A Hollow Crown

Helen Hollick

Chapter 1

April 1002 - Canterbury

Emma was uncertain whether it was a growing need to visit the privy, or the remaining queasiness of mal de mer, seasickness, that was making her feel so utterly dreadful. Or was it the man waiting at the top of the steps? The way he was looking at her, with the intensity of a hunting hawk, that was so unsettling? A man she had never seen until this moment, who was four and thirty years to her thirteen, spoke a language she barely understood and who, from the morrow, was to be her wedded husband.

Spring. Three days after the celebration of the Easter Mass, in the year of Christ 1002. Her brother had agreed this marriage of alliance between England and his Duchy of Normandy for reasons of his own gain. Richard ruled Normandy, and his brood of sisters, with an iron will that imaged their father's ruthless determination. Their father, Richard's namesake, Emma had adored. Her brother, who thought only of his self-advancement, and little else, she did not.

Her long fingers, with their bitten, uneven nails, rested with a slight tremble on Richard's left hand. Unlike her, he appeared calm and unperturbed as they ascended the flight of stone steps leading up to the great open-swung doors of the Cathedral of Canterbury. But why would Richard not be at ease? It was not he, after all, who was to wed with a stranger and be crowned as England's Queen.

With unbound, unveiled fair hair and her large shining eyes, Emma was passably pretty, but she was aware that Æthelred, surveying her from the top of the steps, was assessing that her legs were too long, her nose too large, her chin too pointed. Her breasts and hips not full and rounded. Her eldest sister had laughed when Emma had confided that she feared this Æthelred, King of England, would be disappointed with her.

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'Please him in bed, ma chérie, and no husband will ever be disappointed with a young bride!'

Emma had not been convinced.

The drizzling rain had eased as the Norman entourage had ridden through Canterbury's gates, the swaths of mist, hanging across the Kent countryside like ill-fitted curtaining, not deterring the common folk from running out of their hovels to inspect her. England and the English might not hold much liking for the Normans and their sea-roving Viking cousins, but still they had laughed and applauded as she rode by; had strewn blossom and spring-green, new-budded branches in her path. They wanted peace, an end to the incessant í-víking raiding and pirating, to the killing and bloodshed. If a union between England and Normandy was the way to achieve it, then God's good blessings be upon the happy couple.

Whether this marriage would be of lasting benefit and achieve that ultimate aim, no one yet knew. The Northmen, with their lust for plunder and going í-víking, were not easy to dissuade and the substantial wealth of England had been, for many years, a potent lure. For a while, though, when the Duke, in consequence of this wedding, denied them winter access to his Norman harbours the raiders would search elsewhere for their ill-gotten gain or stay at home. Unless, of course, they elected to offer Richard a higher incentive than the one King Æthelred of England had paid.

If Emma minded being so blatantly used for political gain, it was of no consequence to anyone. Except to Emma herself.

Æthelred was stepping forward, reaching out to take her hand, a smile on his face, crow's-foot lines wrinkling at his eyes. She took in his sun-weathered, leathery face and fair, curling hair that tumbled to his shoulders, a moustache trailing down each side of his mouth to run into a trimmed beard with flecks of grey hair grizzling through it. She sank into a deep reverence, bending her head to hide the heat of crimson that was suddenly flushing into her cheeks. At her side, Richard snorted, disgruntled that she should be greeted before himself. He had not wanted to escort her to England, had vociferously balked at meeting face to face with this English King.

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'I would not trust a man involved in the murder of his own brother to gain the wearing of a crown, any further than I could spew him.' How often had Richard proclaimed that opinion on the dreadful sea crossing? If they were his thoughts about this King, then why, in the name of sweet Jesu, had he arranged for Emma to wed him? Why was she here, feeling awkward and uncertain, fearing to look up at the man who would soon be bedding her and taking her innocence of maidenhood?

Non, Richard had not wanted to come to England, but he had wanted to ensure that the agreed terms were fully honoured. Dieu! To collect and count the dowry! He needed the financial gain and the respectability this absurd marriage would bring. Needed the prestige of having his youngest sister wed to one of the wealthiest kings in all Europe.

What if Æthelred was ugly? What if his breath and body stank worse than a six-month uncleaned pigpen? What if he does not like me? The questions had tumbled round and round in Emma's mind these three months since being told of the arrangement; had haunted her by night and day. She knew she had to be wed, Richard had been insistent on good marriages for all his sisters and it was a woman's duty to be a wife, to bear sons for her lord. Either that or drown in the monotonous daily misery of the nunnery. There would be no abbess's veil for Richard's sisters, though, he needed the alliances, the silver and the land. Normandy was a new young Duchy with no family honour or pride to fall back upon, only the hope of a future, which Richard was too impatient to wait for. This Emma understood on the very day that their father had died and Richard had set the Duke's golden circlet to the short-cropped hair on his head. Richard wanted all he could get and he wanted it not tomorrow or next year, but now. One by one her sisters had been paired to noble marriages, but they were all so much older than Emma. She had not expected to be bargained away so soon.

From somewhere she had to gather the courage and dignity to look up, to smile at Æthelred . . . she clung to the talisman of her mother's last parting words, as if they were a cask of holy relics: 'No matter how ill, how frightened or how angry you might be, child, censure your feelings. Smile. Hold your chin high, show only pride, nothing else. Fear and tears are to be kept private. You are to be crowned and anointed as Queen of England. The wife and mother of kings. Remember that.'

She took a breath, swallowed. Looked up at the man standing before her. Looked at Æthelred, who was to be her husband, and knew, instantly, that she disliked him.

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