The Scarlet Lion

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Extract

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Fortress of Longueville, Normandy, Spring 1197

Isabelle de Clare, Countess of Leinster and Striguil, wife to King Richard's Marshal, was in labour with their fourth child.

'Arse first,' announced the midwife, wiping her hands on a length of towel after examining her patient. 'Bound to be a boy, they always cause the most trouble.'

Isabelle closed her eyes and reclined against the piled bolsters. Throughout the morning the contractions had become steadily more frequent and painful. Her women had unbraided her hair so there would be no bindings about her person to tie the baby in the womb, and the thick, wheat-gold strands spilled over shoulders and engorged breasts to touch her mounded belly.

'He' was already late. Her husband had hoped to greet his new offspring before setting out to war ten days ago, but instead had had to bid Isabelle farewell with a kiss at arm's length, her pregnant belly like a mountain between them. It was May now. If she survived bearing this child and he lived through the summer's campaign, they would see each other in the autumn. For now, he was somewhere deep in the Beauvaisis with his sovereign, and she

was wishing she was anywhere but this stuffy chamber undergoing the ordeal of childbirth.

A contraction started low in her spine and tightened across her womb. Pain bloomed through her lower body, causing her to gasp and clench her fists.

'Always hurts more when they come tail first.' The midwife looked shrewdly at Isabelle. 'It's not your first; you know what to expect, but infants that enter the world by their backsides have a dangerous passage. Head comes last and that's not good for the babe. Best pray to the blessed Saint Margaret for her help.' She indicated the painted wooden image standing on a coffer at the bedside surrounded by a glow of votive candles.

'I have been praying to her every day since I knew I was with child,' Isabelle said irritably, not adding that the overdue birth of a baby in the breech position was hardly a happy reward for her devotion. She was coming to abhor the statue though. Whoever had carved it had put a sanctimonious expression on its face that fell little short of a smirk.

The next contraction wrung her in its grip and with it the urge to push. The midwife signalled to the girl assisting her and busied herself between Isabelle's thighs. 'You should summon your chaplain to christen the child, immediately,' she announced, her voice muffled by the raised sheet. 'Do you have a name?'

'Gilbert for a boy, and Isabelle for a girl,' Isabelle gritted through her teeth as she bore down. The contraction receded. Slumping against the bolsters she panted at one of her women to fetch Father Walter and have him wait in the antechamber.

The next pain seized her, then the next and the next, fierce and hard, no respite now as her body strove to expel the baby from her womb and into the world. She sobbed

and grunted with effort, tendons standing out in her throat, her hands gripping those of her attendants hard enough to leave lasting weals on their flesh.

There was a sudden gush of wet heat between her thighs and the midwife groped. 'Ah,' she said with satisfaction. 'I was right, it is a boy. Ha-ha, fine pair of hammers on him too! Let's see if we can keep him alive to have use of them, eh? Push again, my lady. Not so fast, not so fast. Go gently now.'

Isabelle bit her lip and struggled not to push as hard as her instincts dictated. Taking the baby's ankles, tugging gently, the midwife drew his torso up and on to Isabelle's abdomen. As the mouth and nose emerged from the birth canal she wiped them clear of blood and mucus, then, watching intently, controlled the emergence of the rest of the head with a gentle hand.

Propped on her elbows, Isabelle stared at the baby lying upon her body like a drowned, shipwrecked sailor. His colour was greyish-blue and he wasn't moving. Panic shot through her. 'Holy Saint Margaret, is he . . . ?'

The woman lifted the baby by his ankles, swung him gently and applied a sharp tap to his buttocks, then again. A shudder rippled through him, his little chest expanded and a wail of protest met the air, uncertain at first, but gathering momentum and infusing his body with a flush of life-giving pink.

Righting him, the midwife turned to Isabelle, a smile deepening the creases in her wrinkled cheeks. 'Just needed a bit of persuading,' she said. 'Best have the priest name him though, to be on the safe side.' She wrapped him in a warm towel and placed him in Isabelle's arms.

The cord having been cut and the afterbirth expelled and taken away for burial, Isabelle gazed down into the birth-crumpled features of her newborn son and, still

deeply anxious, watched his shallow breathing. A baffled, slightly quizzical frown puckered his delicately sketched brows. His little hands were tightly clenched as if to fight the world into which he had been so brutally initiated. 'Gilbert,' she said softly. 'I wonder what your father is going to make of you.' She blew softly against his cheek and gave him her forefinger around which to curl his miniature hand. After a moment, she lifted her gaze from the baby and fixed it on her chamber window and the arch of soft blue sky it framed. Her own ordeal was almost over and, God willing, if she did not take the childbed fever, she would soon be on her feet. Saint Margaret could be thanked with an offering and packed away in her coffer again until needed. Now she would concentrate on prayers for her husband's safety and ask God to bring him home in one piece to greet their new son.

The assault on the castle of Milli was not going well; indeed, it was a shambles. Eyes narrowed, William Marshal stared across the ditch towards the castle walls and cursed under his breath, his gaze clinging to the serjeants and soldiers toiling their way up the rungs of the scaling ladder like ants on a twig. Several of these ladders had been concentrated at one part of the wall as King Richard's forces attempted to storm the castle and seize it from its rebellious constable.

'Make haste, in God's name, make haste!' Jean D'Earley, William's former squire, now a knight of his company, danced from foot to foot, chewed his lip and clenched and unclenched his fists.

The defenders on the battlements strove desperately to dislodge the ladders from the walls while the weight of their enemies was still sufficiently low down to make it feasible. Crossbow bolts, arrows, stakes and boulders

rained down on the attackers. Stricken men tumbled from the ladders into the ditch, some in silence, others screaming.

'It's going to fall, Christ help them!' Jean's voice was anguished as the defenders succeeded in lodging a crowbar between one of the ladder ends and the wall and began levering.

'My shield.' William beckoned to his squire with a flick of his left hand.

The ladder slipped sideways and toppled, smashing its burden of soldiers into bank and ditch. The cries of the crushed and maimed rose in chilling twists of sound to join the clamour of battle. A few fortunates crawled and hobbled to safety, but many more lay broken and dying amid the splintered remnants of the siege ladder. Cheers of abuse and a fresh barrage of missiles pelted down from the walls in a lethal rain.

William thrust his hand through his shield grips. The legendary green and yellow Marshal colours faced the embattled walls, the painted scarlet lion clawing the foreground. Something had to be done and fast. If they didn't gain those wall walks, they were going to have to choose between sitting down to starve the bastards out or retreating to lick their wounded dignity . . . and King Richard had neither the patience nor the temper for either. He couldn't afford to wait and he couldn't afford to lose. William snatched a glance along the embankment to the royal standard. Standing beneath the wind-rippled red and gold banner, King Richard was plucking his auburn beard with one hand and gesticulating vigorously to his mercenary captain Mercadier with the other.

Armed with a fresh ladder, a group of serjeants and mercenaries charged across the makeshift bridge of planks spanning the ditch, prompting an increased storm of

missiles from the walls. Most fell short or bounced off shields, but one serjeant was hit in the chest by a crossbow quarrel and another by a sling stone that struck his hand, shattering his fingers. Undeterred, the others planted the ladder's feet into the soft turf of the bank and slammed the end down on the wall.

A vigorous effort led by the Flemish knight Guy de la Bruiere was on the brink of success and the battlements boiled with activity at that section. William took his open-faced helm from his squire and settled it on his head, adjusting the nasal bar until it was comfortable.

'God's bones, the whoresons have got a pick,' Jean spat.

William squinted upwards and swore. Two defenders were leaning through a crenel space, manipulating a large siege pick, intent on using the vicious iron beak to snag themselves a victim. As he watched, they succeeded in hooking the front of de la Bruiere's surcoat, threatening to yank him from his perch. The burdened ladder thrummed ominously against the stonework, in serious danger of following its companion into the ditch.

William gave a peremptory signal to the knights of his mesnie. Covering himself with his shield, he ran across the ditch planks and scrambled up the bank to the new ladder. Ordering aside the serjeant who had been about to set his foot on the first rung, he began climbing himself. He refused to think about the defenders above him and what they might be doing to try and dislodge the ladder, or topple him from it. He needed to take that section of the battlements and seize control of the situation before it became a debacle.

He felt the vibration of the men climbing behind him, adding their weight and stability; gambling their lives as he was gambling his own. His breath roared in his ears, muting other sounds. He didn't look down, just kept

climbing rung to rung, gripping the rough ash staves, feeling their pressure against the soles of his boots. Grasp, step, grasp, step. Closer, closer. Almost there. As William readied himself, he felt the stave shudder under his hands and realised with a wallow of his gut that the defenders were in imminent success of prising the ladder off the wall. The detail galvanised him into a burst of harder effort and his lungs began to burn. Reaching the final rung, he launched himself at the crenel gap, gained it and leaped on to the walkway. He used his shield to beat aside the soldier trying to dislodge the ladder and drew his sword. Breathing harshly, he dealt with a serjeant brandishing a spear and brought down another man who took a wild swing at him with a spiked club. A glance showed him his own men scrambling on to the wall walk. Leaving them to secure the ground, William ran to tackle the defenders wielding the pick. A serjeant jabbed a glaive at his face. William beat the weapon aside on his shield and downed another soldier on the backswing of his sword. A gasping Jean D'Earley dealt with a second assault from the glaive. On the ladder, de la Bruiere had managed to cut himself free of his snagged surcoat; having gained the battlements, he was laying about with his sword.

The fight on the wall walk boiled like a cauldron over a hot flame as Milli's garrison made a desperate effort to repulse their attackers. Another ladder smashed into the ditch but two more went up in its place. William was aware of Jean fighting doggedly at his right, and his standard-bearer Mallard to his left. 'Marshal!' roared Mallard at regular intervals. 'God aid the Marshal!' the cry drew a breathless chuckle from William as he realised Milli's constable Guillaume de Monceaux had arrived on the battlements to fight beside his men. God could not have aided him any better.

'Marshal!' William bellowed to Mallard and sprang upon Milli's constable with all the vigour and determination of a young knight with a reputation to carve, rather than the experienced veteran he was. Monceaux's gaze widened in shock. He flung up his shield, but William swept it aside as if swatting a fly off his dinner, and brought his sword down on the constable's helm with the full strength of his right arm. Finest steel of Cologne, the blade hewed through the helm and arming cap and opened a gash in Monceaux's scalp. The shock of the blow dropped the constable like a stone at William's feet. William snatched the sword from Monceaux's hand and sat on him to make sure he stayed down. Besides, William needed a respite after the fierce exertion of his ladder climb and frantic battle on the wall.

The fight raged around them as the defenders strove to reach and rescue their castellan, but Jean, Mallard and the Marshal knights, aided by the Flemings, kept them at bay, until the defenders realised they were beaten and began throwing down their weapons and crying surrender. Mallard waved William's standard triumphantly aloft and further along the wall the leopards of England replied.

De Monceaux was beginning to turn purple. Easing to his feet, William stood back, but kept his sword levelled at his captive's throat.

'God's bollocks, Marshal, what in the name of all that's holy did you think you were doing?' The voice was deep with a harsh metallic timbre sharpening the edge.

'Sire?' William turned, bowed, then looked questioningly at his King. Richard's complexion was scarlet beneath his helm; runnels of sweat streaked his face. His grey-blue eyes were ablaze with battle fire and as always with Richard the line between laughter and rage was so fine it was difficult to tell which side of it he stood. Behind

him, his mercenary captain Mercadier was watching the exchange and smothering a grin behind his mailed fist.

'You're a commander, not a young glory-hunter. Why didn't you stay back and leave the heroics to youths like these?' He made a peremptory gesture towards a gasping Jean D'Earley, who was cleaning his sword blade on the surcoat of a fallen defender.

William's shoulders stiffened with affront. 'Sire, the assault was failing. I took a commander's decision and acted. You have your castle and the surrender of its constable.' He forbore to add that the King was a fine one to talk. Richard's penchant for leading from the front was legendary. 'I am not so far into my dotage that my will outstrips my strength.'

Richard grunted. His gaze flickered to the castellan whose windpipe remained mere inches from the steady point of William's sword. 'I saw you sitting on him,' he said and his narrow mouth suddenly twitched. 'That either means you were keen to make sure no one else took him for ransom, or you were too exhausted to stay on your feet.'

'Or that I was rendering him *hors de combat*,' William retorted calmly. 'A good commander is capable of doing more than one thing at a time.'

Richard yielded his irritation to an open grin. 'I cannot argue with that, Marshal. For what you've accomplished I would let you have this one's ransom even if he was worth ten times the sum you'll get for him. Nevertheless, I value your counsel too much to enjoy seeing you take such risks. Your wife is too young to be a widow and your sons too small to lack a father. If anything happened to you, I'd never hear the end of it. The Countess has an Irish temper.'

It was William's turn to grin. 'Isabelle is as sweet as honey if you know how to handle her,' he said.

'And, like my mother, she stings like a bee when provoked,' Richard retorted and, chuckling, moved on. Arms folded, Mercadier started to follow him, then paused in front of William, his dark eyes sparkling with amusement.

'When he saw you running up that ladder, he was fit to burst,' he said in a low voice, glancing to make sure Richard was out of earshot. 'If he's annoyed with you it's because he saw de la Bruiere dancing on the pick too and would have gone to his aid had you not beaten him to it. We had to pull him back – we couldn't risk both of you on the same ladder. The moment he saw you gain the wall walk there was no stopping him.'

'Better I should take the risk than him.'

'He didn't think so.' With a nod to William, Mercadier strode after his paymaster.

William sheathed his sword. He had answered Richard with robust assertion but, in the aftermath of hard effort, he was aware of aching, strained limbs and of the fact that before long he would mark his fiftieth year on God's earth. The sweat chilling on his body made him shiver. Stooping, he hauled the dazed constable to his feet and gave him into the custody of Mallard, telling the knight to keep him under close but courteous guard and attend to his scalp wound. When he turned round, Jean was holding out a cup of wine, his expression studiously blank.

William took the offering with gratitude, drank thirstily and wiped his mouth on his gambeson cuff. 'When I was newly knighted and still wet behind the ears, I was involved in a street battle at Drincourt,' he said reflectively. 'The commander told me to stay back and let the experienced knights do their work – said I was too young and a hindrance, but I ignored him and forced my way to the front.' He leaned on one hip, his left hand resting on his

sword hilt, and drank again, this time more slowly. 'I lost my horse, took a nasty shoulder wound and impoverished myself into the bargain because I demanded no ransoms from the knights I put down. But we won and I lived to tell the tale.' He gave a self-deprecatory smile. 'I was a whelp then; I'm an old dog now, and unlikely to change my ways.'

'I'm wise enough to leave that kind of persuasion to the Countess,' Jean said with a straight face.

William laughed and started towards the stairs leading down to the bailey. 'She'll boil my hide in oil when she hears about today's battle,' he said over his shoulder. 'Tell the men not to exaggerate too much for my sake.'

'I'll do my best, my lord,' Jean replied with a rueful grin.

Isabelle set the final stitch in the scrap of linen she had been working on, secured the thread and snipped it with her small silver shears. 'There,' she said to her fidgeting three-year-old daughter. 'He's finished. What do you say?'

Mahelt's little face lit up as she took the representation of a swaddled baby from her mother. It was the size of a man's thumb; the body made from whittled wood and fleece purloined from the spinning basket, then wrapped in a strip of linen. 'Thank you.' Mahelt gave her mother a smacking kiss and a fierce hug before dashing back to the corner where she had been playing with her *poupées*. Isabelle smiled with tender amusement. Mahelt might be little more than an infant, but already the maternal, nurturing soul was as fierce within her as the warrior spirit was in her older brothers. She possessed a moppet made of soft cloth to nurse and cuddle, but this new, smaller addition was for her 'family' of *poupées*, each one the size of a small tent peg. They dwelt in a small carved chest

by Mahelt's crib-bed and she played with them most days. The child would chatter to them as brightly as a magpie and make up stories about them. They had briefly fallen out of favour when her baby brother had been born, but, fascinated as she was by Gilbert, once the immediate novelty had worn off, she had returned to her toys. Now she tucked the baby *poupée* gently against the arm of the mother one who sported a rose-coloured gown and long golden braids like Isabelle's.

Isabelle brushed threads from her lap, rose to her feet, and went to look at Gilbert, now almost five months old. Despite his awkward birth, he was thriving and showed no ill effects, either of body or disposition, the latter being remarkably sunny. Providing he was fed, kept dry and played with, he made few demands, unlike his two older brothers who at seven and six were into every scrape imaginable and frenetic with energy from the moment they woke until the time they were sent to bed, Richard in particular. She could hear his voice now through the open shutters, raised in a shriek of excitement, and his brother's yelled reply.

Isabelle frowned. Their training in weapon play must have finished early, or else Eustace, their tutor, was letting them have a moment to run wild. But the shout of masculine laughter that followed their exclamations was not from Eustace and it caused her heart to kick in her breast and her breath to shorten. She ran to the window arch and looked out. Eustace was standing on the sward, hands on hips, a broad grin on his face as he watched her sons blithely attacking their father and Jean D'Earley with their wooden practice swords. Behind them, the knights and serjeants of the Marshal coterie were making their way towards the hall, shields slung at their backs, arms filled with baggage rolls and equipment.

Gathering her scattered wits, Isabelle turned from the window and began issuing swift commands to her women. She didn't know whether to laugh or be furious that William had not sent heralds to warn of his arrival but had chosen rather to sweep in like an autumn gale and take her unawares. Once the matter of a bath and food had been set in motion, she sped down to the hall, checking her wimple and smoothing her gown as she ran.

A son bundled under either arm, William was entering from the courtyard as she emerged flushed and breathless from her chamber stairs. Composing herself, aware that all eyes were upon them, but only having eyes for William, she went forward to greet him. His cloak and boots were pale with dust from the road but he himself was tanned from his summer of campaigning. He looked lean, fit and dangerous.

He saw her and released the boys. 'Go to,' he said, tousling their hair. 'Let me greet your mother fittingly.'

Nudging each other, grinning, Will and Richard stood aside. William went to Isabelle, lifted her right hand in his and formally kissed it. He had grown a beard whilst away in the field and his whiskers tickled. The expression in his eyes filled her heart and liquefied her loins. 'My lord, welcome home,' she said with equal formality, although the look she returned him was incandescent. 'If you had sent word ahead, we would have been better prepared to greet you.'

'And that would have been a pity. I wanted it to be a surprise.' He turned to take the welcome-cup of wine presented by the hall steward. Having taken a formal sip, he passed it on to Jean D'Earley who also drank and in his turn gave it to another knight of the mesnie.

'Your supper will be a surprise too, depending on what supplies we have to hand,' Isabelle answered, but she

was laughing. She felt giddy, a little drunk on his presence. It was always the same after so long a parting. Appetites that had been suppressed of a necessity were suddenly brought into sharp focus, both the physical and the intellectual.

'After the rats tails and boiled worms we've been eating, anything will taste like manna,' he said with a wink to his sons, and headed for the tower stairs. All around the hall wives, sweethearts and children were greeting their menfolk and the sound of voices raised in pleasure and merriment filled and warmed a room that had been too long empty.

'That bad?' Isabelle said.

'Some of the time,' William answered evasively. Entering the chamber, he acknowledged the curtseys of Isabelle's women with a nod and went over to the cradle at the bedside to gaze down at the slumbering baby. He had received news in the field of Gilbert's birth and baptism. A third son to vouchsafe the bloodline.

'He chose to come feet first into the world and frighten everyone into thinking he might be stillborn, but he's behaved himself ever since.' Isabelle joined him in his scrutiny. 'From the tales I have heard of your days as a squire, he takes after you.'

He looked amused. 'In what way?'

'It was said that you did naught but eat and sleep and earn yourself the nickname "Guzzleguts".'

'Unfair,' William protested. 'I liked food and sleep when I could get them – what youth of those years does not? But I had to work for them.'

'Still, the name suits him. He's already got a tooth and he's started eating pap.' She looked at him through her lashes. 'I employed a wet nurse last week.'

William said nothing, but his body reacted instantaneously,

warmth flooding into his groin. Isabelle liked to suckle the children herself for a time at least, viewing it as both a maternal pleasure and an obligation. Her offspring were of de Clare blood and it was only fitting they were nourished from that source, at least until they were ready to begin weaning. However, the Church declared it a sin for a nursing woman to have carnal knowledge of her husband. While he and Isabelle sometimes ignored the strictures, the burden of guilt in disobeying them added furtive worry rather than piquancy to their marriage bed. It was always a relief when the time came to employ the wet nurse, especially following a long, dry summer.

He became aware of another presence at his side and, looking down, met the wide solemn gaze of his three-year-old daughter. Her bottom lip was caught in her teeth as if she wasn't quite sure who he was and what her response ought to be. He squatted on his heels so that his gaze was on a level with hers. Her eyes were winter-deep like his own and her hair was rich brown with coppery lights. Freckles peppered her dainty nose and there was a smear of dust on her chin. He raised his hand and gently thumbed it away.

'And how goes it with you, young mistress?' he asked solemnly.

Mahelt made a face at him and giggled. She presented him with some of her *poupées* to admire, including two he hadn't see before: a swaddled baby and a knight with a surcoat and shield of green and gold.

'Who's this?' he asked.

'It's you,' she replied, eyeing him as if he was a lackwit.

'I thought you already had one of me,' he said.

'Yes, but that's when you're my papa at home. This one's you when you're gone. Mama's going to make me a king next.'

He bit his lip to avoid laughing, and at the same time felt a little sad. He swung her up in his arms. 'Well, I'm home now, sweetheart.'

'Yes, but you'll go away again.' She touched the rich braid edging the neckline of his tunic.

'Not for a long while yet . . . plenty of time to make kings and queens and princes.'

'And another baby?' she asked, eyes wide.

He spluttered. 'You'd have to ask your mother about that,' he said with a grin at his wife.

Tucking a towel around his waist, William stepped from the bathtub. Isabelle dried his torso and conducted a careful scrutiny. Apart from the scars of wounds taken in his youth, of which there were very few given his career in the tourneys and on the battlefield, she was disturbed to notice one or two recent additions, mainly of bruises fading to yellow. Since he was a senior commander and overseer of campaigns these days, there should not have been any bruises at all.

'What?' he asked warily as she moved from his back around to his chest.

'We heard a preposterous tale about the siege of Milli.' She handed the damp towel to a maid and folded her arms. 'Apparently you ran across the ditch, led an assault up a scaling ladder and fought single-handed on the wall walk.'

He shrugged. 'You should know by now not to listen to tales, my love.'

'It depends who's telling them. When it's one of my own messengers who was in camp and witnessed the event, I tend to yield him credence.'

He caught her round the waist and pulled her against his damp body. 'I'm not in my dotage yet, and I'll have neither my king nor my wife putting me out to grass.'

Isabelle set one palm against his chest and with the fingers of her other hand traced the outline of his freshly shaven jaw where the ghost of his beard lingered in the outline of lighter, untanned skin. 'I harboured no such thoughts, but I am bound to think of your safety. Besides,' she added mischievously, 'when old warhorses are put out to grass, it's usually to stud.'

His eyes narrowed at the remark. 'And those in their prime can usually manage both the battlefield and the breeding stall.' He gestured towards the bed. 'Draw the hangings and I'll prove it to you.'

Isabelle laughed and blushed, aware of the proximity of the children and grinning, wide-eared servants. 'I already have the proof . . .' she said with a nod towards Gilbert's cradle, and a glance at their other offspring who were chasing each other round the room, wild with excitement at having their father and his entourage home. '. . . of both.' Her fingers were rueful as she ran them over his bruises. The towel did little to conceal the detail that he was perfectly ready and capable of proving his point, but decency was swiftly restored by the garments which had been warming at the fire: loose linen braies, chausses, and a tunic of soft dark-blue wool. Nonetheless, the look William exchanged with her promised the matter would be attended to at a more appropriate and leisurely moment and caused Isabelle to shiver with luxurious anticipation.

'We took Milli and captured the Bishop of Beauvais, so Richard was mightily pleased.' William sat down to drink wine and eat a platter of honey pastries. 'And we turned back the French – for now at least. Richard's short of money again but that's nothing new. He's talking about raising the taxes in England to gain more revenue. I daresay his chancellor will do his best to accommodate him and squeeze where necessary.'

Isabelle made a mental note to have a word with their stewards and clerics. She and William would pay their dues and even a little more than their dues because it was useful to keep royal favour. There were often occasions when they would lend Richard money from their own revenues, but they were able to do that because they were astute and kept an eye on their own interests and purse strings. It helped that much of their English revenue was based on the wool from their Welsh Marcher estates, of which Flemish looms could not get enough.

William sat Mahelt on his knee and shared a pastry with her. 'Prince John acquitted himself well,' he remarked.

Isabelle couldn't prevent herself from making a contemptuous sound.

'Mama doesn't like Prince John,' announced seven-year-old Will, who had been listening and watching the parental exchange and unconsciously absorbing the nuances. 'She says that an ermine is still a stoat under the season's changes.'

William helped himself to another pastry. 'Your mother is right to be cautious,' he said. His tone was casual, if not the warning look he cast at Isabelle. When he spoke again, his words were as much for her as for their son. 'But for the moment I have no quarrel with him and he is the King's brother.'

'Do you like him?' Will asked with the raw candour of childhood.

William licked his fingers. 'He's a competent commander and good company round the fire at night.'

Isabelle noted his evasive answer. She knew William and Richard worked well together and, despite past frictions, their relationship was one of mutual trust and the liking that William declined to admit for Prince John.

Isabelle's antipathy for John went much deeper than her husband's. She sometimes thought that if the Devil walked the earth in the shape of a handsome and charming man, he would look and act like the King's brother.

'He is Richard's heir,' William added with quiet emphasis. 'One day he might be King. He's also our overlord in respect of your mother's Irish lands.'

Not wanting to begin an argument within an hour of William's return, Isabelle bit her tongue and busied herself chivvying the maids to empty the bathwater and take away the dirty items of baggage to the laundry. Her Irish lands were a sore point, and one which could only be resolved by putting time and effort into them – time and effort that William was too busy giving to Richard and Normandy.

The shutters were closed against the night, but the ceramic oil lamp suspended from the bed canopy had cast enough light to see by and enhance desire and pleasure. Isabelle held William close, savouring the sensation of his hard body upon and within hers: the thunder of his heartbeat, the catch of his breathing, the relaxation of muscles which a moment ago had been bunched with tension. They had been married for eight years; some times were invariably better than others, and this occasion, fed by a season's built-up appetite, was one of them.

'Is that proof enough for you?' William gasped against her throat.

Isabelle arched her neck. 'It is certainly proof,' she replied in a sultry murmur, 'but whether it is enough . . .'

'Is that a challenge?'

'And if I said yes?'

He nuzzled her throat. 'I can still race up a siege ladder and have the stamina remaining for a long campaign.'

Isabelle answered the sally with soft laughter. 'Maybe so,' she said, enjoying the banter, 'but in me you have met your match.'

He rolled to his side, pulling her with him. 'Ah, Isabelle,' he said tenderly, and drew his hand through her thick tawny hair. 'I thank God for it every day.'

'So do I . . . and that's why I worry for you.'

'Now that I'm getting older?' His tone was still light but Isabelle didn't miss the sardonic nuance.

'Your age has naught to do with it.' She gave him a nudge. 'Were you three score and ten, I suspect you'd still be leading your men from the front rather than staying back to command.'

'I know what I'm about. As in all things there's much to be said for experience.' He nibbled the inside of her wrist. 'Truly, I am not in search of glory these days.'

Isabelle wasn't so sure, but let the matter drop. She feared that King Richard involved William in too many scrapes, but saying so was pointless and would only create a vicious circle compounded of her worry and his exasperation. It did not mean, however, that she was finished with skirmishing on other matters close to her heart. 'Did you speak of Ireland to Richard and John?' she asked.

'Yes,' he said diffidently, 'I mentioned it.'

'And?'

He sighed. 'The King agreed in principle to give me leave to go, but for the moment he needs me to command in Normandy.'

'And what did John say?'

'Very little.'

'He would,' she said tartly. 'He's our overlord in Ireland and he doesn't want us stirring our spoon in his cauldron lest we dredge up things that he doesn't want us to see.'

When he didn't reply, Isabelle raised herself up on her

elbow to look at him. 'You think I am being foolish about John, don't you?'

'No, my love, I don't. A trifle zealous in your dislike, I admit, but you are right. John doesn't want us interfering in Ireland, but it's a moot point anyway because I cannot spare the time to go.'

Isabelle exhaled impatiently. 'We have been wed as long as Richard has been a king, yet not once have we crossed the sea to Leinster. When *will* you be able to spare the time?'

'As soon as it is right on all counts, I promise.'

With an effort, Isabelle restrained herself. She didn't want to quarrel on his first night home. The privacy of their bed might be the place, but it wasn't the time. She suspected that William was as reluctant to visit Ireland as Richard and John were to see him go. She had long realised that while the tranquillity of retreats such at Caversham in England or this keep at Longueville were necessities to his wellbeing, he was uncomfortable when away from the hub of the court for too long. He had dwelt in its glow for most of his life, so that leaving it for the distant periphery of Ireland would be an almighty wrench. Then there was the sea crossing. He abhorred travelling by ship and the passage to Ireland was no calm day's sail. Still, she intended holding him to his word. He was always insisting that it was by her auspices he held the land and only in trust for their children. Let him put his actions on the same level as the courtesy of his words and give them substance.

'I was born there.' Her voice took on a wistful note. 'Half my blood is of that land. I have a longing to see it again . . . and my mother. I was little more than a child when we parted and now I have children of my own. Even if we were never close, I desire to speak to her one

woman to another, and she has a right to see her grandchildren.'

'I always keep my promises,' he said with the assertive reiteration she had heard him use to difficult vassals and pouting children alike.

She sighed. 'I know you do.' For a while there was silence as Isabelle tried to put her concerns aside and focus on the pleasure of having William's warmth in the bed beside her. 'You will give it serious thought though . . . ?'

William's voice was filled with wry humour. 'I haven't been asked to think about so many things in a long time, and I've not been home a day yet.'

'I suppose there are many things you haven't done in a long time,' Isabelle said, leaning over to kiss him. 'What were you saying about stamina?'