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King of the Wood

Written by Valerie Anand

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KING *of the* WOOD

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This book is for

KATE MORTON

who helped so much with the research and who, from the
beginning, cheered the project on.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

According to *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, King William II of England, otherwise known as William Rufus, was shot dead with an arrow by one of his own men, while hunting in the New Forest on 2nd August 1100.

This is all that is known for sure about his death. Whether it was accident or murder remains a mystery. If the latter, there is more than one possible murderer. A man called Walter Tirel, Count of Poix, who was visiting the court, is popularly credited with loosing the fatal arrow, whether intentionally or not, and, if the latter, whether on his own behalf or that of someone else.

Other names have been mentioned. Tirel's brother-in-law Gilbert Clare, Earl of Tonbridge, is thought by some to have been involved, with arranging Tirel's escape if nothing else. Gerald of Wales, writing many years later, also names a man called Ranulf des Aquis as having been concerned. He was writing in Latin and 'Ralph des Aix' is a reasonable Anglo-French rendering of the name. I have christened my character accordingly. For bringing Ranulf des Aquis (and much else besides) to my notice, acknowledgements go to Duncan Grinnell-Milne's informative book, *The Killing of William Rufus*.

The place where William Rufus is traditionally said to have died is near a small community called Canterton. At

the time of the Domesday Book this was known as Chenna's Tun, which is the name I have used. Similarly, Truham was the eleventh century name for the district now called Fritham Plain.

I am indebted to the historian Catherine Morton for her theory about the real nature of the relationship between William Rufus and Count Helias of Maine. Their recorded exchanges have an intense quality which is extremely puzzling, except in the light of this theory.

I am also indebted to Professor Frank Barlow, for patiently answering queries about Count Helias, and above all, for the goldmine of information in his biography of William Rufus.

Finally, the rare commodity which Richard Debrouillard grows on his manor was known in England before the Conquest but then faded out and was not officially reintroduced until the 14th century. But it continued to be known in Cornwall and who is to say that in England no entrepreneur ever tried producing it between the 11th and 14th centuries? My thanks go to the Spice Bureau for their helpful advice on this subject.

PROLOGUE

His story ended on an August evening, in the forest. The trees were in the dark green leaf of mature summer, and shafts of golden light from a declining sun slanted through the boughs. To look westwards was to be dazzled. The air was soft. Almost, one could hear the earth breathing deeply in gratitude for the warmth of this fine day after a long affliction of rain.

And then: the shaft that came out of the sun but was not made of light. And under the trees where a moment ago had been a calm and lovely evening, with a stag in antler running superb and graceful through it, there was squalid pain, and death.

That was the end of the story. But the beginning?

Ralph des Aix sometimes thought about that beginning. It seemed that one could trace cause and effect back for ever. Yet there were certain events, concerning different people in places far apart which although small in themselves, were nevertheless like the seeds from which grew the forest where William Rufus died.

Perhaps, Ralph thought - a little wryly, since he was himself involved - the earliest seeds were planted in 1068, when two boy-children were born. (There were girl-children too, but Edith and Sybil came later.)

One of the boys was the future Henry I, brother of William

Rufus who was king before him, both being sons of that stark ruler William Duke of Normandy and King, by conquest, of England. Henry was born in Winchester, the only one of the Conqueror's children to come into the world after their father became a king. It was a bad labour, so report said and, although Queen Matilda survived, there were no more babies.

The other child was Ralph himself and he was born in Normandy, the second son of a man called Peter Longshanks and he too gave his mother trouble as he forced his way into the light.

So much trouble, in fact, that unlike Queen Matilda, she did not survive.

And that, as it turned out, was important.

PART I

IN WHICH THE SEEDS ARE
PLANTED 1068-1087 AD

1087-1091 AD

- | | |
|-------|-------------------------------|
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ONE

Untimely Death

1068-73

Peter Longshanks' second son came as an unwelcome surprise. Peter was nearly fifty when Ralph made his disruptive appearance, and his wife was well past forty. Their elder boy was twelve and Cecile had not conceived in all those years.

Who, Longshanks asked himself as he stood in the upper room under the slanting rafters, looking down on his wife's still face, would have expected this?

The sun, shining through a roof louvre, showed the dancing dust motes. Seeing them made him angry, for they looked as if they were alive, while Cecile was not.

He was going to be lonely. He had been that, he admitted, even while she was alive. But now it would be worse.

His home was in southern Normandy but he was not a Norman. Peter Longshanks was English. He had followed his exiled lord to Normandy, long ago. But when the lord made up the quarrel which had sent him into exile, and went home, Longshanks had stayed behind.

He had stayed because by then he was married and

Cecile, cut off from her smallholding and her own language, would have been far more lost in England than he was in Normandy. She had married him believing that he would remain with her on the holding of Aix, and he would not break even an unspoken agreement, not when it would cause her so much anguish.

But he had suffered. Cecile had limitations. She was dumpy and swarthy and her conversation was restricted to practical matters. 'I think the pig is ready for killing.' 'Reggie is growing out of his tunics.' 'Peter, I think I'm *enceinte* again . . .'

She had spoken only Norman-French and he had never known, until his English lord had gone, how much one's own language meant. Even the dullest remarks would have sounded like music, if he could have heard them in English.

But she had cared for him and Reggie, worked like a demon to make the holding productive. She had tried hard to be company for him; she had *bothered* about him. He drew the rug over her face and turned away to descend the ladder to the ground floor, trying not to cry. It wouldn't bring her back. Only, he would not have thought her going could leave him so desolate.

The room below was sunny and spacious. Aix was an old name borne by many places large and small and most of them had springs of good water. The local priest, who was interested in such matters, said that the Romans had settled in these districts, being appreciative of the springs for bathing (he didn't approve of too much bathing himself and managed to make it sound like a dubious heathen practice). He thought the name Aix had something to do with Aqua, the Latin word for water.

Peter thought he was right, for Aix had a fine spring, and in one corner of the paved downstairs room there were traces of mosaic. As he stepped off the ladder, he saw that the sun

was picking out the bright chips of purple and pale green. The floor was clean because Cecile had swept it only half an hour before her pains began. The need to grieve overwhelmed him and he blundered, eyes flooding, to a stool, ignoring the two people who were already in the room - three, if one counted the child in the cradle. The others were the midwife, who was clucking over the mewling newborn bundle which was his son, and the priest, who had given Cecile the last rites and baptised the baby, just in case, though the brat seemed healthy enough, Peter thought with bitterness, burying his face in his hands.

But although he didn't want to be pestered with any of them, it was clear after a few moments that something was expected of him. The priest was clearing his throat. Peter raised his head and became aware that somebody was missing. 'Where's Reggie?'

'We sent him to the village,' said the priest. 'The child needs milk. We have sent for Elise.'

'*Elise?* Without asking me?'

'There is no choice,' said the priest shortly. This female, carnal matter embarrassed him. 'As the goodwife here says, there is no one else who will do.'

'But *Elise!* And where did her baby come from, I'd like to know? Devil's spawn, if the tales are true. They say she's a witch.'

'That won't affect the milk,' said the midwife, 'or if it do, there's no help for it. There ain't no one else.'

'And no proof of sorcery, either,' put in the priest. 'That's just the talk of jealous old women.' He did not like or trust women, but he did his duty by his female parishioners and was shrewd enough about their mistreatment of one another. 'A widow with a pretty face is easily led into sin, and there's a good few without pretty faces, who'd like the chance! So

tongues clack. They'll say anything. They'd do better to say their prayers instead. And Elise'd do better to marry again.'

'Well, don't look at me,' said Longshanks.

The priest looked through the open door instead. 'Here's Reggie with Elise now.'

Longshanks sighed and then, because he sensed that they thought he should, he went across to the cradle and looked at his new offspring. The comment about clacking tongues had reminded him of something. There had been just one real cause of dispute between himself and Cecile. She wouldn't let him teach Reggie to speak English. She'd feel shut out, she said, if father and son got to chattering in some foreign tongue.

Well, he could teach this new child, Ralph, to speak it. He could learn from babyhood.

It was a plan for the future, something to look forward to, that he could think of as important. It made him feel a little better. He turned quite amiably to greet the woman Elise as Reggie brought her in, thinking that after all, the spare-time occupations of Ralph's wet-nurse were hardly of any consequence.

He was wrong.

By the autumn of 1073, Ralph des Aix was five years old. Over in England, the Conqueror's last-born son Henry had also turned five and was in the process additionally of turning into a handful.

The royal hunting lodge at Brockenhurst in Hampshire had belonged to the Conqueror's predecessors and was English in construction. This meant that its fortifications were derisory by Norman standards until King William ordered a moat to be dug round it, and also that it was built of timber. It was conventional for its Norman users to

comment disdainfully on its rusticity. But more than a few of them secretly admired the subtle, intertwined patterns of carving on the doorposts and the similarly adorned furniture within. And all of them valued the warmth. The timber walls were double, with brushwood packed between. It was more flammable than a stone castle but infinitely drier and much less draughty. The Conqueror liked it. In search of a few days' hunting and relaxation, after a successful campaign across the Channel in Maine, to the south of Normandy, it was to Brockenhurst that he went.

Most of the court accompanied him. There was room. In the English fashion, the lodge was surrounded by small editions of itself, thatched apartments where guests and their servants could be accommodated with more privacy than most castles afforded, and where business could be conducted in peace or small boys tutored.

'Only,' said Henry, staring mutinously at the slate on which his tutor had drawn an outline of Normandy, 'I don't see why I have to stay in and look at maps. My brothers have gone out hunting with Father. It isn't fair.'

Some instructors might now have administered a sharp rebuke, either verbal or physical. But Henry, even at five, was capable of meeting verbal disapproval by folding his mouth into an obstinate shape which meant *I won't listen*, and of withstanding any kind of chastisement suitable for his years, in a silence still more obstinate, until the chance came to kick the perpetrator's shins, when he would do it.

Besides, the tutor sympathised with his charge. It was a glorious September morning and the hunt setting out had been something to see; the horses pawing and tossing their heads and the coupled hounds all but pulling their handlers over as they smelt the first frost of autumn. The colours had been dazzling too; brilliant tunics, scalloped reins of scarlet

against the neck of a dapple grey horse, the leaves of a chestnut tree turning golden-brown, spread against a sky so purely blue that it would surely feel smooth to the touch.

Britnoth was a monk and ought not to be moved by such worldly things. He also knew that he should disapprove of the king's passion for the chase. King William valued the beasts of the forest above the lives of men and it was a disgrace.

But that morning, holding Henry's hand as they watched the hunt set out, he had longed to be part of it all, just as much as Henry.

Who was now regarding him with smouldering brown eyes, from under a very untidy black fringe. No doubt Henry had liked the bright colours too. Children did. 'Looking at maps need not be dull, Henry. I'll show you.'

Half an hour later, he was congratulating himself on the success of his stratagem. Where charcoal lines on a slate did not appeal, pigments on scraped sheepskin could enthrall. Henry, his tongue poking between his lips, was industriously filling in the blue outline of England, dipping an interested brush in water and paint, and asking intelligent questions about whether the land was really that shape.

'More or less,' said Britnoth, with strict regard for the truth. 'The real coastline is more jagged but this is near enough. Now, we'll put some wavy lines for the sea - thus - and put in Normandy. What colour shall Normandy be?'

'Red,' said Henry. It was his favourite colour.

'All right. I'll do the outline and you can fill it in presently. I'll put some other places in first. Wash that brush for me. Now, what's this place I'm drawing in a red dotted line below Normandy; to the south, that is? You ought to know. Your father has just come back from there.'

'Oh, that's silly old Maine.' Henry had heard the word

bandied about all summer while his father was away, and since the king's triumphant return with the keys of Maine's capital, Le Mans, in his possession, it had been bandied about still more.

'Excellent, Henry.' Britnoth held out a hand for the brush, which Henry had been dipping in water. 'Now I'm going to make a new colour, green. I mix blue with yellow for that - there. And I'm drawing a new outline, still further south. Where would this be? Do you know who its lord is?'

'No.' Henry was interested in the paint-blending process but bored by the questions. He kicked the bench-leg beneath him, warningly.

'That's called Anjou. It has a lord with a funny name. Men call him Fulk the Surly. He was disputing with your father over which of them should be called the overlord of Maine but your father won. Now here on the eastern border of Normandy - I'll show you how to mix purple for this - we have France, whose king is Normandy's own overlord . . .'

Hoofbeats went past outside, at speed. The water jar slopped with the vibration, fortunately on the table and not on the map. 'Mop it up with this rag, Henry, quickly. Come along, what are you waiting for?'

'I'm not waiting, I'm listening.' Shouting had broken out somewhere nearby. 'What's all that noise?'

'A messenger, I expect. If it concerns us, we'll be told. You mustn't be inquisitive.'

'I mustn't be inquisitive. I can't go hunting with the others. It's not *fair*.'

'You'll be able to ask more questions, and go hunting too, when you're older.'

'Robert says I won't ever catch up. He says I'll never be on equal terms with him and Richard. He says all my father's lands will go to them and there'll be nothing left for me.'

Britnoth was forty-eight, had led a sedentary life and had never been athletic even when young. The king's eldest son Robert was nineteen and tough; he could have picked Britnoth up from the ground, or felled him to it, with one hand. Notwithstanding any of this, Britnoth frequently had a wild desire to box Robert's ears. He was for ever teasing and provoking his small brother. Britnoth thought he did it because he himself had been thus provoked, usually by his father, who never praised him but often gibed at him for things he couldn't help, such as his short stature. Curthose, *Shortlegs*, was the Conqueror's preferred nickname for his firstborn, spoken jovially but with the lion's claws not entirely sheathed. But one could hardly expect Henry to understand that.

That Robert's remarks had been perfectly accurate, did not help.

Mildly, Britnoth said: 'It is the custom for the eldest son to inherit his father's lands intact. When a man spends a lifetime gathering a great estate, he doesn't like to think of it being broken into fragments the moment he's dead. Normandy and England are so very separate in the way of nature that perhaps in this case the two eldest sons may benefit instead of just the first, otherwise Richard would be no better off than you. In fact, Henry, you're the fourth son. You've never met your brother William because he is being educated in Normandy while you were born here, but he will share what you regard as the unfairness. Both you and he will have to make your own careers. It isn't a disaster. To make a successful life for yourself, to gather possessions by your own efforts, there are great satisfactions in that. But you'll need your education. You must understand the world you live in, the better to seize your opportunities . . .'

'That *noise*,' said Henry persistently.

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The clamour outside had increased. Doors banged and running feet sped by. A man's voice was raised in shocked exclamation and a woman near at hand had burst out crying. Henry, regardless of the value of education, scrambled off his bench and made for the door. Britnoth went after him.

People were streaming across the paved inner court, towards the gate. A woman clutching a bucket and broom went by, followed by a fat baron whose hangover had kept him from hunting that day. After him ran a cook with dough on his hands. All their faces were distraught. 'What's happened?' Britnoth cried as he and Henry, drawn by the ancient magnetism of calamity, fell in with the rest. 'A hunting accident! They say it's the king himself!' The woman with the bucket quavered an answer. 'And what'll become of us all now . . .!'

'It ain't the king!' the cook contradicted. They were through the gate now and jostling across the muddy outer court, towards the gatehouse. The drawbridge was down and a grim procession was already making its way across. Britnoth had caught Henry's hand, but Henry dragged him forward, pushing between massed bodies. They were in the front as the hunting party which had gone out so bravely in the morning, came home.

It came sombrely, led by King William himself, on foot. He was obviously not dead but he carried in his arms something that was. Robert Curthose followed him, mounted and leading his father's horse. Behind Curthose, a huntsman led another riderless animal. The Conqueror's face was set like granite. As he stepped off the drawbridge, he paused to adjust his burden and with a gesture that seemed strange in a man normally so harsh, he lifted the head that lolled over his forearm and cradled it against his shoulder. Those who were nearest could see its face. Britnoth looked round for a

way to get Henry out of the crowd but in vain. Someone let out a wail and someone else cried: 'What did it?'

It could be seen now that the body had a smashed red band across its throat. The Conqueror glanced round and called an answer. 'He was galloping to reach a good position for shooting. A low branch got him across the neck. He died before he hit the ground.'

Then Henry, who had been standing on tiptoe, recognised the dead face and with a screech of: 'Richard, it's *Richard V* broke away from Britnoth, flinging himself at his father.

Britnoth lunged after him. 'Not now, Henry! I'm sorry, my lord, my apologies; Henry, don't . . .'

'But it's *Richard*! He's dead!' Henry knew what death was. One did not reach even five years of age in the Conqueror's household and remain unfamiliar with the concept of death, with the sight of dead stags and with talk of dead men.

'Bring him to the chapel later, when his brother has been made seemly,' said the Conqueror, and walked on. Henry fought to follow, pummelling Britnoth's chest as the tutor picked him up. 'It's Richard, it's Richard, I want to go to Richard!'

'Hush!' said Britnoth desperately. The woman with the bucket said: 'Poor little soul.' Curthose, who had pulled up when William stopped, jumped down, threw the reins of his two horses into the nearest pairs of hands and with the first sign of fraternal affection Britnoth had ever observed in him, removed Henry from his tutor's arms. 'You poor bloody little tyke,' said Curthose. 'Big brother Robert's still here. Don't cry.'

Next day, because it was customary, Britnoth admonished Henry on the importance of quiet and dignified conduct and took him to the chapel to say farewell to his brother, who lay

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before the altar, tidily disposed upon his bier, candles at his head and feet. Henry clutched his tutor's hand tightly and seemed to be puzzling out what the meaning of this solemn new thing would be to himself.

He considerably startled Britnoth when at length he voiced his conclusion. Having touched the white waxen forehead with a small forefinger, he stepped back and said: 'Poor Richard. Is he in heaven now?' And then, before Britnoth could answer: 'I only have two brothers ahead of me now, haven't I?'