Relics of the Dead

Ariana Franklin

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Extract

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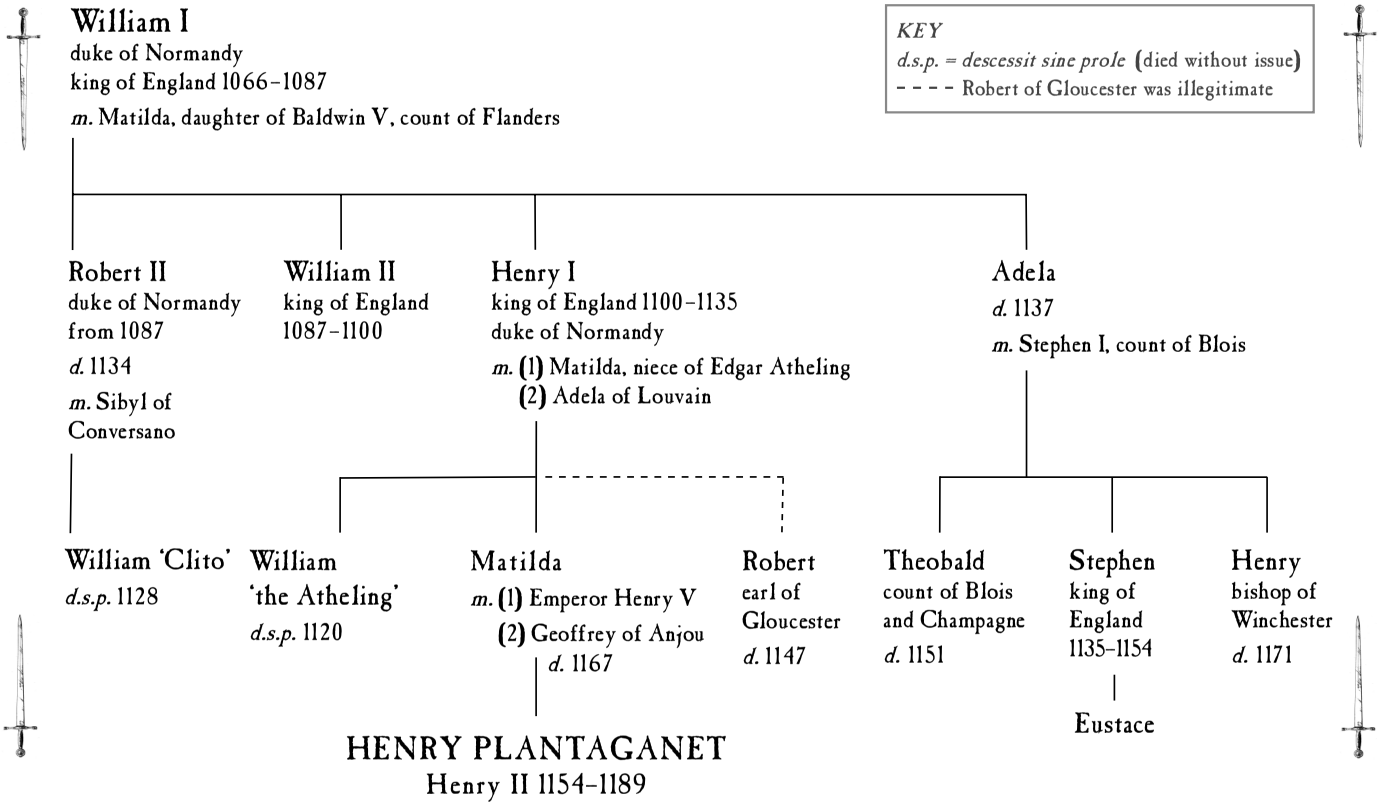
· From William the Conqueror to Henry Plantaganet ·



Chapter One

And God was angry with His people of Somerset so that, in the year of Our Lord 1154, on the day after the feast of St Stephen, He caused an earthquake that it might punish them for their sins . . .

Thus wrote Brother Caradoc in St Michael's chapel on top of Glastonbury Tor to which he'd scrambled, gasping and sobbing, so as to escape the devastation that God with His earthquake had wrought on everything below it. For a whole day he and his fellow monks had been up there, not daring to descend because they could still hear after-shocks making their abbey tremble and look down, appalled, at more giant waves submerging the little island villages in the Avalon marshes beyond it.

Caradoc was still wet and had a pain in his poor old chest. When the earthquake struck and his fellow monks had scampered from the shivering abbey, making for the

Tor that was always their refuge in times of danger, he'd run with them, hearing St Dunstan, strictest of saints though dead these 170 years, telling him to rescue the Book of Glastonbury first. 'Caradoc, Caradoc, do your duty though the sky falls.'

But it was bits of masonry that had been falling, and Caradoc had not dared to run into the abbey library and fetch the great jewel-studded book – it would have been too heavy for him to carry up the hill, anyway.

The slate book that was always attached to the rope girdle round his waist had been weighty enough, almost too much for an old man labouring up a 500-foot steeply conical hill. His nephew Rhys had helped him, pushing, dragging, shouting at him to go faster, but it had been a terrible climb, terrible.

And now, in the cold, dry but unshaken shelter of the chapel that Joseph of Arimathea had built when he'd brought the cruets containing Christ's sacred blood and sweat from the Holy Land, Brother Caradoc did his duty as the abbey's annalist. In feeble taper light and apologetically using St Michael's altar as a table, he chalked this latest event in Glastonbury's history on to slate pages so that, later, he could transcribe them on to the vellum of the Great Book.

And the Lord's voice was heard in the screams of people and the squealing of animals as the ground undulated and opened beneath them, in the fall of great trees, in the

toppling of candles and the roar of flames as houses burned.

The pain in his chest increased and the shade of St Dunstan went on nagging him. 'The Book must be saved, Caradoc. The history of all our saints cannot be lost.'

'I haven't got to the wave yet, my lord. At least let there be some record of it.' He went on writing.

Loudest of all, Our Lord spoke in the noise of an approaching wave that raised itself higher than a cathedral in the bay and ran up the tidal rivers of the Somerset Levels, sweeping away bridges as it came and drowning all in its path. Through His mercy, it only reached the lower levels of our abbey so that it still stands, but . . .

'The Book, Caradoc. Tell that idle nephew of yours to fetch it.'

Brother Caradoc looked to his fellow monks, immobile and huddled for warmth on the choir floor, some of them snoring. 'He sleeps, lord.'

'When doesn't he?' St Dunstan asked with some justice. 'Either sleeping or singing unsuitable songs, that boy. He'll never make a monk. Kick him awake.'

Gently, Brother Caradoc prodded a pair of skinny young ankles with his foot. 'Rhys, Rhys. Wake up, *bach*.'

He was a good boy in his way, was Rhys the novitiate, a lovely tenor, but St Dunstan was right, the lad cared more for singing profane songs than psalms and the other monks constantly berated him for it, keeping him busy to

cure his idleness. Tired out now, he merely grunted and slept on.

Well, well, let him rest . . . Caradoc began writing again. He hadn't yet recorded the fissure in the graveyard. Yes, he must put that in. For, as he'd run from the quaking buildings, he had seen a deep hole opening up in the abbey's burial ground between the two pyramids that had stood in it as long as time had gone. *As if*, he wrote, *the end of the world had come and the Almighty had sounded the Last Trump so that the dead might rise from their graves*.

'The Book,' St Dunstan shouted. 'Caradoc, would you leave the record of our days to looters?'

No, he couldn't do that. So Brother Caradoc put down his chalk and, though his shivers were becoming uncontrollable and the pain across his chest an iron bar, he made for the door of the chapel and began stumbling down the winding terrace of the Tor. He knew now that the Last Trump had sounded for him and that, even if he couldn't save the Book, he must die trying, or, at least, take his last breath in the beloved abbey that had been his home these thirty years.

A lot of precious breath it cost him as he wavered downwards, falling over hummocks, his gasps sending sheep galloping, but gravity was on his side and it propelled him down to the gate which swung open at his touch, under the chevroned Norman arch and into the grounds. He staggered onwards as far as the vegetable

garden where he collapsed amongst Brother Peter's lettuces, unable to go further.

Now he could peer down the incline towards the towering church. There had been damage; the old bell tower had collapsed and gaps showed where some corners were sheared away. The waters that encircled the grounds had not reached this far, therefore the Great Book and all the relics of the saints would still be untouched. Beyond them, though, the village outside the walls was still and smokeless, its pasture littered with dirty white lumps that were the corpses of sheep.

Caradoc experienced anguish for the drowned people and animals, for the ruined hayricks and corn fields – it would be a hard summer for the survivors, and an even harder winter.

Yet holy Glastonbury still stood. Beautiful, beautiful, it was, crystalline under the bright new moon reflected in its skirt of floodwater, an island of glass. *The* Island of Glass.

Sucking in breath that couldn't fill his lungs, he turned his eyes to the graveyard awaiting him.

A flicker of movement caught his eye. Three cowled figures were pulling on ropes that dragged something up the slope from the abbey's great gate. Too far away for him to hear any sound they made, they seemed like ghosts. And perhaps, Caradoc thought, that is what they were, for what human could be abroad and busy in this

devastation when even owls and nightingales were silent?

He couldn't make out what it was they were hauling: it had the shape of a great log or a canoe. Then, as the figures came to the fissure in the ground that the earthquake had opened, he saw what it was. A coffin.

They were lowering it into the fissure. Now they were kneeling and from the throat of one of them came a great shriek. 'Arthur, Arthur! May God have mercy on your soul and mine.'

There was a moan from the dying monk: 'Is King Arthur dead then?'

For Caradoc, though a Glastonbury monk these thirty years, had believed that King Arthur was merely resting, waiting until he was called to rise and fight the Devil's hordes once more. And he rested *here*.

Avalon was Glastonbury, Glastonbury for Avalon, the Isle of Glass indeed, and Arthur slept somewhere amongst these hills with their hidden caves and crystal springs: Arthur the brave, Arthur of the Welsh, who'd resisted the seaborne invaders and kept the flame of Christianity flickering in Britain during its Dark Ages.

It had been Caradoc's joy that he could serve God in the place where Arthur had been brought to be mended from his wounds after the last great battle.

Was he dead then? Was great Arthur dead?

The earth trembled again, lightly, like a dog settling itself to sleep. Caradoc heard other voices, this time

calling his name. An arm went under his head and he looked up into the frightened eyes of his nephew.

'Look, *bach*,' Caradoc said, trying to point, 'they are burying King Arthur. Three of his lords in hooded cloaks, see.'

'Lie still now, Uncle,' Rhys said and shouted up the hill to the other searching monks: 'I've found him. Here, he's by here.'

'There, boy,' Caradoc said. 'Between the pyramids, in the fissure. I saw them lower his coffin. I heard them mourning him.'

'A vision, was it?' Rhys asked, peering towards the graveyard and seeing nothing.

'A vision, clear as clear,' Caradoc said. 'There's sad it is that Arthur is dead.'

'Whisht now, Uncle,' Rhys said, 'there's help on the way.' To calm and comfort the old man, he began singing, not a hymn, but a song that Welsh mothers sang to their children: a song of Arthur Pendragon.

> '. . . when the land rang with minstrels' song,
> The sharpening of weapons,
> The splash of oars coming into harbour,
> A ripple of water in the sea-cave . . .'

Caradoc's eyes closed and he smiled. 'Good, good,' he whispered. 'At least I shall lie where King Arthur lies. There's company.'

When the other monks came upon him, they found Rhys still singing as he cradled a dead man.

They buried Brother Caradoc the next morning. If there had ever been a fissure in the graveyard, the earthquake's last tremor had filled it in for there was no sign of it.

Nor did Rhys ap Gruffid tell anybody of what his uncle had seen. Rhys, who was not suited to be a monk and knew now that he never would be, was a Welshman through and through and it would not do for these English to know that Arthur was dead.

So, for twenty-one years the two pyramids guarded the place where an old monk had seen Arthur buried and nobody knew the importance of what lay between them.

Until . . .

. . . March AD 1176 and a wind hurtled down a ravine in Wales, blowing the haulms of reeds and the flare of torches in the same streaming angle as the hair on the severed heads that topped the line of poles leading up to the Plantagenet tents. It sent grass, leaves and branches nodding in vehement agreement.

With a spike through their Welsh brains, the heads couldn't nod, though they revolved slightly so that their blank eyes shifted as if dividing their attention between the bottom of the ravine, where English soldiers were digging burial pits, and a limping mailed figure who was

dragging a woman up the steep slope towards the tents.

As she was pulled level with the poles, the woman broke into a wail of Welsh lamentation, peering at each head and calling out what, presumably, were their names.

The mailed man paused, puffing. She was a big lady to haul. 'Look,' he said, 'they were killed in battle. *Battle*. Understand? My lads got a bit carried away with their bodies, that's all. The King doesn't behead prisoners – at least, not often. He's a good king. *Good*.'

But the woman was ignorant of English, no matter how loudly it was emphasized. '*Duw. Duw!*' she cried, lifting her arms to the sky. The man had to get behind her and push before she'd go further.

The opening of the biggest tent was lit from inside, outlining the figure of Henry II who stood at its entrance, also mailed, also shouting – this time at a line of bound men being made to kneel in front of him – while a man-at-arms undid the King's hauberk at the back and carefully peeled it off.

'There was no *point* to this, you stupid bastards. No *point*.' To the interpreter at his side, the King said: 'Tell 'em that. Tell them I've made peace with their Lord Deheubarth or however the bugger pronounces it. They won't have to pay any more taxes with me as their king than they pay him already.' He paused. 'Well, not much more.' He pressed a cloth against his left arm to stop the bleeding. 'Now look what they've done. Tell them I've

had to mount an expensive campaign to put down their bloody rebellion, I've lost good men, *they've* lost good men, I won't be able to use my shield arm for bloody days and they'll be taxed for it until their brains squeak, that's if they've got any and if I don't gouge them out. Tell 'em that. Tell them Arthur is *dead*.'

At the sound of the name, the kneeling prisoners raised their heads as one man and a shout of '*Bywyd hir Arthur*,' rippled along the line.

'Arthur live for ever,' translated the interpreter helpfully.

Henry Plantagenet exhaled with violence. 'I know what it means.' He extended his wounded arm. 'The bastard who did this was shouting it. They all shout it. Tell them Arthur is dead. I'm as proud of him as the next man but he lived about seven hundred years ago and . . . There you are, Bishop, and who in hell is *this*?'

The lady from the hill had arrived in the tent with her companion.

Rowley, Bishop of St Albans, lifted off his helmet, then the coif beneath, and rubbed his nose where the nasal bar had chafed it. 'I believe she's from the village down the valley, my lord. She was wandering among the dead. Looking for her son, I think.'

'It seems she's found him,' Henry said. The woman had cried out and thrown herself at one of the prisoners, toppling him over in her joy. 'Yes, that's his mother all

right . . .' For now the woman had taken to slapping the prisoner around his head with some force. 'You usually like 'em slimmer and younger.'

St Albans ignored the slur. 'My lord, one of our men down there, he speaks a bit of Welsh, he seems to think she's got something valid to tell us and wants to ransom her son with it.'

'What in hell can she possibly . . . Oh, all *right*. Fulk, take the others away, all except that one and the lady. And send up that pill-pissing butcher who calls himself a doctor.'

Fulk signalled to two of his men, who began kicking the prisoners to their feet. 'Do you want me to hang them, my lord?'

'No, Fulk, I don't,' Henry told him wearily, 'I want to enlist them. I want them to teach my bloody archers a thing or two and they can't do that with their necks stretched.'

As the prisoners were taken away, the King turned to Rowley and gestured to an unusually long bow propped in a corner. 'How do they do it? I tried and I could hardly bend that damn thing but those wizened little bastards pull it back as easily as a pump handle.'

'It's a skill we've got to learn, no doubt about that,' Rowley said. He set about taking off his chausses.

'And the penetration . . . one flight just missed me and hit a tree. I pulled it out later. Nine inches in, it was. I

swear, nine inches into solid oak. If it hadn't been for the wind . . .'

'That's what saved me; the wind swerved mine and took off most of its force.' The bishop looked morosely at the calf of his leg. 'Still went in, though, and, *damnation*, it's taken a couple of links in with it.'

'That'll need cauterizing, then,' the King said, cheering up. 'And now, Owain my boy, what are those two yammering about?'

The interpreter, an elderly border Welshman with the gift of making himself near invisible, had been attending to the conversation of mother and son in the tent entrance, most of it pursued by the woman. 'Interesting, my lord. Urging him to tell you about Arthur, so she is. Something about Glastonbury and a vision . . .'

'Arthur?' The King, who'd collapsed on to a stool, sat up.

'What I can make of it, my lord, the son's not a soldier by rights, he was with the holy men at Glastonbury a time ago and she wants him to tell you something that happened, a vision, a burial, I can't make it out at all . . .'

'Glastonbury? He can speak English?'

'So it would seem, my lord, but he's reluctant . . .'

Henry turned to a crouching page. 'Fetch a block. And fetch Fulk back. Tell him to bring an axe.'

Apart from the sobbing pleas of the mother to her son, the tent fell quiet. Every now and then the wind from

outside sent the burning logs of the brazier into a flare so that the shadows of the men who sat round it sharpened and then faded again.

The entry of the doctor and his assistant added the smell of drying blood – their hands and aprons were covered in it – to that of bruised grass, sweat and steel.

'How's de Boeuf?' the King asked.

'I have hopes of him, my lord. Thirty stitches but, yes, I have hopes.'

'And Sir Gerard?'

The doctor shook his head. 'I'm afraid not, my lord.'

'Shit,' the King said. When the doctor took his arm to examine it, he jerked it away. 'Attend to my lord bishop first. His leg'll need cauterizing.'

'So will that arm, my lord. The cut's gone deep.' The doctor picked up the brazier's poker and stuck it into the glowing ash.

Accompanied by the page weighed down with an axe, Fulk came in, cradling three feet of tree trunk like a baby. He set it down, relieved the page of the axe and, at a nod from his king, dragged the prisoner to the block, shook him so that he folded to his knees in front of it and showed him the axe. The blade gleamed in the firelight.

'Take the woman out,' Henry said. 'No, first get this fellow's name.'

'Rhys,' the interpreter said.

'Now then, Rhys . . .' He had to wait until the page,

with some difficulty, hauled the screaming Welshwoman out of the tent, '. . . tell me about Arthur.'

The prisoner's eyes kept blinking in terror. He was a tall, lanky man, probably in his thirties, with unfortunate teeth and straggling fair hair. His voice, however, was captivating and, isolated from his comrades, with the yells of his mother audible outside the tent and the axe's blade practically touching his nose, he used it to answer questions.

No, no, he hadn't fought with the rebels, not actually fought, they'd taken him along to put their prowess to song. Very content he was, personally, with King Henry Plantagenet to reign, and there was a fine name for a eulogy that he'd be happy to provide any time.

Yes, yes, he'd spent a year as an oblate in England, in Glastonbury. His uncle Caradoc had been a monk there, see, but he, Rhys ap Gruffid ap Owein ap Gwilym . . .

Fulk hit him.

. . . had decided his vocation lay in the bardic world and he'd wandered away back to Wales to learn the harp. A fine bard he'd become as it turned out, oh yes, his 'Marwnat Pwyll' – well, 'Death Song for Pwyll' it was in English – was considered the finest composition since Taliesin had . . .

Fulk hit him again.

'Oh, well then, the vision. It was of Arthur in his coffin being buried and lamented. My Uncle Caradoc saw it.

Just after the earthquake it was, see, and terrible that was, the ground heaving like a ship . . .'

Slapping him was useless; the man wasn't being obstructive, he was physically incapable of keeping to the point. It was a matter of waiting it out.

Eventually, wearily, the King said: 'So your uncle saw a vision of Arthur's burial. In the monks' graveyard at Glastonbury, between the two pyramids.'

'Yes, yes, very old, those pyramids, very exotic—'

'Take him away, Fulk. Better keep him separate from the rest; they're not going to be happy with him.' Henry turned to his bishop. 'What's your opinion, Rowley?'

The Bishop of St Albans's attention was being dominated by the tweezers that were picking shreds of chain mail from his leg.

He tried to consider the matter. 'There are true visions, I don't say there aren't, but a dying old man . . .'

'Worth telling Glastonbury about it, though?' While his friend havered, the King said: 'I need Arthur dead, my son. If there's something down in that fissure I want it dug up and shown to every bloody Celt from here to Brittany. No more revolts because a warrior from the Dark Ages is going to lead them to freedom. I want Arthur's bones and I want them on display.'

'If they're there, Henry. *If* they're there, they'd require some sort of verification.'

The poker-end in the brazier had become a molten white and the doctor was lifting it out.

Henry II showed his vicious little teeth in a grin as he held out his arm; he was going to get some reward from the situation. 'And you know who can provide that verification – *saints' bollocks*.' The smell of scorched flesh pervaded the tent.

'Not her, my lord,' the bishop pleaded, watching the poker approach his leg. 'She's – *God damn* – she's – *oof* – earned the right to be left in peace. So have I.'

'She's my investigator of the dead, Rowley. That's what I pay her for.'

'You don't pay her, my lord.'

'Are you sure?' The King puzzled over it, then: 'If she gives me a dead Arthur, my son, she can name her price.'