

CHAPTER 1

Grey wisps of wood-smoke ghosted from the great open chimney and danced into the still October air, while on a rampart outside the castle keep, a pair of glossy ravens bounced to the ground. They noisily harried a red kite away from the scrap of mutton stolen from the swill-pit behind the kitchens, and greedily tore at the flesh and bone. In the outer yard, two guards kicked and spat at a peasant bringing his bundle of oats and turnips from the nearby village, an aggressive reminder that they had the authority to refuse him entry. He should be grateful to be allowed to pass into the inner sanctum of the Earl, the legendary Leopard of Dramoor.

Inside the great hall the Leopard himself, Earl of Northumbria, eased to a new position in the curved

oak seat, cursing his old wounds that now caused so much pain, and cursing the oncoming winter when the damp and cold would make the pain almost unbearable. He glared at his cousin Robert who had flung a discarded bone towards the fireplace, causing two of the huge, shaggy Irish hunting hounds to snarl and snap over the spoils. He looked up at the minstrel gallery, and remembered how as a child he would hide up there and secretly watch the great feasts from his vantage point, creeping silently away before he was discovered. He could see once again his father, the celebrated warrior, back from his latest raid against the Scots. With his deep booming voice and uninhibited laugh, he presided over the feast like an ancient Nordic God, adored and worshipped by all his subjects. Why did he always seem so distant towards his son, who so desperately wanted to be close to the great man? How he longed for those strong arms to lift him in the air so they could laugh together and for the small boy to look into his father's sparkling eyes and know that he loved him. All the love came from his mother, the beautiful Celtic princess. To everyone else she was the dark, reserved, mysterious wife of their lord, but to young Stephen she was protector, companion and teacher. She used to call him her little fox-cub. How he loved her. And how he still missed her so much.

But now he was the master. Now his word was the law. Now he would be obeyed by everyone, everyone except – he glanced quickly at his wife who

was sitting alongside him. She made little effort to disguise her boredom. These Sessions of Justice were tiresome affairs, and of little interest to her. She was expected to attend, but was irritated by the tales of sordid events in the lives of common peasantry. Such matters were of no consequence. It annoyed her that her husband insisted on fulfilling his duty as Lord of Judgement; this wouldn't happen in the more civilized Lancaster where her brother was Earl. Lady Catherine's face, once beautiful, was now deeply lined. The lips seemed thinner, and the creases at the sides of her mouth added to the appearance of haughty indifference. The once flashing green eyes had become dull and the eyelids drooped heavily. Her nose, once considered regal, now seemed aquiline. This one-time most feminine of visages now looked almost masculine. The Earl himself, Stephen, the Leopard, now in his fifty-third year, was growing old and tired. The beard was flecked with grey, and arthritic fingers on huge, powerful hands were possibly no longer capable of gripping a broadsword. His eyes reflected every fight and every wound. They had seen suffering so many times, but now the suffering came from within. Suddenly he was conscious of a silence, of faces watching him; the man who had been speaking, Brother Joseph, was looking towards him expectantly. "Repeat your point so that all the court may hear," growled Stephen imperiously. Brother Joseph, appointed by the Bishop of Durham to prosecute

wrong-doers in the Earl's jurisdiction, glared for a moment at the man sitting in judgement. Damned old fool. He was the one who hadn't heard the point. If he couldn't listen to all the reasoning, all the arguments, all the questions, he shouldn't be judging the cases. These criminals should be taken to Jarrow or Durham for trial. He cleared his throat irritably.

"My lord, I was explaining that there had been several witnesses who can identify the miscreant."

Stephen looked at the intense and earnest young Monk, his shaven pate looking like an enormous hen's egg that he could crack open with his sword. He looked then at the accused, a thin, dishevelled, blond Saxon boy of about ten years old.

"What is your name, boy?" The inquisitor wondered how frightened and overawed the young lad must feel. How he seemed like a tiny sparrow in a nest of eagles.

"Michael, sire," came the reply.

"Do you have any other name?"

"I am known as John's Son, sire."

"So – we have heard the evidence against you, Michael, John's Son. That on the evening of Wednesday last week you stole some bread from the kitchens of the 'Red Boar'. You were seen running from the tavern clutching a loaf. What do you have to say?"

There was a brooding, overwhelming silence in the great hall. Michael's voice was barely audible as he fidgeted from foot to foot.

“Please sire, we were hungry. We had hardly eaten anything all week, and my little brother is sick with fever. We had to have food.”

Stephen felt torn between duty and compassion. ‘Fly away, little bird’ he was thinking to himself. ‘Fly back to the woods, back to your mother’.

“Brother Joseph, remind our young thief how long Jesus fasted in the wilderness.”

“Forty days, sire. Forty days and forty nights.”

“Forty days and forty nights, my little scoundrel. I don’t think Jesus would have been tempted to steal bread from the Red Boar just because his belly squealed from a little hunger.”

“Please sire, I don’t think Jesus would go in the Red Boar.”

Stephen heard Robert guffaw. A wave of whispering and laughter flowed through the hall as people who had heard the comment passed it on to those who hadn’t. Stephen was angered by the loss of dignity.

“Silence,” he roared. He looked at Brother Joseph. Michael’s apparent Christianity would at least count in his favour. “Quite so, quite so,” said the Earl with some satisfaction.

“I’ve heard Thomas the Farrier say that the measures of ale served in the Red Boar would make a saint curse,” piped Michael.

This time a roar of laughter erupted and hands smacked the oak tables in expressions of glee. Michael’s wide blue eyes looked up at Stephen, not understanding why everyone was laughing. Tears of

fear trickled down his cheeks. The Earl had suppressed a smile.

“Hold your tongue, boy,” he growled. You’re a thieving little ferret. You’ll be punished for that before we need to add defamation to your list of crimes. Ten lashes of the birch should teach you not to steal, and God have mercy on you if we ever have cause to try you again. Take him away.”

Brother Joseph was outraged, and became untypically animated.

“My lord.....” he blustered.

“Don’t say it, Brother Joseph” interjected Stephen. He had no illusions about the Church’s attitude to crime and punishment. “You would have had the boy walking on red hot coals before branding him with an iron. I know what you think. I’m too lenient. Wrongdoers should be taught right from wrong whatever the circumstances, and they shouldn’t steal even if they are half-starved and they’ve had another poor harvest. What you fail to understand is that it’s not the fear of punishment that will stop them thieving, it’s a warm fire and a full stomach. Bread if bread. It doesn’t taste any different if it’s been stolen.”

“The Scriptures make it quite clear.....” began the Monk haughtily.

“I know perfectly well what the Scriptures say on the matter,” snapped the Earl. “Don’t patronise me. Spend some time in your cell thinking about how the Scriptures should be *interpreted* before you try to

lecture me.”

Brother Joseph silently bowed his head, apparently in submission but with barely disguised arrogance. Stephen pushed himself out of his seat, indicating that the discussion and the proceedings were at a close. He looked across at de Courtney and de Framlingham, his military commanders, and his stentorian voice echoed round the hall.

“No reason, however, to be lenient with those plundering Scots” he boomed. “They’ve been burning farms and stealing cattle again.” He singled out de Courtney. “Sir Edmund, ensure all is prepared. We’ll march north and cut them off. Those Celtic barbarians will learn about Northumbrian justice. Go.”

There was hubbub in the great hall as everyone who had been seated took their cue from the Earl and began to rise. The soldiers present were in high spirits. They knew there had been more cross-border raids which would not be allowed to go unpunished, and this presented an opportunity for some fighting and the spoils of victory. The plunder would not be of the highest quality – not like France or even Wales – but there would be some booty. Others were discussing the cases that had been heard and the judgements handed down by the Leopard, while Michael’s comments about the Red Boar were still causing a good deal of amusement. The guard at the entrance had removed the latch and was starting to push open the huge oak door, when Brother Joseph,

with a delay that was timed to perfection and a voice trained to reach even the far corners of Durham Cathedral, called out to Stephen:

“My lord, I beg, hear one more case before you leave.”

The Leopard had closed court proceedings. Although he took his civil responsibilities seriously, he was now planning the really important business of the day. There was much to prepare, and time was of the essence, but Joseph’s request had produced the desired effect, and silence was returning to the hall of the Earl’s castle; Stephen slowly turned and looked at the Monk for a few seconds before speaking.

“Brother Joseph, we are called to fight. Any matters regarding jurisdiction which cannot be dealt with in my absence will have to await my return. All I require from you now is your blessing on our soldiers and a prayer for a speedy victory.”

“I would not trouble you, sire, if the matter were not of the utmost importance. I implore you to hear the case before you leave.” Joseph stood his ground.

Stephen’s tone was beginning to acquire an edge of impatience.

“What purpose would be served living in a land where justice prevailed and where all men had the right of appeal to the highest authority if that land was held to ransom by its enemies? The first and most important rule is to be strong and prepared to defend yourself. Better to be strong and free than to sacrifice everything for the sake of expeditious justice.”

Joseph walked to a nearby table and picked up an apple, theatrically holding it aloft.

“My lord, only those apples that are firm and pure can withstand the onset of winter. Those that are rotten inside shrivel and waste before Christmas. So it is with men. Hear this last case and I shall pray for you and your soldiers each day until you return.”

There was a momentary pause. All eyes were on the Earl.

“One more.” There were groans of disapproval from those looking forward to the forthcoming battle. “I’ll hear one more case, then we leave. Include another prayer, Brother Joseph, that we’re not too late to save yet another farmstead.”

His knights de Courtney and de Framlingham were standing near the half-open door. A quick nod in their direction sent them hurriedly out of the hall. At least they could begin making preparations for the expedition, and not too much more time would be wasted. The door was closed behind them as those who remained resumed their places. After another pause for maximum effect, Joseph unrolled a parchment and read from it the charge:

“That on the twenty-fifth day of last month the prisoner did unlawfully steal with the intention of consuming a goose...” there were groans from around the hall. Stephen frowned with anger. Brother Joseph was known to be earnest and enthusiastic in all his duties, but holding back the Leopard of Dramoor from a battle for the sake of a

goose – the man must have lost all sense of reason. He spoke again: “I say again did unlawfully steal a goose – from the Abbey estates.” This time there was silence. Nobody stole from the Abbot. Merely to trespass on the Abbot’s lands was to risk a harsh and vindictive punishment, but to steal from him....a mood of anticipation descended. Outside, one of the ravens landed on the chimney and pierced the air with a harsh shriek – a symbolic herald of doom.

“Indeed,” intoned the Earl. “Bring the prisoner forward.”

A man in his late fifties was led into the hall. He was tall, with a proud bearing, although his massively broad shoulders were slightly hunched. His hair and beard were unkempt from languishing for two weeks in a dirty prison cell, but Stephen recognised the man immediately. His mouth had opened as if to speak, but he looked in silent shock at the man who had been brought before him.

“Gilchrist” he whispered. “Not you?”

The prisoner looked up at Stephen. “My lord,” he said.

The Earl rose from his seat and stepped down to where Gilchrist was standing. Seemingly unaware of anyone else’s presence, he stood within inches of the powerfully-built prisoner who matched him in height, and spoke to him as though they were the only two people present.

“You – a freeman. In God’s name, man, what need do you have for taking the Abbot’s geese? You till

more land than most men hereabouts. Don't you keep your own geese?"

The big prisoner didn't show the slightest sign of fear. He looked straight into the eyes of the man who had the power of life and death.

"It is true, my lord, that my family have rarely gone hungry."

The Earl's tone was almost pleading, wishing there had been a mistake.

"Then why?"

There was a pause. Gilchrist looked slowly towards Brother Joseph, then back to Stephen.

"Sire, you know that it is the practice of the Abbot to impair dogs belonging to the villagers by having one of their paws cut off to make sure they can't be used to catch deer..."

"So," said Stephen impatiently.

"My lord, I have a daughter by the name of Beth. We had her late in years, and she is now the only child living with us. She is almost thirteen years of age, but an accident of birth has given her very poor sight and a withered leg. She finds little comfort in this life, and has few companions. Her one true friend is her dog. She spends many hours playing with the dog, and he seems to take special care of Beth. One day, the dog went missing. She searched everywhere, but couldn't find him. Finally it returned to her, but to the girl's great distress she discovered that a paw had been hacked from the animal. The Abbot obviously wished to be certain that a blind lame girl

and her companion creature did not become notorious poachers, able to deprive him of some of his venison banquets.”

Gilchrist looked again at Joseph, this time with obvious contempt. The young Monk averted his eyes, looking briefly at the floor. Gilchrist then continued his story.

“I regret, my lord, that I was unable to control my anger. I admit that I intruded on the Abbey intent on revenge. I very soon came upon the flock of geese as they bore down on me like a band of marauding Highlanders, hissing and beating their wings. I grabbed one of the birds, killed it, and took it home for supper, unaware that the diligent Brother Joseph had witnessed the incident. Our evening meal was interrupted by the good Brother with one of the sheriff’s men who found us with newly-cooked goose on our platters.”

Stephen leaned forward so that his mouth was just inches from Gilchrist’s ear.

“Good God in heaven, man,” he whispered, “You can’t go taking revenge in such a manner, even if you feel personally aggrieved, especially against Father John. What were you thinking of?”

Gilchrist continued looking straight ahead. “My lord,” he said.

Stephen broke away.

“Don’t ‘my lord’ me, you fool. This is a serious charge. You’re guilty by your own admission. We shall have to sentence you.”

There was another silence.

“Well say something man,” yelled Stephen.

Gilchrist had been entirely truthful. “Sire, I have nothing to add and nothing to subtract. I await your judgement.”

Stephen’s mind was in turmoil. What should he do? He felt beads of sweat cause a prickling sensation on his neck. If the man had taken a deer, or a larger stock animal – a pig, or a ewe, that would be clear-cut. No question of what the sentence should be. But a goose? A vision of his mother flashed through Stephen’s mind. She used to teach him natural justice : how the wolf-pack would deal with individuals that had disobeyed the pack rules. ‘There’s a lot we can learn from the beasts of the forest,’ she used to say. Her views of justice were naïve and simplistic, but how he wished she was there to give him some advice. Stephen spoke for the benefit of a wider audience.

“You’re a villain and you must be punished.” His voice echoed round the hall. Then he spoke once again privately to the prisoner in front of him.

“Why you, Gilchrist? Why did you do this? You can’t change anything.”

Gilchrist made a small but deliberate change of stance, so that the shackles on his legs scraped the stone floor with a sound that seemed to carry all round the great hall. He looked into Stephen’s eyes, then away to a distant stare. In the agonising silence, Stephen felt so many pairs of eyes piercing him like a

hail of tiny arrows.

“We await your judgement, my lord.” The penetrating voice of the prosecuting Monk rang out.

“I know, I know,” blurted Stephen. He wanted to be seen to be decisive, and he spoke with an air of finality.

“You will be taken from this place and incarcerated in a cell for one year, bound by chains. You will have a meagre ration, and no-one will be allowed to visit you. Take him away. This court is dismissed.”

Unfortunately for Stephen, the steadfast Brother Joseph was not one to allow himself to be rushed and trampled by the bombastic protocol of any temporal lord. He raised a hand in a gesture to ensure everyone remained silent and seated.

“Sire – wait, I beseech you.” There were murmurs from the military men. “This man must pay with his life for his wicked deed. We must teach these people that they cannot be allowed to pillage and steal, that the rule of law, God’s law, is absolute. This man must be hanged, and his body left to rot on the gibbet as a warning to others. I demand the sentence of death.”

The last of the meadowsweet rushes scattered on the floor had long since lost their perfume, and Stephen suddenly felt nauseated by the smell of sweat. He wished he could be on his grey charger, heading north, with fresh air in his lungs and the excitement of battle in prospect.

“Brother Joseph, for a man of God you have a fearful

vengeance.” Stephen hoped for some sort of compromise. “Are we to trade the life of a man for the life of a goose?”

Joseph stood immediately in front of the Earl, his deep-set eyes burning like coals. “Sire, act with weakness now and there will be no end to the wickedness and depravity. Respect for the law will be lost. The day will come when thieves and beggars will be sitting in judgement of *you*. But act with strength and you will win their respect. The perpetrators of evil will be seen to be punished, and people will go about their duties with diligence and honesty in a land safe for us all.”

Stephen could not help admiring Joseph’s eloquence and commitment, although he wondered whether the fiery Monk would have taken such a special interest in the case if the offence had been committed against anyone other than the Abbot.

“I believe justice has been done,” retorted Stephen. “My judgement stands.”

Throughout the exchanges, Catherine, although sitting dutifully next to her husband, maintained a look of saturnine indifference. Gilchrist retained his fearless dignity, seemingly oblivious to the arguments concerning his fate. Brother Joseph had another card to play, and decided that this was the appropriate time to play it.

“I beg that you discuss this matter with Father John, my lord, before the final word is spoken on the subject.”

“Aye, I’ll see the good Abbot on my return,” snapped Stephen. “We have a battle to fight. You’d do well to remember that it’s the strength of my steel and the courage of my soldiers that ensures your safety and maintains the peace.”

Joseph held his ground. “The Abbot would be much aggrieved, Sire, if this matter were not resolved immediately.”

“Then entreat Father John to practice the pious virtue of patience, Brother Joseph,” growled the Leopard, “and ask him to pray with you for our victory and safe return. I’m master of this earldom. I will be obeyed.”

“You may recall, my lord, that without the support of the Abbey’s coffers your army would not be the force it is.”

Joseph had gone for the jugular. He brought the discussion round to the undeniable and fundamental issue that ultimately dominated any dealings between the Abbey and the Earl. Money. The Abbey was enormously rich and powerful. Like other landowners, the Abbot paid his dues to the Earl, but his position in the hierarchy was different and special. There had to be a high degree of consent for the arrangement to work, which meant that Stephen could ill-afford to insult or upset the irascible Abbot. He still hoped that the young Monk might hedge his bets on the negotiation with his two masters.

“Is the spiritual Brother attempting to coerce his temporal lord?”

“Certainly not, sire. I am merely pointing out that your greatness and strength, which we all so admire, is upheld by alliance and collaboration.”

Dressed in a coarse brown habit and open sandals, one’s attention was drawn all the more to Joseph’s square, clean-shaven face with the firm jaw and dark, intelligent eyes. It was clear to all who saw him that the Monk was not going to give way, even to an Earl. Stephen understood, and sighed audibly. He clamped his hands on his knees, knowing he had not won the argument.

“I’ll speak to the Abbot,” droned Stephen resignedly, “but I will not be delayed a minute more than necessary. The prisoner Gilchrist will not hang, I give my word. Summon Father John and this matter will be resolved.”

Joseph tried to show no sign of triumph, but his heart was pounding with pride.

“My lord, the Abbot is returning from a visit to Wansbeck Monastery. He should be back by sunset. It may save some time if you were to visit Father John at the Abbey on his return.”

“Heaven preserve us and may our bones rest in peace,” intoned the frustrated nobleman. He knew, though, that despite any demonstrations of annoyance, he was trapped. “I’ll go. Make ready. Send word to de Courtney that the men must be assembled and ready to march on my return.”

Once again there was noise and commotion as the doors were swung open and Stephen marched out of

the hall followed first by his wife, Catherine, and then everyone else who had witnessed the court proceedings. Gilchrist was led back to his small cell.

Stephen continued briskly along the corridor outside the hall, then up a narrow spiral stone staircase to his private chambers. He started to put on the sturdy leather boots he wore for riding, as Catherine followed him into the small anteroom.

“You fool,” she said contemptuously. “Hang that peasant and get on with defending our lands.”

Stephen didn’t hesitate or look at his wife. “It seems, Madam, that you can hardly wait to pitch me once again into combat.”

“You love it,” she said, “and you were right just now. It’s the strength of our fighting force that maintains order. You don’t usually hesitate to clear trifling civil matters when there is important work to be done.”

“Trifling? You call a sentence of death trifling?” said Stephen.

What little patience Catherine possessed had expired.

“Who is he?” she sneered, “what is he? Some oaf who wanders into the Abbey and nabs geese for his stewing pot. Hang him and good riddance.”

The Leopard now turned and glared at his wife.

“Why are the Abbot’s geese so damn special? Do you think they’ve been blessed by His Holiness the Pope? Will we be visited by a biblical plague because we harbour the man who cut the head off a holy goose? For God’s sake, woman, have you lost all sense of fair play, all sense of reason?”

Catherine's face wrinkled into a mask of ugly spite.
"I thought it was just the village maidens you bedded,
not their fathers as well."

Stephen looked at the thin lips and narrowed eyes.
"You're getting old, Catherine, old and bitter. Don't
spit your venom at me."

Catherine could see she was making him angry, so she
gave the Leopard's tail another twist.

"I trust you and the goose-thief give each other
comfort while the Scots are plundering your estates.
Why is he so special?"

The anticipated rage of temper didn't materialise.
Astonished, Catherine watched as Stephen pushed
aside the heavy drape and walked into the main
chamber. Intrigued, she followed. He walked to the
narrow slit in the wall and looked down into the
courtyard below, which was already a scene of
frenetic activity. Sacks of food and barrels of rough
ale were being counted and loaded onto wagons.
Men were shouting, and horses stamping their hooves
on the cobbled yard as preparations for the
forthcoming expedition swung into action. Stephen
took the scene in for a few seconds, then looked out
over the far wall of the castle and gazed into the
distance. His temples were pounding, and blurred
images appeared fleetingly in his mind. He felt
disorientated, and sensed a high-pitched buzzing
sound as though a thousand bees were swarming
inside his head. He put his hands high on the cold
stone wall and leaned forwards, and when eventually

he spoke, his words were muted and measured. Catherine could barely hear what he said.

“He was Sergeant-at-Arms the day of the battle, the day we won at Dramoor and finally established the borders of this earldom after all my father’s long and bitter campaigns. I was twenty-two years old. I knew nothing of the harsh realities of warfare. I could barely swing a broadsword, let alone lead nearly two thousand soldiers in battle. I retched when I first saw an arrow strike a man’s chest and emerge through his back, and the first time I saw a head lifted from the shoulders spewing gore I almost passed out. The noise. The stench. Terrified horses, men yelling at the tops of their voices to give themselves courage. The lessons from my tutor had not prepared me for any of that.”

Stephen’s face was pale and small beads of sweat appeared on his forehead as slowly he walked across to a rough table which stood against the west wall of the room. On the table was a flagon of wine and a pewter goblet. Stephen carefully poured some of the wine into the vessel and drank from it, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and leaned heavily on the table.

The world seemed to be melting into a mess of blood and severed limbs, and I was supposed to be controlling it. I was master of the game, but I didn’t know the rules and I didn’t know how to play. I opened my mouth to shout encouragement, but no sound came out. It was as though poison had

paralysed my senses and left me without any control. With blurred vision I tried to see where Harcourt was waiting with the reserve force, and I wondered how thick with bodies the ground had to be before he should be summoned, but it was all confusion.”

Stephen drank again from the goblet, and re-filled it. Every movement he made was agonisingly slow, his hand was shaking as he replaced the flagon on the table. He was re-living the battle as he had done so many times in nightmares. The events of that day could never be wiped from his memory. His voice dropped to a whisper.

“He was there though. Gilchrist – he was there. He stayed by my side the whole day. He had fought in France and the Holy Land, and though only a few years older than me, he knew about the turbulence of battle. He could see beyond the flailing arms and wide-eyed corpses, and he knew how the things were going. He gave out the orders, supposedly from me. ‘His lordship bids the archers hold their fire.’ ‘Orders from his lordship – the footmen to advance on the right flank.’ All the while, he kept me informed about what was happening, until gradually I began to make sense of it all, and I began to make use of what I had learned from my father. By evening we had gained the upper hand and finally cut the enemy apart. The soldiers were my father’s, not mine. The courage and discipline he had instilled in them gave them the advantage and they were able to overcome a disorganised force of Scottish Borderers.

By nightfall we were the masters of Dramoor, victory assured. I was hailed as the great general, the Leopard of Dramoor. The men all rallied round me and cheered to the heavens, but without Gilchrist there at my side, I wouldn't have survived. He was the true Leopard of Dramoor. He saved my life, and he won the day. And now you want me to hang him."

Whenever he had recalled the events of that day, whether consciously or not, it left Stephen pitifully drained. Having turned to lean with his back against the wall, he now slumped to a sitting position staring at his hands which he held in front of him, fingers entwined. Catherine felt as though she had heard the innermost secrets of a complete stranger, and found it difficult to break the silence of the confessional room. When at last she spoke, her tone was slightly conciliatory, although her perspective was still entirely different from that of her husband.

"I'm touched by your gratitude to the man," she said, "but that was a long time ago. You can't be forever in the debt of every man who does you a service. After all, by holding you together he was doing himself a favour as well. He didn't want to get himself hacked to death by the Scots. This is a world where each man looks after himself, Stephen. If you want to cultivate relationships and demonstrate loyalty, then do so with people who matter, people who can return favours to us, not peasants who are of no importance."

Stephen looked up briefly at his wife. Why couldn't she have been like his mother. She was beautiful, even when she was old. Her beauty must have come from within. Stephen's mind drifted away again, but this time to the days when he was a boy, and his mother would teach him by telling him stories about the animals and the birds. It was as though she had links with her Celtic ancestors. She knew all the wild herbs, and how they could be used. She knew about the stars and the phases of the moon. 'When you are older,' she used to say to him, 'you will have to be a great soldier, like your father. But when the fighting is over, show clemency to your enemies so that you can live in peace. And remember to look after all your subjects, even the most humble. Remember the wolf-pack, how the weakest member is kept in its place, but is never allowed to go hungry and is never injured.'

"These peasants *are* important to me." Stephen's voice was still weak and broken. "They pay my taxes, they fight in my army when summoned. They may not reward me with fine jewellery or land for my estates, but they offer me the one supremely precious thing they have – their lives."

Catherine's expression gave away her thoughts. The peasants who fought in his army either did so because they had to, or for self-protection, or because they were greedy for the spoils of victory.

"Don't eulogise falsely," she said. "They come back to their families bent double under the weight of

booty. They earn more from fighting than from farming.”

“Some don’t come back at all,” rasped Stephen, his thoughts still far away.

Catherine decided to change tack. He was no use in this sort of mood. The tone of her voice changed completely.

“Yes, it’s a risk – a chance” she said brightly. “That’s life. Your father understood that. He took risks and won great prizes. You carried on the family tradition and established the greatest earldom in England.”

Stephen looked at her with a pained expression.

“Alright – with some help,” continued Catherine. “But it is you – the Leopard of Dramoor – who now holds all the land from the mountains to the sea. You’re already a legend. The king himself is jealous of the power you hold. Don’t weaken now. Don’t let sentiment stand in the way of greatness. Too many people rely on you holding on to what you possess.”

Stephen rose slowly to his feet and drained the goblet of wine. The terrible blackness of despair had passed, but he was still in a sombre mood.

“You’re forgetting the low points.”

“Even leopards can be wounded, but the strongest recover.”

“They’re not supposed to lose their first-born cub. That shouldn’t happen.”

“William was a warrior. He died in battle. It was a tragedy, but we have David. And Harry.”

“All our strength went into William. He was my natural successor.” Stephen pounded the wall with his fist. “He should have had these castles, these lands. And I lost him.”

“You can’t blame yourself for losing William. He was reckless.”

“He was my son,” moaned Stephen, “my heir. I should have looked after him. I should either have trained him better in military skills, or kept him away from battle.”

“At least you still have an heir. David will succeed you. He will have the lands and the castles.”

“Yes”, said Stephen, “but will David hold on to them? Everything we’ve given to him he’s given away or lost.”

“He’ll learn.”

“He’s accident-prone.”

“He’s generous.”

“Given half a chance he’ll be generous with our hard-won earldom. He’ll give it away.”

“You’ve never forgiven him for Beowulf.”

“What boy in his right mind exchanges one of our finest horses, a present on his twelfth birthday, for a dagger and a pair of hunting dogs?”

“I knew that still rankled with you.”

“Of course it still rankles. It rankles that the boy – our boy – is an imbecile. He started badly and has never improved. Why did we have to breed a thing with a cabbage for a brain? He has a weakness that he inherited from your mother.”

“My mother” shrieked Catherine. “Why does my mother always have to come into this? Why can’t she rest in peace?” Catherine crossed herself with grand gestures and looked accusingly at her husband. “The only conversation I ever enjoyed with your mother,” said Stephen “was when we were discussing your dowry. My God, how beautiful she was then. The family trait came flowing out just like her best Burgundian wine. The generosity with her family’s treasures was overwhelming. I didn’t know then that the family penchant for giving everything away would come back to haunt me now.”

Catherine was about to launch an angry response to this slur on her mother’s character when they were interrupted by a sharp rap on the small oak door. Stephen opened the door to find Lethbridge, a man-at-arms under de Courtney’s command, with a worried expression on his face.

“Forgive me my lord, my lady,” stuttered Lethbridge.

“What is it?” snapped Stephen.

“Some bad news, my lord.”

“Well say it man.”

“Andrew of Falkirk has been seen with a sizeable force marching towards the castle at Arlingford.”

“David,” gasped Catherine.

“The Scots dare to march on Arlingford?” mused Stephen. “Are they mad?”

Stephen had now fully recovered all his senses, and was thinking as a military commander. How could a rag-bag force of Border Scots, little

more than an ill-disciplined raiding party anxious to make up a shortfall in their winter supplies, possibly think they could threaten a major castle like Arlingford? Either they were more desperate than he had realised, or they were drunk on the mead they had stolen from Lindisfarne earlier in the year. He didn't need to speculate for long.

"It is believed," said Lethbridge "that their numbers are swollen by men from France, my lord."

"French soldiers?" said Catherine with a puzzled expression.

Stephen understood the implications immediately. He was steeped in the machinations of political power. It had been part of his education from a young age.

"Falkirk has an alliance with Geoffrey of Brittany." Although speaking aloud, Stephen was talking almost as though to himself. His mind was racing through possible actions and counter-actions. "They obviously think for some reason that this is the right time to strike. It seems they want to test my resolve by taking a border castle."

Catherine knew Geoffrey of Brittany, a distant cousin of hers.

"What does Geoffrey have to gain?" she asked.

"I still have a legitimate claim to large parts of Alsace" explained Stephen. "Geoffrey wants a settlement with Bordeaux, but he knows I could get in the way of an agreement. We shan't be found wanting." The Earl was once again the man of action. "We

must move quickly to put an end to this adventure. Send for de Framlingham. We need a further two hundred and fifty men under arms. Give word to the garrison commander that the campaign will be longer than anticipated. We must have extra wagons and further provisions, and tell him we need the armoury from Sheremouth.”

Lethbridge bowed to his Earl and hurried back down the stone steps to carry out his tasks. Stephen was left to consider forthcoming events. He paced the room, smashing his clenched right fist into the open palm of his left hand. This was not how it should have been. One of Stephen’s secrets of success over the years had been that he took control of circumstances, he liked to hold the initiative. It worried him when he had to react to events that took him by surprise, and this plot by Falkirk and Brittany had certainly taken him by surprise. He wasn’t prepared for a major show of strength, and yet how could his enemies have known that? Why had they chosen this particular moment to strike against him? “Damn the Scots” he fumed, “and damn the French. Damn them.”

Catherine grabbed his arm urgently. “You must get to Arlingford now, ahead of your main force. Make sure the defences are sound.”

Stephen turned and looked at her with derision. “Worried David might not be so competent after all? Why have they chosen his castle to attack?”

“He doesn’t have your experience. He’ll need help,”

said Catherine.

“He’s probably out hunting or whoring.”

“He’s your son.”

“Yes, he’s my son. That makes me so proud,” sneered Stephen. “I have to sort out this matter with the Abbot. Then I ride.”

“To hell with the Abbot,” screamed Catherine. “Send word that you agree to the hanging and go to Arlingford.”

“I do not agree to the hanging.”

“Well go anyway.”

“And risk losing the support of the Church? That Monk was right. We need the Abbot. Without him, we’re vulnerable.”

“He wouldn’t dare desert you.”

“The man’s a lunatic. He cuts the feet off dogs to stop them chasing his deer. He’s capable of anything.”

“Then for pity’s sake, hang the peasant. We can do it after you’ve gone if it makes it any easier for you.”

“I gave my word. I’ll not go back on that.”

“Ha” scoffed Catherine. “The only man who will curse you for going back on your word will very soon have popping eyes and a black tongue and be swinging from a gibbet. Can’t you see. It doesn’t matter. What matters is the defence of our land and saving David. You’ve lost one son – surely you don’t want to lose another?”

Stephen swung to look at his wife, anger burning in his eyes. She always knew where he was vulnerable,

where to attack. This woman whom he had once loved so dearly could now cause him so much hurt. He looked away, through the small casement, and could see in the distance the river. He thought of the swans that came every year to nest, how they mated for life. Each pair was so strong while both cob and pen were still alive, taking turns to protect their nest and showing the young cygnets how to feed. An unquestioning, permanent bonding. Why couldn't his marriage have been like that. Together, he and Catherine had been so strong and now, when his physical strength was deserting him, he needed more than ever the certainty of someone close to him who trusted him, who shared in the difficult decisions he had to make. Instead of which, this woman knew every point of weakness he had, and used that knowledge to attack him. He turned back once again to look at his wife, the anger now turned to bitter sadness.

"Have some diplomacy, madam," he said. "When your argument is intended to cause such pain, it'll just make my opposition to it all the stronger."

"You know I'm right," said Catherine dismissively. "We can take care of the peasant's family when he's gone."

"What about the men who now obey so readily the call to arms? Will they be so keen to take up their longbows if they see how I treat past warriors?"

"The man's a criminal," sneered Catherine, "he deserves punishment."

“It’s not a hanging offence.”

“Your brother Edward would have no hesitation in hanging a man for such a crime.”

“I’m not my brother. I’ll not do it. I gave my word.”

Outside there was a break in the cloud on this dark October day, and a weak ray of sunshine fell through the casement and lit the green velvet gown which Catherine was wearing. She took a step towards Stephen, and the light now fell on her face. Her appearance seemed to change; the lines looked less deep, the mouth less pinched, making her appear softer, more feminine. The sun accentuated the red still left in her hair, and hid the grey. Her shoulders, which had been tight and rigid, relaxed to a more natural posture, and a faint smile came to her lips. She moved slowly to a chest in the far corner of the room and took from the top of it a goblet which had been left there. She then picked up the vessel that Stephen had recently drained and, crossing to the oak table, she put the goblets down and filled them with wine. Silently, gently, she handed one to Stephen, and took some sips from the other. Licking the crimson liquor from her lips, she sat down on the floor with her back against the wall looking up placidly at her husband. Stephen took his lead from the change in mood; perhaps she also was tired of the bickering and fighting. He sat down next to Catherine.

“I don’t often beg,” said Catherine, her voice

matching the change in appearance, softer, gentler, “but I beg now. I live for those boys. You see them as lieutenants, as successors to your power. They’re investments to you. To me, they are the product of our love, reminders of the passion we once felt for each other. They are the summer days lying naked in the forest, the nights entwined in front of a log fire. They are the beads of sweat I wiped from your brow when you lay panting on the floor, the stars in the sky when you whispered how much you loved me. I never begrudged the sickness I felt when they grew inside me, or the pain when they came into the world. They were mine, and for the first time in my life there were people who depended on me, who loved me simply for what I was. They have their weaknesses – we all do. They can’t match up to you, nor will they while you live. When your father was alive, who took notice of the callow youth who flew his falcons and studied Latin. But when the old oak died, the young sapling felt the sun and grew strong. So it is with you and our boys. If you were eighty years old and frail they would still be in your shadow, because you’re the Leopard of Dramoor, the Charlemagne of the North. They can’t compete with you. But for all their faults they’re our flesh and blood, and I treasure them, and I beg you not to sacrifice one of them for the sake of a principle, however well-meaning. Be a father as well as a great Baron – save David. Please.”

Stephen had listened with his head resting against the wall, and while Catherine spoke he had

closed his eyes. He spoke in a deep, quiet voice with his eyes still shut.

“I remember those days. You were beautiful. The sun was always warm, everyone was happy. Life was a great adventure. I didn’t see much of the boys while they were growing, but somehow we all seemed bound together by love and happiness. I remember that day when William caught his first trout from the river. The castle seemed to ring with the boys’ shouts and your laughter.” Stephen opened his eyes and turned slowly to look at Catherine. “But now – now life seems to be a long weary pilgrimage, without ever reaching he shrine. What’s happened? What’s gone wrong?”

“We’re old, Stephen, old and weary. We’ve seen too many Spring mornings, too many sunny days. Nothing’s new these days, nothing’s a surprise. We can no longer win – we can only lose. That makes for a tense and dreary life.”

“I love it when you cheer me up.”

“I’m a realist.”

“You’re a pessimist. Let’s give David his inheritance early and go and set up residence in our manor house in York. No more fighting. No more worrying about who’s making an alliance against us. We could learn once again to enjoy life’s simple pleasures.”

“And the not so simple,” said Catherine quickly.

“We’ll have lots of Flemish lace and Rhenish wine and feast on swan from the Ouse.”

“And at Christmas,” continued Stephen brightly,

“we’ll have all the family with us. We’ll have minstrels singing and huge log fires and we’ll dance until dawn.”

They both laughed. They laughed like care-free children planning their futures, and when the laughter stopped, they drank more wine.

“They’d never let you do it,” said Catherine, breaking the spell.

“No.”

“You’ve made too many enemies.”

“I know.”

“Within three months a small band of executioners would be despatched from London, or Stirling, or Calais. Old scores would be settled. One Sunday the bells will toll and the people will mourn the passing of the Leopard. You will enter the pages of history.”

“You certainly have a talent for brightening a situation,” said Stephen drily.

“I tell you the truth,” added Catherine. “That’s what upsets you.”

The Earl tugged his beard thoughtfully. “I’m a prisoner of my own success.”

“Yes,” said Catherine, “but a very privileged prisoner.”

“Why do we have to grow old?” muttered Stephen.

“That’s the way of things. But just think, after you die, what a wonderful statue of yourself will grace the nave of the Church, your hands clasped devoutly in eternal prayer.”

“And in time there’ll be a stone likeness of you lying by my side, and it’ll be saying : “They’re going to come and break you up for building stone next week. What will there be then to remind the world you lived!””

“There might be a son if you can rouse yourself to saving his neck now.”

Stephen clambered once again to his feet. “Whatever is said about me when I’m gone, I want one thing to come high on the list of credits – ‘he was a man of honour.””

“He kept his promises and sacrificed his children,” chimed Catherine.

“I’m going to see the Abbot,” said Stephen, and he slammed the goblet down on the table. “And after that I will remove the Scots and their French cronies from Arlingford. Trust me.”

“You know me better than that,” said Catherine. “I trust no-one.”

Stephen picked up a heavy woollen cloak and threw it round his shoulders. In a couple of strides he was at the door.

“Au revoir, my little angel of brightness,” he said, and marched rapidly from the room. Catherine sat motionless and listened as his heavy footsteps echoed along the stone passage and faded from hearing as he descended the twisting stairway.

“Au revoir,” she said to herself. She drank the last of her wine and stared at the open doorway.