of mine, called me The Spider. (Not to my face, however.) He was referring to my intelligence network as well as to what he thought of as my ruthlessness. I had Peter removed, permanently removed, shortly after I had heard that that cobwebby sobriquet had been going the rounds. In the first place, I thought Peter was stealing from the accounts—and besides, I certainly couldn’t be seen to countenance his defamatory and seditious speech. I must say, however, I didn’t object to the name he gave me that much, not really. I admire spiders and the way they work. They work hard. And they kill effectively—when they have to. Spiders have their virtues. And spiders survive—just as rulers like me survive. We leaders of men make our own fates, I do firmly believe.

I certainly don’t curse fate for entangling me with the second great nemesis of my life, Pope Innocent III. A superior person like me must expect to be plagued from time to time with maddening individuals like this pope. Of course Innocent, *né* Lothario di Segni, considered himself quite a superior person, no doubt of it. Superior for a pope, I suppose he was, but that’s not saying all that much.

At any rate, Innocent saw that the church had gradually acquired the potential for power, and only needed some strong man like himself to take charge and put lay princes like me in their place. He engineered the consecration of Stephen Langton as Archbishop of Canterbury, the primate of *my* kingdom, in defiance of my express wishes—Langton, a miserable little ferret, a man I hated. When I heard about it, I sent word that Langton had better not try to set foot on English soil, or I’d have him thrown back into the sea.

For my defiance, that devil wearing the crown of St. Peter put the kingdom under an interdict for the next seven years. I could picture him, that hook-nosed degenerate glutton, sending off his interdict from his golden throne in the

Lateran Palace and then ordering an extra tub of lampreys and a half dozen ortolans for his dinner.

All my enemies predicted disaster: no church services, no church weddings or funerals. But the joke was on the church. For what do you suppose happened to the vast revenues of the church in England during all that time? Why they came straight into the royal treasury, of course. Surprise, Your Holiness!

Eventually, however, the time came for me to make it up with the church. Now I would be talking about events in the year 1213, when my political troubles came to a head. I had been making ready a big expedition to put the Welsh prince Llywelyn in his place. Llywelyn, a husky blond giant, was a genius of a ruler in a pathetic country full of mountains and bumpkins. I had tried to keep him close to my bosom—I had even given him in marriage my daughter Joan, whom I dearly loved. But he and I had inevitably had our differences, and there had been the need to put him in his place from time to time; now was one of those times. So I had been gathering a large force at Nottingham to lead into the wilds of Wales. I had just had the not-too-unpleasant duty of hanging twenty-eight hostages that Llywelyn had given me.

(People criticize me for killing hostages; but I ask you, what are hostages for, after all? And I wasn't needlessly harsh, like for instance Prince Llywelyn himself, who, it was rumored, liked to castrate his prisoners with his own hands.)

Suddenly one evening at dinner in Nottingham, surrounded by my barons, I got a letter from Llywelyn's wife, my dear daughter Joan.

"Most honored father, I must draw your most urgent attention to news I have that there is a plot by a group of your barons to have you killed during the first battle with the Welsh forces..."

Well. I remember I was eating jellied eels, one of my favorite dishes. I was so astonished, I dropped a piece of eel into my wine cup and the wine splashed into my eye. Grabbing a cloth from my squire and wiping my face off, I looked around at the faces of the men dining with me and tried to read their minds. Everywhere I could see the averted eyes and furrowed brows of deviousness and hypocrisy.

Robert FitzWalter turned his big fat, jowly face away and avoided my gaze. Eustace of Vesci, with his rat-like countenance, faced me boldly. "Some bad news, sire?"

"Perhaps," I said, hearing my own voice tremble in anger—and fear. And I caught Vesci with a half-smirk on his repulsive little swarthy face.

I immediately called off the expedition; I didn't need to make things easy for my enemies; and I never again trusted any of those at that table.

So I beg leave to introduce the third great nemesis in my life. You've already met them. For this nemesis is not one person, it's a class. My barons. First, and foremost in treason, are my Norman barons—may they rot in hell. And second, but perhaps first in overall self-seeking and deviousness, are a number—too many—of my English baronage.

So there I was in late 1213. I had nemesis number three, the barons, who I had good reason to believe were continually plotting against me. At that point, nemesis number one, King Philip, got it into his head to try to conquer England. What hubris! I was sure he'd never follow through on it; but it turned out he was serious enough to start to gather together an army and a fleet of ships. At this point I didn't need Clemence to tell me that I had better settle things with nemesis number two, Pope Clement. By this time the Holy Father had gone so far as to excommunicate me. *That* was politically dangerous, because it gave any ambitious subjects of mine an excuse to try to overthrow me.

So I now offered to accept Langton as archbishop after all. I did even more. I submitted my kingdom of England to become a fief of the Holy See. People were astonished, I was giving up my sovereignty to Innocent.

But of course I really wasn't. His papal sovereignty was all theoretical; Innocent had no army to enforce his will. All that happened was that the pope took me under his protection. Now my other nemesis Philip couldn't invade England: we were a feudatory of Rome. And even better, the pope sent me a legate who told Langton to toe the line and accept my recommendations for benefices: the Holy Father's loyal vassal John was to be accommodated in all things. What a joke on all concerned!

Unfortunately, the papal initiative helped, but it did not solve my problems with the barons. They still wanted to struggle with me over their "rights," that is, translated, my money—they didn't like paying the fees and duties that were due me as their sovereign. And the excuse they used to work up their indignation was poor old William de Briouze.

William had once been one of my most faithful and deserving friends and supporters. As the years went on, however, he became much too conscious of his own deserts. It finally became a question of who was to be master.

My nobles were always badgering me to borrow money. Briouze had ended up owing me many thousands of marks. At one time I had asked for family members to be handed over as hostages to secure the loan. They told me that his wife, Matilda, a rather handsome blonde but a decidedly loud-voiced shrew, said: "I will not deliver my two sons to the man who foully murdered his nephew Arthur." A mouthy female, indeed.

For the moment I had been stymied by Matilda de Briouze's stubbornness. Later, however, when Briouze tried to take back some castles he had pawned to me as security, I was able to take that obnoxious woman and her charming young red-headed older son into custody. When the father continued to defy me, I called his bluff. I didn't hang his wife and son, but I admit I may have neglected their feeding. In fact, later people started rumors that they found Matilda's dead body next to her son's and that she had been gnawing on his wrist. Imagine! What a barbarous imagination my enemies have!

Toward the end of 1214, FitzWalter and Vesci gathered together a group of discontented noblemen. The two of them recounted the story of the Briouzes and

frightened the others into believing that something like that could well happen to them next. The barons, panicked and desperate, sent me a demand that I grant them a charter to protect their “rights.”

Oh, I have always been misunderstood; I’ve also been too lenient with those who have misunderstood me. I tried all last winter and spring to assuage the concerns of the dissident barons. But despite the fact that the soreheads were only a minority, my forbearance gave them a chance to take control of London and eventually I had to compromise. This last June, I had to sign that arrogant and ridiculous document, the Magna Carta, not only giving them their “rights”—which meant taking away some of *my* rights—but agreeing to set up a council of barons to “help” me run the country.

William Marshall, to his credit, was appalled by the “great charter.” “This is the end of the monarchy!” he expostulated, his eyes bulging in dismay.

Not my monarchy, I said to myself, because I was already thinking of ways of getting around this latest effort of the mediocre to dominate the exceptional.

Well, the Magna Carta was signed in June, and now it’s October. In the meantime I have tried to work with the malcontents, but the result has been chaos. They call me unforgiving and ruthless, but I invite my critics to see how patient I’ve been with these madmen—to my dismay and to the distress of the realm.

Now at last I think I’ve checkmated them. My inspiration about subjecting the kingdom to the pope has again worked out magnificently. Innocent has just sent out a letter annulling the Magna Carta and excommunicating Vesci and FitzWalter and the other rebels. And I am about to call up the levies and mount a major campaign to settle this thing once and for all. My other nemesis, Philip, is making noises about sending an invasion force to help the rebels. Well, I’m ready for him too. I am John, King of England, Duke of Normandy and Aquitaine. And English barons, arrogant popes, and royal French meddlers to the contrary, I will be king till I die.

Aftermath

That is the end of the memoir that King John gave to me, translated from computerese into what I hope is acceptable English. It wasn’t originally dated, but it appears to end sometime in late 1215. I can fill you in briefly on what happened after that.

It’s true that the agreement with his barons that became known as the Magna Carta eventually became the foundation stone of the English constitution. Eventually. But at the time, it was the success of the barons that turned out to be illusory. The main article of the charter, putting a council of barons in charge of the government, was never implemented. And after the Pope declared that the entire charter was null and void and all good Catholics were not to recognize it, John started an all-out campaign against the rebels and their French allies.

Following a year of struggle, he was on the point of crushing the opposition. Then fate—or something else—intervened.

Here I was interested to look at Shakespeare's take on the final act of John's story. Examining the last scenes in his play "King John," I found that in Act 5, Scene 7, the playwright posits that a villainous monk had gotten to the king, apparently in revenge for John's looting of the monasteries:

K. John. Ay, marry, now my soul hath elbow-room.
It would not out at windows or at doors.
There is so hot a summer in my bosom,
That all my bowels crumble up to dust:
I am a scribbled form drawn with a pen
Upon a parchment, and against this fire
Do I shrink up.

P. Henry. How fares your majesty?

K. John. Poisoned—ill fare: dead, forsook, cast off,
Nor let my kingdom's rivers take their course
Through my burned bosom nor entreat the north
To make his bleak winds kiss my parched lip
And comfort me with cold....I do not ask you much,
I beg cold comfort; and you are so strait
And so ingrateful, you deny me that.

P. Henry. O, that there were some virtue in my tears,
That might relieve you!

K. John. The salt in them is hot
Within me is a hell, and there the poison
Is, as a fiend, confined to tyrannize
On unreprievable condemned blood.
..... [the king dies]

Most historians believe that the problem was food poisoning, not monk poisoning—or even that it was just serious overindulgence at a local banquet. In either case, the consequences were the same: John died in October 1216. John died but—after a period of anarchy—the barons that had opposed him eventually united behind his son Henry III. On the other hand, despite John's successful scheming to undo the barons' work, a great many of the features of the rejected Magna Carta were codified during the following years of Henry's reign and have been recognized as the basis of English law ever since.

Such is the best I can do with my “true” history of King John, who in his memoir describes himself as The Spider. I make no representations that John is telling the whole story here, of course. In particular, I wondered why he omitted entirely his marriage to Isabelle of Angouleme, a hot-headed little thirteen-year old beauty he stole away from Hugh, Count of Lusignan; Hugh was a bad sport about it and started a troublesome revolt against the English. Furthermore, it was rumored that John later got wrapped up in diddling with the fiery Isabelle when he should have been organizing the defense of Normandy. But I suppose no man tells all in his memoirs. Lord knows he told plenty; his memoir certainly had done little enough in helping me in my task of showing the family in a good light.

At any rate, publicizing the memoir, whatever its faults or virtues, was supposed to be just the beginning of my writing task. I gathered that John wanted me to trace the threads of silk in his web down through the centuries, right down to me, insignificant commoner that I am.

It suddenly occurred to me that he might have not told me his entire plan. Maybe he was working through other writers in other locations or generations to explore other threads of the web. Certainly he had had plenty of time to carry out such an elaborate scheme. But for me it really didn't matter. I had enough problems just dealing with all the people in all the generations between him and me. And that was not counting duplications from intermarriage: my daughters' researches had indeed suggested that the blood (DNA) of King John descended to me through quite a number of “silken trails.” I couldn't possibly cover all those descendants—so how could I adequately tell the “truth” that he wanted?

One thing was, it would be kind of lame to just look at clumps of ancestors all living at about the same time. It made sense for me to merely sample the centuries, examining, say, one descendant of John in each era down to the present. That narrowed my choices from roughly millions of individuals down to thousands, I guessed: a small bit of progress, right? And that way I could see, along the way, how the family dealt with some of the big historical events of the millennium, like the War of the Roses or the American Revolution.

Anyway, I had the memoir. Where did I go from there? A good question, and one I needed to ask him. I also had some other things I wanted to discuss with the king, like the contents of the memoir itself.

In particular, John had blown me off once about the cruelty quotient—but still. I had crept away, humbled, after suffering the wintry blast of his invective, but now I had second thoughts in a big way. I mean, since then he had added more disturbing material, first the incident with Peter Fowler, and then the horrible business of the Briouze mother and son in the dungeon. John could pull rank of me and tell me to stick to my last; but I was human too*, and if he wasn't going to even attempt a bit of self-examination, I didn't see much future in this

* In a technical sense, more human than someone on the Other Side.

manuscript. I needed some concession on his part, even a little one, some sign that he could show some compassion for his victims and contrition for his sins.

I also wanted to see if he had any comments on my editing and any remarks on his last months of life and Shakespeare's version of them.

I had the system now for getting in touch with him. I posted the complete rewritten memoir, together with my "Aftermath" section, to my website. This time the e-mail was in my inbox the next morning.

To start out with, John's e-mail had some tart things to say about my editing job: "The treatment of the Holy See is so slipshod as to be criminal" was one good one. And my admittedly imaginative reconstruction of the scene with his mistress came in for comment too ("I would never describe an intimate encounter with such vulgarity...").

There was a lot more like that. Since I believe that in the vast majority of the cases I had interpreted the gist of the bungled "computer translation" correctly enough, there is no need to go into the whole matter of his nitpicking here—he had numerous comments on wording. In theory, I take the point of view that the memoir is John's. It's whatever he says it is. Nevertheless, I have not slavishly caved into his objections. On the other hand, I *have* made many corrections to my original draft to take his e-mail comments into account. So the reader need not be bothered about this issue—what you read above has already been largely restated as he wished it to be.

As far as the end of his life was concerned, he had this to say:

"You have described it more or less correctly. My enemies were confounded, and it was my ill fortune that I did not live to see my full triumph over them. As far as the whole Magna Carta business is concerned, however, I must protest that I was all for the liberties of an Englishman, and there too I was misunderstood. I merely stood against the unfettered rule of the more aggressive nobles, that is all."

On Shakespeare he said the following:

"Your playwright's scene is absolutely ridiculous. His imagination smacks of the vulgar; he can't have come from a good family. In the first place, most of the monks were cowards, and even the ones that were not slavishly followed the policies of my friend the Pope. Somebody else, not a monk, could have poisoned me; how do I know? But I did *not* overeat. Absolutely not. I loved food, but only in moderate quantities. I was not a pig! And I was not a whining coward when I did take sick—whether from bad food or unnatural poisons. I died with courage—you, my descendant, should have more faith in me!"

But perhaps the most useful thing the king said was about the projected continuation of the manuscript. "You can't cover everyone: make a selection, show off some of the promising members of the family, use your good judgment. And intuition, always intuition!"

"And to start with, why don't you take a look at my granddaughter? Joan's daughter, that is, the Welsh girl. I only saw her once, when she was quite small,

but I've heard good things about her. Puff her up a bit, show how her virtues stemmed from my strengths. She's been ignored by the chronicles—of course women usually are, with some exceptions like my mother. My granddaughter was the dam for a whole brood of the Mortimers—and some of them turned out to be *stupores mundi*. Of course they were hated by some people—the best people always are, you know. So don't let that stop you. *En avant*—can you handle that much French, Bill?"

He closed it with "Keep me informed, Johannes Rex."

I had my marching orders. Now I just had to see if I could keep in step with the demands of the story, whatever that turned out to be. I still wasn't absolutely sure of the *why* of this project—but I was getting an idea of the *what*.

It was only later, after I'd awakened in the middle of the night, a full moon shining on my face through the Venetian blinds, that I realized: John hadn't answered any of my concerns over his ruthless actions as a monarch. He had ignored the key question I had posed. "Next time," I vowed. I was going to set the record straight, and he was going to have to deal with that part of his past. If he didn't like being called "the Evil King John," he was going to have to face up to a thing or two.