

The Book of Quests

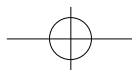
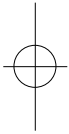
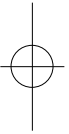


part one

# the Book of Quests

May 1148





Waiting for Henry

## Chapter One

# Waiting for Henry

May 1148

*Who is this that cometh out of the wilderness  
like pillars of smoke,  
perfumed with myrrh and frankincense,  
with all the fragrant powders of the merchant?  
Behold his throne, which is Solomon's.*

Song of Solomon, Ch3:V6-7

It is three days since the messengers arrived in Mainz with the news. Henry is coming home, at last. And now the city is preparing for his return, knowing how the Archbishop likes to be properly welcomed and, where he can, makes sure it happens. The art of sudden arrival he practises only on his enemies.



## The King's Daughter

Outside the gates of the walled city, on the banks of the River Main, a small group of armed knights await his arrival, their tunics bright dashes of colour against the greyness of water and sky on this uncertain May day. Eyes scan both river and sky as heavy grey clouds gather, threatening, but then pass on, pushed by the strong, bold wind coming off the river. The men begin amusing themselves with a display of horsemanship, turning their horses in ever smaller and swifter circles, until finally one of the horses protests against this rigorous discipline. Pushing against the circle being imposed on him, she breaks free, nearly unseating her rider. Everyone laughs and whoops but many eyes also turn sharply back to the river. To their relief, there is no sign yet of the Archbishop's barges.

It is not that the Archbishop of Mainz is a stern man. Far from it, for generally he prefers cheerfulness and even high spirits in his men, holding sullen faces to be unmannerly. But he does not like to hear laughter without knowing its reason, or to have it continue without his encouragement. And for them to be seen laughing and cavorting along the banks of the Main, without him there among them, well – it would seem as if they had forgotten themselves. And worse still, forgotten him, Henry, the Lord of Mainz, Count of Wartburg, friend of kings and popes.

Within the city walls, people are gathering outside the great cathedral of Mainz, pride of the proud city. Its red sandstone walls gleam under the fitful sun, its grandeur humbles the human forms that move or sit or buy or sell in its shadow. Inside lies Henry's predecessor, Archbishop Adalbert I, kingmaker. He who ruled Mainz for nigh on thirty years and rebuilt the cathedral from within, now sleeps in his stony tomb.



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Adalbert's renewed cathedral is both a reminder and an exhorter of the greatness of Mainz; ancient city, powerful lords, prosperous lands. All who pass along the river must see its magnificence, surely raising their thoughts towards the glory of the Lord for whom such a church has been built.

Perched above Adalbert's tomb, inside the high eastern tower of the cathedral, a young choirboy now keeps an eye out for the episcopal barges. The canons of the cathedral, like the knights by the riverside, have no desire to be caught unawares by their Lord. Inside the cathedral many of them restlessly wait to welcome the Archbishop back, and to report if called upon, on the many aspects of his territory, spiritual and temporal. The Master may want an account of the talents spent, squandered or buried in his absence.

Other priests are still making their way back to the city from their land holdings, leaving any women and children at home. Henry of Mainz is no zealous reformer who insists on celibacy from his priests, or demands that they all lead the communal apostolic life in the chapterhouses of Mainz Cathedral. Though the Lateran Council of 1123 has finally forbidden priests to marry, Henry does not appear to care much where or how or with whom his priests live. But it is known that he expects them to carry out their duties towards him first and foremost. And perhaps, after all, not to bring their children into his great church for baptism.

Indeed, some of the canons themselves think Henry is too generous with his priests, and say that he cares more that they render unto Caesar than unto God. But so far the voices of these men are low and soft, whispers only. Perhaps any great prince must expect to have such whispers swirling about his lands, part of

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the mists of envy and malice. If the Lord hears them, he gives no sign.

Near the cathedral, the Archbishop's palace is also in a state of eager waiting. The great hall has been swept and scrubbed, with fresh grasses laid upon the flagged stone floor. Every other room off the hall, or in the upper floor above the hall, and in the outbuildings, has been swept and scrubbed. And every object inside them – be it furniture, cloth, tapestry, bowl or tool, anything and everything that could be polished or scraped or scrubbed – has willingly endured such vigorous treatment. The stables, too, have been swept and scraped, and every horse and mule within them groomed and glossed until all are alert with anticipation. Henry knows all his horses, and will demand to know who is responsible if any of them are found to be in poor condition. His protection of them never ceases, however far away he might be.

In the large sprawling kitchen, too, supreme efforts are under way for the welcoming feast, where every dish will come under the scrutiny of the Lord. Siegweld the cook and his team ease their tension by keeping up a raucous singing match, while in the pantry freshly slaughtered pheasants, geese and quail lie resting, feathers still waiting to be plucked.

Feather mattresses and quilts lie resting as well, spread over stools in the rear courtyard, catching the last of the drying sun. Anxious eyes are cast over them and up at the sky as the women continue their watch: for rain, for Irmengarde's call, for Henry. The lady Irmengarde has ordered the usual midsummer washing of bedding to be done, despite its being only the springtime and a fitful one at that. She would have everything perfect for him, she declared, as soon as Henry's messengers had arrived, even

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where he would not expect it. Who knows where Henry has been and in what rough beds he has had to sleep, synod or no synod, pope or no pope. He would have fragrant fresh bedding to come home to.

Irmengarde ignored the murmurs of her husband Albert, the Lord's cousin and his steward, about the diseases and painful agues caused by damp bedding. She dismissed his fears, and the possibility of rain. And while others of less certain faith, including her soft husband, prayed against the danger of sudden heavy spring rain, Irmengarde did not waste her time seeking Divine intervention. Instead, on several occasions she was seen standing in the courtyard, head thrown back, pale neck arched, legs apart, her boots gripping the stones beneath. No one dared ask but they guessed that she was willing the clouds to move on and away. A woman of such strength and purpose that the heavens could only respect and obey.

The Lord's steward, Albert, knows that his wife can manage to be everywhere at once and to have every tiny detail thought out, supervised and brought to fruition. He knows that the success of his stewardship rests in large part upon her abilities and energies. And he knows that Henry is also aware of how much it is the lady Irmengarde rather than his cousin Albert who contributes to and maintains the order and prosperity of the Mainz family household. It is not that Albert begrudges his wife her fame or her glory. But that Henry might think his steward a useless thing – this is what causes Albert pain. A pain he feels physically, as a sharp sensation in his liver area, which makes him wonder if the liver might not be the seat of the soul after all.

Albert does not share his theological musings or his bodily experience with his wife, lest she mock him further. But it is

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here today: the pang in his lower right side. He pushes his right hand against it, more to acknowledge rather than to alleviate the pain, for he is well used to it by now, and pretends he is simply patting the hilt of his short sword. He is not sure what next to do.

Standing irresolute in the middle of the great hall, surrounded by a whirl of household activities, Albert becomes aware of another place of stillness, another site of inactivity echoing his own. But this inactivity is not confused or desiring to conceal itself. This stillness is focused, and unashamed. It is the silent boy, Theo. He sits on a stool with his back to the massive stone wall near the front door of the great hall. Theo is quietly waiting – has been waiting with patience and with great joy – for the return of his Lord. His face has not stopped shining since the messengers arrived three days ago.

He has, as usual, suffered terribly in the Lord's absence. For Henry to have left him behind in the first place, on a whim, on an impulse perhaps of cruelty, perhaps of forgetfulness, was bad enough. But the long-delayed return has bitten into Theo's soul and haunted the household. The one hour of pleasure Henry might have gained from leaving the boy behind has been paid for in weeks by the rest of the household at Mainz, who have had to put up with the sight of this acute suffering, this atrocious longing.

Albert knows that he too is being cruel, but he can't help himself as he kicks the stool from underneath the boy's legs. 'What are you doing here, hanging about like one of the Three Marys? Christ has not risen yet! Go on, get out of here, get back to the kitchens.'

Theo looks at first bewildered at the sudden attack, coming from Albert who is usually not a threat to anyone, and

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then distraught at the sentence of exile. He will not be here to see Henry arrive. Albert's heart stirs within him but he crushes its message with a further kick towards the boy's slim backside. 'Come on, come on, get moving, lad. There's too much work to do to be sitting around.' Even to himself he sounds blustery, false, the fool who thinks he's in charge. But really, there are times when he cannot bear the sight of poor silent Theo. He cannot bear to see the longing, which this boy never has learnt to hide. And, more than that, that echo of his own unmet soul: he cannot bear that this lowly child should have what he does not. Albert cannot bear the fact that on days like today, when the great household is in full movement and song, he, the Lord's steward, stands in the middle of it all and is unable to find his task, his service.

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Chapter Two

The Marchioness

*Blessed be the hour when first I knew her;  
Her who with heart and soul did rout me;  
When all my senses were aroused to woo her;  
I felt her goodness hover all about me.  
And now I cannot part from her again,  
Because her beauty and her kindness delight me,  
And her red red mouth that laughs so brightly.*

Walter von der Vogelweide (1170–1228)

The sounds of horses and shouts from men outside bring Albert out of the dark realm of his thoughts. He runs to the narrow, well-defended door of the great hall and leaps down the right-angled steps into the courtyard. He will allow no one to come between him and this most cherished right and privilege of the

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steward: to be the first to welcome the Lord home.

Only it is the Lady Rikkarda, Marchioness of Stade, and her men and women who are riding noisily into the courtyard, sending the dogs barking and Albert into a frantic recounting of the household's resources. He has not seen the Marchioness for some time, although of course the palace is always aware of her movements in the great world. Especially do the women speak of her, collecting information among themselves and through their networks in Mainz and further afield. They gather all their words together, sharing them, adding to them, weaving the tale of the widowed Marchioness, the greatest lady in their realm. Messages, stories, letters frequently pass from her Spanheim estate to the palace at Mainz. Not to mention, Albert has grumbled, several visits by Lady Rumour and Lord Guess if more reliable tales are not at hand.

Albert, making his way to her side, speaks as he should. 'Madame, welcome, first to God and then to us. Welcome indeed!' But he knows that despite his efforts, his waving hands and the rising red colour in his broad face speak another language. Where to put them all, how to feed them?

'Fear not, my friend Albert,' the Marchioness smiles down at him, and at his attempts to be courteous. 'We shall not be staying long.'

Her words are light but they sting. He flushes again, this time with shame. Whatever would Henry say if the Marchioness should tell him of his steward's disrespect? Such discourtesy! That she was not properly welcomed to Mainz! Words of repair tumble from his lips, calling helpers to assist the lady in dismounting, in taking care of her horse, offering food and rooms and beds and perhaps a bath?

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'It is all right, Albert.' She finally takes pity on him and speaks in soothing tones, following him up the steps into the great hall. 'We have no wish to diminish the Lord's welcome. I thought Henry would be home by now. Why does he delay even further?'

Inside the great hall Irmengarde, Hazzecha and the other women have rapidly gathered to greet the Marchioness. There is no sign on their pale cheeks of any response to her unexpected visit other than great pleasure and delight. Which is what they feel, they say, at the sight of such an honoured guest.

'My lovely Irmengarde.' The Marchioness returns her friend's greeting with an embrace. 'We had no desire to upset by surprise. And we will not be staying long – perhaps just the one night. And once the Lord Henry has heard my news, I think he will not stay here much longer either.' She smiles around at them, green eyes sparkling, enjoying creating the mystery she is famous for. Then, turning to Albert, the Marchioness instructs him as if he is of lower rank than his wife, which is how both of them always treat him. 'Good Albert, please send me up some light fare, for I should like to rest quietly until the Archbishop comes.'

And with her own ladies, and Irmengarde and Hazzecha close on her skirts, the Marchioness glides across the hall and up the stairs, leading the way to the rooms above so often provided for her use. She has lost none of her smooth swiftness, that quality she shares with Henry.

And Albert is left behind, again. He feels like a fool in a comic play, whirled around by other more knowing characters, full of their own plans and intentions, usually dishonest and cunning ones. And at the end of each adventure the country simpleton is always left poorer and no wiser, while everyone laughs at his being duped, again. Laughing mostly without

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kindness. He has not even been able to enquire after the health of her family: her brilliant and beautiful daughters, or her landmark of a son, Hartwig, newly elected Archbishop of the northern missionary diocese of Hamburg–Bremen. Nor ask her how her own recent journeying has fared, to visit her youngest daughter, the luminous Luitgard, now the Queen of Denmark.

No doubt the court in Denmark has been just as easily left behind by her swiftness, and her beauty. What a striking pair they make: mother and daughter, Rikkarda and Luitgard. Some people mistake them for sisters, or say they do. That red-lipped smile of the Marchioness shows up a few lines around her eyes but no more, although she is a woman of some years by now. Albert's mind as a matter of courtesy sweeps away from trying to calculate just how many. Yet those years have seemed to not touch her. Just as they brush so lightly over her great friend, the Archbishop of Mainz.

How Mainz loves the story of Luitgard's second marriage: the brightest of all the Marchioness's stories so far. Four years ago Luitgard married the King of Denmark. It appears that this marriage and her Queendom might last. Luitgard's first husband was a wealthy nobleman but despite the birth of a little girl, Adelheid, the Count proved a disappointment to his bride and her mother. The Marchioness, through the offices of the Archbishop of Mainz, had prevailed upon Rome to annul the marriage on grounds of consanguinity, of being too closely related by blood.

Released then from bondage, the beautiful free bird that was Luitgard, whom all the women so loved, flew to the heights of Queendom. Everyone rejoiced in her success. Certainly the betrothal and the wedding enlivened their speech for weeks. The

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Mainz women celebrated Mothernight with great élan that year, with the Marchioness as usual presiding over the secret female rituals. To assist Luitgard in producing an heir for Denmark, and the security of her own crown, they laid three places at the table for the three wise spirits, known as the Mothers.

Only one dissenting voice was heard. It came from Luitgard's elder sister, the first and foremost beauty of that handsome family, the nun Richardis. She had left the world years earlier and gone to serve another Mother, the magistra Hildegard. Yet it was in Richardis' care that Luitgard's daughter Adelheid was now placed. 'Of course she does not approve,' laughed the Marchioness on her return from the abbey at Disibodenberg, 'but then she never has.'

Albert heard of all these events mainly through Hazzecha, his wife's right-hand woman in the household. Hazzecha often brings Albert amusing or strange tales, ones she has heard from travellers' boastings and ramblings, and stories she has herself seen unfold within the household. Together the two of them ponder the meanings of the stories: of the mysterious ways both of the episcopal family and of the great world. And their ruminating and pondering is not all serious, for Albert and Hazzecha also laugh a lot. Hazzecha feels at ease with Albert's gentle amiability; the very softness that she knows his wife despises. She enjoys bringing him stories, hoping in this small way to help the poor steward, who does not always get to hear or see everything that goes on in his own household. She encounters no opposition from Irmengarde for her services. Indeed, Irmengarde once said she was grateful someone could bear her husband's company for longer than ten minutes, without nodding off for lack of enlivening conversation.

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And Albert too enjoys their talks, their musings. He does not always understand Hazzecha's perspectives, her way of seeing – from first one point of view, then another, and then to another. Her stories move around from view to view, and often there seems to be no single hero. Albert has often observed that the women in his household seem to have alarmingly multiple allegiances, and not all flowing upwards. For a man, the praise of his Lord is everything. For a woman, the praise of her sister beside her at the spindle seems at times to be enough. And sometimes, as everyone knows, nothing can satisfy them.

Unless the Marchioness is visiting. Then such happiness reigns at Mainz!

It is not to be expected, Albert supposes, that women should love a master the way they love a mistress, but it irks him sometimes that it is not Henry they are always speaking of: praising him, laughing at his sayings, at his doings, and gleaming with his victories in the great world.

'You would perhaps not be so fond of her,' Albert did say to Irmengarde, in one of his rare moments of defiance, 'if she really were your own Lady, giving orders, watching over your work. Here, she is always the guest, praising and thanking you.' Half joking and half angry. For really, it is Henry who is owed allegiance, not the Marchioness. However fair and honoured and beloved a friend she might be of the Archbishop, she is not Lord of Mainz.

'You're soft in the head, as usual,' Irmengarde spat at him. 'Talking of working, why don't you go back and sleep in some sunny corner somewhere, or wherever it is that you've been hiding yourself.'

'I've been out looking at the storm damage to the vines!'

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he protested. Despising himself. No man should need to defend himself from a woman. Especially one who sees every defence as further reason for attack.

'Or you could try visiting the kitchen and take a nap on the hearth. Siegwald might even let you lick his spoon.' And his wife stuck her tongue out and made a lewd mocking gesture.

Around him, Albert felt again that disturbing emptying of space. Usually when his wife slashes at him in front of others, Albert can sense people moving away from him, pretending not to have seen or heard anything. Since he always loses any encounter with her, he understands that it is their display of loyalty to him, leaving him with some honour intact. Yet this creation of space around him makes him feel more lost, unconnected, spinning even further out of place. And it creates room for her coldness to encircle him, marking out his loneliness.

Albert rarely mentions his marital woes to Henry. It is not seemly, and the Archbishop shows little interest anyway in discussing such trivial matters. But just being with Henry eases Albert's mind; then the world straightens itself out to its rightful order and harmony. But Henry is not here yet. And the Marchioness is, taking up her rooms, the place full of excitement at her unexpected appearance, the women rushing around the place, ready to do anything and everything necessary – and more – for her comfort and their joy.

'Soft-headed Albert' is one of his wife's favourite gibes. But Henry once called him otherwise. They were on a hunt, an insufficiently indulged but passionate interest of Henry's. And one of their dogs had got himself wounded – a young dog, very affectionate, but foolish and inexperienced. He had been

The Marchioness

dancing in and out of the horses' legs, tail up, full of delight with the day. And then he must have irked one of the stallions in the party, and an eye had been gouged out by a striking powerful hoof. Eye and blood streamed down the dog's muzzle as the dog went suddenly silent: too shocked in that moment even to howl. Albert had not been able to suppress a gasp of pain at the sight.

'Soft-hearted Albert,' Henry had said, without even looking around, alert to everything about him, as usual. And there was no humiliation, no desire to hurt, for the words were carried along on a warm breeze: the warm breeze of Henry's amused voice. Soft-hearted Albert. The words had passed from Henry's lips into his steward's heart, and stayed there, a small but eternal flame.

The King's Daughter

Chapter Three

The Return of the Lord

*You are strong  
and beautiful  
in ceremonies  
and in the shining of the altar  
ascending like the incense of perfumes  
to the column of praise  
Where you intercede for the people  
who yearn towards the mirror of light.*

From Hildegard's song, 'Columba aspexit'.

The crowd waiting in the market square at the eastern end of Mainz Cathedral hears at last the trumpets declaring the return of the Archbishop. Then the first riders burst through the narrow city streets into the open space of the square, and the sight of

The Return of the Lord

their glory and colour brings forth a sound of response, a cry of welcome. The Lord, resplendent in his sky-blue tunic, is smiling as he leans down from his great grey horse, touching outstretched fingertips and blessing his people. A large number of heavily armed men ride just behind the Archbishop while two younger and only lightly armed men ride beside him. One is the priest Geodolph, the other the young nobleman, Hugo of Bemersheim.

'You see, my lord,' laughs Geodolph, delighted at the welcoming shouts and cheers, leaning over to Henry, 'Mainz has not forgotten you.'

'My dear son,' Henry speaks softly, bringing his horse up to Geodolph's, 'I think that this is precisely what Mainz has done!'

But they can see that he is smiling, pleased at his reception.

The high wooden doors at the south-east of the cathedral begin to open from the inside and a party of canons, the clergy of the cathedral, move out onto the great stone steps to wait for their lord Archbishop to dismount. Geodolph waves now to his friends gathered at the great doors of the cathedral. He raises his hand up above them, waving also to Christ, a small wave, not wishing to attract laughter or disapproval for such a possibly disrespectful act. But Geodolph doesn't mean any disrespect, he really is pleased to see Him, to be home again.

High above the priests, above the archway covering the doors, Christ the King sits on His stone throne, flanked by the kneeling figures of His Mother and John, the beloved Apostle. In a world of suffering and madness, the fallen world of mankind, Christ's work of salvation is both once and continuous.

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His hands are extended towards the world in compassion rather than in righteous anger. This Judge is a merciful one, a sorrowful Christ. The sins of the world still press heavily upon Him.

Below this noble stone group secured to the wall of the cathedral, other much smaller and coarser images lurk. In the stone foliage decorating the uppermost parts of the stone pillars that flank the vast doors, the masons of Lombardy have left another story. A beast with deep-set eyes, its jaws gaping, and its great claws gripping the top of the pillar, lurches halfway out of the stone. Beside him, the coarse figure of a strong, squat man holds the monstrous beast by a leash. It is the stonemason himself perhaps, holding the monster down or back, or even threatening the Faithful with the force under his control.

Behind the beast's master, squatting on the foliage is a half sized stone manikin: a broken toothed goblin, legs apart and grinning, ready to jump down with a hellish high-pitched squeal onto the heads passing below into the sacred realm of the cathedral. For it is always at the very doors of Truth that the demons gather, for one last attempt at destroying the pilgrim.

The priests, ignoring these dangers lurking above, shuffle and adjust their weight in anticipation, for the Archbishop is finally dismounting. Some of them wave discreetly back to Geodolph, and to other friends who have accompanied Henry on this, his latest journey. An honour much coveted but never really secured. For the Lord chooses his entourage afresh for each journey, each purpose. One priest might last for several journeys while another man is kept in Henry's party for only one. And then, months later, he might be asked again, usually after he has finally accepted that in some way he has failed the Archbishop and has given up hope of further travels.

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Sometimes a man does know why he has been chosen as companion. The Archbishop will either tell him directly or let the Dean of the chapter know that a canon is required for his skill at poetry, or astronomy, or Latin or French or philosophy, or his knowledge of the waterways in the area Henry is sailing. Or perhaps simply for his fine singing voice. Or his strength at fighting. Other reasons are guessed at but left unsaid. (That his family might be currently in favour, or their estate lay on some part of the Lord's journey, and so the canon's presence in the episcopal party would be further encouragement for hospitality.) Whatever the reason, stated or otherwise, one's presence in the party is always aligned to furthering the cause of Mainz.

But then there are the complete mysteries, such as surrounds Geodolph, now returning from the successful Trier adventure with the Archbishop. Geodolph has been able to meet the Holy Father at the papal synod – plump pink-faced Geodolph who has no special talent or skill or knowledge, at least none that his brother priests can see. No high family connections, no special ability with languages, horses, hunting or poetry. He is not particularly good-looking or high in energies, unlike the noble youths Henry usually includes in his retinue of priests and warriors. If anything, he is slightly lazy, and his softly overflowing belly testifies to his lack of inner discipline.

It is a mystery to Geodolph as well, why Henry sent for him in the first place, and why the Lord should continue to favour him. Once he even dared to ask, but Henry remained silent, only looking at him with that familiar mixture of humour and warning. A warning which said clearly that if he asked any more foolish questions he could be sent back to the confines of the chapterhouse, its dormitories and refectories and live like a

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poor monk. For Geodolph, unlike many other members of the clergy, has no extensive prebends: land holdings or lordships over mills or inns, or any other powers of taxing the wealth of the countryside. 'At least,' he said to one of his canon friends, laughing, 'we know the Archbishop is not after my money.'

'It must be your body then,' said his friend, and everybody laughed – at Geodolph's protruding gut, not at Henry. Everyone knows that the Archbishop is interested only in women.

Eventually Geodolph has relaxed, reckoning that by the time the Lord finally realises his mistake in choosing him – that he, Geodolph, really is of no use to Mainz – he would at least have had several enjoyable and fascinating encounters with the world, and would be grateful for that. He knows he needs to practise this gratitude now, for it will be his only consolation in the return to obscurity and dry routine again, once the Archbishop wakes up to his servant's uselessness.

Mainz Cathedral

Chapter Four

Mainz Cathedral

*Hold out for your people the lamp of the King so that they  
will not be scattered through a wounding hardness.  
Raise yourself up as one who lives in the light.*

Letter from Hildegard to Bishop Eberhard of Bamberg, 1146

The canons are smiling with approval as the Archbishop strides up the last stone step towards them. 'Christ conquers, Christ reigns –,' the Dean of the cathedral meets the Archbishop with the traditional acclamation. '–Christ rules the world.' Both men intone the response before the Archbishop returns the Dean's greeting with a kiss and an embrace.

As the priests gather about him, eager also to receive his embrace, Henry is aware of opposing and contradictory sensations within him, which seem to come into sharper view as

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the crowd with him at the centre moves inside, into the interior of the cathedral.

Before he even left the silverscape of the river, he had sensed the walls of his city reaching out and closing around him. Now, as the clerics and craftsmen of Mainz encircle him – welcoming, begging, beseeching and accusing – he feels their grip upon him tighten even further. Like a jealous wife, Mainz will try to both suffocate him with her embraces of relief at his return, and smite him for his absence.

And in the lack of proportion that accompanies the feminine, the domestic realm, no explanation for absence could possibly be sufficient. Not even a papal encounter. Not even the duties of kingship while the King was away on this most foolhardy crusade. Yet Henry knows their need for him is greater than any need to protest too much at his neglect. They are almost pushing at one another to get closer to the Archbishop, to make their voices heard, to receive an answer. A rough lot, Henry thinks. Most would be thrown out of the places he has recently been in.

But despite the feeling of being choked, of being embraced too tightly, he is also pleased with the jostling, glad to see that even the critics are excited by his return. They will all be happy to hand over their troubles to the Lord. 'Seek not for them to love you,' he often tells men seeking his advice on estate management, or the management of monks, or of women, 'but make sure that they need you. Or think that they do.'

Strange that this sense of enclosure, of entrapment, is taking place in a building designed for the opposite effect. For the cathedral has been designed for the liberation of the spirit from the grossness of material things, for the soul while on

## Mainz Cathedral

earth to get a taste of the height and depth and infinite space that is God. And therefore to draw the pure heart into deeper communion here and now with the Divine.

That is, if one's soul and heart can stand it. For sometimes the grand space of the sacred interior can strike at the sinner coming from the density of the world outside, rather than free him. The loftiness of the walls, the dizzying height of the roof, the light shining through the high windows like a blessing can reflect back to a man the meanness of his own form, the labyrinthine twists of his sins.

Henry, Archbishop of Mainz, draws in a deep breath and meditates upon the strengths emanating from the great plain stones of his church. He can feel their virtue. Here inside the sacred stones is the apex of his realm: the centre, the place of power, where all the inward flowing energies are gathered, held, and strengthened before flowing back out again to sustain and support the lower realms. The Church is the place of relation between God and humanity, the meeting place, the moment of embrace.

Some of the canons have long been pressing him to organise more decoration inside and out of the cathedral, as word of Abbot Suger's magnificent Abbey of Saint-Denis in Paris continues to flow down the Rhine to the episcopal cities. When, four years ago, Suger had invited Christendom's princes to admire his new abbey, the glittering church of the French King, Louis VII, Henry had of course been among them.

There were twenty altars in the new Abbey of Paris, radiating from the centre, with light flooding from large windows at the choir. Light upon light. Light falling on brightly painted statues, on frescoes of vivid colour shining on the walls in

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between multi-coloured rich tapestries, and the main altar itself covered in gold: the work of six goldsmiths from Lorraine. On seeing this wealth many had forgotten dignity and restraint, and voices and faces were raised in greed and desire, especially at the sight of the greatest of Suger's treasures; the jewel encrusted cross.

This cross, three men high, sparkled with amethysts, sapphires, rubies, emeralds, topazes and pearls, along with flashes of fine gold. And Suger, peasant-born, and constantly boasting of that fact, a self-made man risen in the meritocracy of the Church, stood inside his scandal of an abbey, grinning from ear to ear, hands pressed lightly on his belly as if the envy of the world would feed him forever.

Henry had spent some time in Paris as a young student priest and he was not troubled by such flamboyant and French excesses, but he was glad that some of the clergy in his own entourage were appalled as well as being bedazzled. He had coveted the jewels and gold of Saint-Denis of course, as Suger had intended they all must, and he enjoyed Suger's argument that everything that is most precious should be put into the service of the Lord. That inward purity shone through outward nobility. And that, as Abbot Suger said so often, precious ornaments and sacred chalices could be put to no better use than worship of the divine King.

But in the case of his own cathedral, Henry prefers for once to be in agreement with the sterner members of his Mainz chapter and of course the great abbot Bernard of Clairvaux. 'What is gold doing in the holy place?' Bernard had thundered. 'Greed is the root of all evil. Every part of the church shines, but the poor man is hungry! The church walls are clothed in gold, while the children of the church remain naked.'

## Mainz Cathedral

Henry has no intention of clothing the walls of Mainz Cathedral in gold. Specie has better uses than that. Gold purchases goods, and lands, and men, and will extend the power of Mainz further than any prayers provoked by the sight of a gold altar.

Many of those in the crowd circling him now also have riches on their minds. Or rather, their debts. Henry can tell immediately from their movements which ones are unable to meet their financial obligations to him, and will have to rely upon his mercy.

Now his people are pelting him with questions. How is the Holy Father Eugenius? What suffering that good and saintly man has been through. And what of the rebellious Romans? How are they still making it impossible for the Pope to live in and rule over his own city? Why has no one been able to silence Arnold of Brescia and his followers instead of letting them join forces with the Commune of Rome against His Holiness? Trouble at the heart of Christendom can only lead to trouble in all its limbs.

Henry murmurs reassurances, rather than responses. It is in fact unclear to any of the great princes how the Holy Father will be able to rout all his enemies in Rome and re-establish papal authority over that turbulent city. The Pope's army is not particularly large and, moreover, he cannot preside over a bloodbath in the Holy City and expect then to rule from atop of burial mounds. For the Romans are also Christians, despite their crazy dreams of the glories of republican Rome and the fantasy of the people's Commune. But Eugenius does need a show of military strength. He needs a King to support him.

Mainz soon, however, brings its questions and laments back to itself, and eventually Henry begins to get an

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understanding of events in the realm during his absence. Though no one has the wit, he notes with amusement, to arrange any order of importance. Out it all pours, from one set of lips and then another.

A new building in the town has fallen down just nearing completion and three lives were lost. The builder has fled the city to escape retribution. There is a trickle of men coming back from the crusade to the Holy Land, the stench of failure about them; and with them the sad tale of the three young sons of the lord at Ingleheim who would never return home now. He was mad to let them all go, and now unless he puts away his wife and makes another marriage, he will lose his estate to his hungry relatives. More tragedy at Alzey, where the young wife of the old count at Alzey died in childbed, just as his two previous wives did. The child, too, died, and is buried with her in consecrated ground, although some said it was another monster. There is word that the count is looking for a fourth wife but no woman will have him now, despite his wealth. An outbreak of dysentery has caused great suffering in the weavers' quarters. Some blame the May players, with all their immorality, for the disease. But what a shame the Archbishop missed the May festivities! They have all missed him. Is there any truth in the rumours that famine threatens the northern lands again? Has he seen or heard of any hungry bands heading down to plunder the rich Rhine lands? There are rumours that the Jews have stolen a sacred vessel from the church at Bemersheim and are defecating into it at exactly the same time as the local priest says Mass. But no one has yet owned up to this, nor has anyone been able to find the vessel. Overenthusiastic spring rains have threatened the vineyards, but the danger has apparently passed.

## Mainz Cathedral

Henry waits patiently for the hubbub to die down, responding where he can, or wishes to. He notes that most of the stories and the questions are dark, fearful, angry. His people have had enough of carrying their suffering on their own, and are laying it at his feet. He encourages them to tell him of the May festivities, drawing them away from the darkness by detailed questioning. Who were crowned the Queen and King of May? How many people spent the night out in the open? Where have they danced? How long has the linden been flowering? Has it been a good year for the perfume? What have the musicians played? What have the performers put on this year?

Responding to him, rushing to tell him of the fun he has missed, they begin to relive that period of pleasure. Henry senses a new atmosphere building from their laughing and reminding one another of the May dances and festival. He lets it build for a while, this pleasure in their memories and in his company. When he feels they have reached some unity and some joy, he judges it a right time to draw this first audience to a close. And thanks them for their welcome, and blesses them. With his rich, sonorous voice he takes his time in blessing them, making sure the strength and peace of their Lord quiets the last remnants of scuffling or impatience at the edges of the crowd. And harmony once more is surely manifestly present in the world, for the Lord is back in his rightful place.

Some indeed are startled by the strong feeling in his words, for the Archbishop is not known for his piety. But then again, he has been with Eugenius, and this particular pope is a holy man, a good monk drawn away from the safety of his Benedictine cloister to save his threatened Church. The debtors decide to see this as a good sign. There may be mercy yet for them, for the

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Archbishop is known for some surprising clemency at times, as well as at other times for harshness and a tough indifference to tales of woe. And no one has yet been able to discern the pattern he works from.

Henry and the Marchioness

Chapter Five

Henry and the Marchioness

*I raised a noble falcon  
for more than a year;  
And when I had tamed him  
and decked his feathers, tying  
them with a golden band  
He rose so swiftly, flying  
far to another land.  
Ah, God bring those together  
who lovers fain would be!*

The Knight of Kurenberg (c1150 – 1170)

She is wearing a soft silk gown, dyed green, its bodice loosely laced with silver thread. In between the threads, at the neck of

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the dress, are glimpses of a snow-white and exquisitely embroidered linen undergarment. A large emerald gleams at her neck, cunningly laid in silver. Its shine is met and echoed by the lesser stones at her ears. In accordance with the freedoms allowed between noble friends, her head is uncovered as if she were an unmarried girl. Her hair, once a burning wild flame is now darkened, tempered, honouring her years. Yet Rikkarda has contrived to keep some subtle flames there, memories gleaming in the glints of a low burning red woven through the dark. Her lips, too, gleam with a dark wine red.

For a woman of her wealth and rank she appears agreeably but almost simply dressed. No lengthy train, or intricately embroidered sleeves, or fashionably too-tight bodice. The signs, however, are there for other women to read: in the quality of the silk, in the delicate design of the silver that surrounds the emerald, and in the clarity and size of the stone itself. And, too, the deliberate shading of the colours of the gown and the hair allow the extraordinary light green eyes of the lady to shine forth. As they do, have always done.

But what to women is a complex embroidery of conscious detail must appear to men, whose eyes are sharpened to other things in the world, only as a single and blurred impression. And so for almost all other men the Marchioness would have added something; another jewel, another layer of kohl around the eyes, a dress embroidered with gold thread. But she has trusted Henry to see, if not the details, God forbid, then the whole.

What she sees, immediately, is his tiredness. Quite visible: a gauzy beige veil over those usually acute dark features. He looks, in fact, exhausted. She feels, and checks, her own impulse of tenderness – that old desire to reach out and hold, support,

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touch. She has learned long ago not to do any such thing in the presence of others. He would see it as a disloyal act, bordering on treachery. Lest her soft murmuring words or gestures might indicate to others that the Archbishop of Mainz needs help.

Yet he has come across the room towards her with every sign of vitality, almost of anger. Of course he could still be angry with her, and with Hildegard, for having pushed him all the way to Trier, to the papal synod. Where he had to endure the open smiles of some of his brother princes, raising their eyebrows at the sight of the rich and worldly Archbishop of Mainz clutching the words of an insignificant little woman. Yet another feeble virgin who in her hunger claims that she has seen God.

Rikkarda searches his face for signs of this injury, of all the injuries she has inflicted on him. She knows he remembers them all. Somewhere inside him he carries them, although they lie disguised and hidden by the ease of his horseman's body, in the strength of him. Not tall but well built, with hair still thick and darkly brown, he appears a man of almost crude and earthy energies, despite the nobility of his birth. Yet attempts by some members of the papal party at Trier to label him another Teutonic barbarian kept coming unstuck, for several reasons.

First, there was the rich voice, the fluent ease with Latin and French, the courtesies, the discretion and self-control he displayed everywhere and seemingly with everyone. There were no fits of rage or passion, at least nothing more than the usual and expected passions for a good horse and fine wine. He brought no ostentatious retinue but moved about with a modest company of armed men and knights, priests, squires and a few servants. In this he was unlike his brother prince, Archbishop Albero of Trier, whose retinue was always so huge and grand,

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running into the hundreds, that Albero was joked about everywhere. It was less amusing, of course, for those who must offer the Archbishop of Trier return hospitality.

But at least Albero usually takes along his own wine – barrels of it in wagon trains behind his army of priests and knights. And fortunately, at Trier, Albero was the host and not the guest. The gathering was therefore roughly divided into those who felt that the papal synod provided them with an opportunity to regain some of the wealth lost previously to Trier, and those others who feared that any overt guzzling of Trier's resources might provoke a return visit by its Archbishop.

It appeared that Mainz was in the latter category, for while they feasted, they did not lay waste. Moderation seemed to be the rule at work. One or two of the Roman prelates decided to make it their business to penetrate the mystery of the strongly built, softly spoken Archbishop of Mainz. They tried to find out what sins he must surely enjoy, for no-one would ever have called him a saintly man, and his championing of the prophetess in his realm could only be ambition, to close in on an overly pious Pope. Eugenius had once been a cloistered monk, and monkish he was yet, and still well under the influence of the ascetic Abbot of Clairvaux.

Ironic perhaps that Eugenius, this most diligent of popes, should be the one currently facing the fury of the Romans, and suffering their accusations of a papacy of wasteful luxury and indulgence. Of course the battle between Roman citizens and their popes had been going on for so long now that small matters like a new pope probably made little difference to the conflict. Or to the language of the critics. And even if poor Eugenius had never eaten off a golden plate in his life, he was surrounded by

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many who had, and still did. Including the Archbishop of Mainz. Yet like Eugenius, Henry of Mainz was no slave to his belly. He ate and drank with vigour as a lord must, but he did not stay too long at table either. Feasting was obviously not Henry's locus of pleasure. So what was?

None of the Romans could get any of the Mainz servants, high or low, to reveal any of the secrets of their Lord. All enquiries, discreet or otherwise, were met with silence – or outright hostility – at the impertinence. It was this small company of Henry's that was seen, finally, as his hidden source of strength, his real treasury. The Roman lords came to envy him then, to envy the tight band around him, the loyalty that protected him spiritually as well as physically and must surely be responsible for his successes everywhere.

For Henry was successful at Trier. Pope Eugenius sent a deputation of bishops to the obscure and dour abbey at Disibodenberg, unknown until now for any special features other than some relics of St Ursula. But then half of the lands along the Rhine were seemingly scattered with that saint's bones, as half of France appeared to be strewn with Mary Magdalene's hair. What set Disibodenberg apart now was its claim to harbour another visionary woman, and one living still. Under direction from the Pope, the learned men closely questioned this woman Hildegard, and investigated her claims to have experienced and learnt directly from the Divine Light. And they returned to Trier convinced, they said, that she spoke truly.

And then the Holy Father, Eugenius himself took some of her unfinished writings into his hands and read parts of the seer's vision of the cosmos aloud to the assembly.

*And I, a person not glowing with the strength of strong lions or*

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*taught by their inspiration, saw a blazing fire, incomprehensible, inextinguishable, wholly living and wholly Life, with a flame in it the colour of the sky...And I saw that the flame sparked and blazed up. And behold! Heaven and earth stood fully formed and resplendent!*

As the pope spoke, his old Abbot, Bernard of Clairvaux, stood beside him listening with such focused attention to Hildegard's words that most others felt they too must share his unwavering passion for Truth. But not all the members of the papal party were so easily browbeaten by the stern visage of Bernard. A few managed to look very attentive to the words being spoken by the Holy Father at the same time as watching closely the Mainz company for their reactions to such a great victory. Naive Rhineland faces beamed all around their dark-haired prince, who stood at his ease, listening to Eugenius declare that these were the words of God, looking as if he did not care that he had won, almost as if he cared not whose words they were.

The Marchioness has learnt all this – of the success with Hildegard's visions and of the Romans' intense curiosity – from sharp though brief letters from Henry. Over the years she has learnt how to read between the lines of his dry official despatches, and to savour their condensed humour. She knows he will never tell her everything; he never has. But perhaps he doesn't know how much his silences speak; that she knows, for example, that the Roman investigations have really disturbed him. And that the cause of Hildegard became the cause of Mainz much more so, once Henry sensed the worldly laughter about to erupt at his expense. If they had not won at Trier, he might never have forgiven the Marchioness for such a shaming. She will have to go gently with him now.

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'Madam, madam, arise!' Henry waves her up as she attempts to kneel before him. 'You do us far too great an honour, as usual.' He looks at her with deepening pleasure. 'You are looking wondrously well, madam.'

'Thank you my Lord.'

'I should have taken you to Trier with me, and saved us much time and investigation. The Pope would have been persuaded by you in a moment.'

'This Pope is a monk; he does not love women. Or at least he would not have been persuaded by me. I think at best Eugenius prefers the unadorned woman, the submissive wife so beloved of the Apostle Paul, whose only jewel is her hidden spirit.'

'Madam, all men prefer the submissive woman.' He has lowered his voice, bending so close she can feel the heat emanating from his body.

'Yes, and to keep women's jewels to adorn themselves and their altars and vestments.' She raises her voice to engage all the people in the room. This jousting game with Henry is for them all to enjoy, and to frighten them a little with her daring.

'The garments of the Church do rightful honour to the Creator, and are not personal adornments, madam.' He raises his own voice a little, falling into step with her with accustomed ease.

'Just as a woman adorns and glorifies creation through her person. It is another act of worship.'

'Yes, but who is it that women are worshipping?'

'The same God as men do.'

'Without vanity? Without thought of self?'

'Only as much as is present in the prelates in their finery.'

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Tell me, what was our friend the Archbishop of Trier wearing when you left him?

Henry laughs out loud, with real enjoyment. She senses his men relax a little. But she sees she has really shocked the little one standing right behind him, the silent page Theo.

'My Lord Henry,' she changes her tone from humorous challenging to one of sincerity and warmth, 'it is your achievements at Trier, carried out without thought of self, that have done us all an honour.'

'We had come too far to retreat, madam, as you so wisely reminded us when our courage was faltering.'

'Your courage, my Lord, has never faltered in its support of your love.'

'Love?' Henry pauses thoughtfully, and then declaims, "Love is a kind of warfare; avaunt ye laggards! These banners are not for timid men to guard."

She knows the reference, from Ovid's Art of Love, and joins in with delight: "Night, storm, long journeys, cruel pains. All kinds of toil are in this dainty camp."

She pauses, and he takes up: "Oft will you put up with rain from melting clouds of heaven..."

"and oft will you lie cold upon the bare ground." She is shining, she knows, with the joys of this meeting of theirs. And of the renewal of their decades-long dance.

"Shall I bid you send tender verses also?" Henry says, swiftly changing poems: "alas, a poem is not much honoured.

Poems are praised but costly gifts are sought.

If he be wealthy even a barbarian pleases."

The bitterness of these lines should perhaps warn her, but she feels only relief that he has not gone beyond her; that she has

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not finally pushed him beyond her power over him. "Let love find entry, veiled in friendship's name," Rikkarda sparkles still.

But he looks darkly at her, and delivers instead one of his punishments: 'Ovid was perhaps more to the point, my lady, when he said, "If you are wise, cheat women only. Keep faith save for this one deceitfulness."' He does not laugh to soften his words. Nor does he speak them softly. They enter her in sharp, clean, precise stabs. Is he just speaking his anger or is he telling her a truth? What has happened at Trier?

Someone sniggers behind him. It is this laugh, this enjoyment of her humiliation even more than the sudden attack from Henry, that causes Rikkarda to flush deeply. Tears threaten her. She sees from the dark face in front of her that Henry too dislikes the laughter but he says nothing, nor does he turn around. He returns the loyalty of his men by refusing to rebuke them in public. Only a certain subtle stiffening of Henry's body would have indicated to the knight behind that the Lord had not appreciated his laughter.

Yet he did mean to hurt her. To shake her power over him. What are we now, she thinks, but two old warriors from love's cruel camp? Watching each other like hawks, and with as much mercy as one of those proud birds. Rikkarda gazes at the tapestry on the wall nearest to her, burying herself in detail, entering the Garden of Eden, picking out the cream threads that make up the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, until she can reweave herself, become ordered and calm. No longer a foolish, caring, vulnerable woman who can be insulted, but once more the mother of a Queen. And the newly elected youthful Archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen. As these thoughts of her successes do their soothing work, she becomes aware that

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Henry is shielding her with his body, waiting without comment until she should regain herself, and the threat of tears subsides. He is watching her with the vision that lies behind his eyes.

Now he holds his hand out, and takes her to a chair, while his men bow and move back. The Archbishop sits diagonally opposite, leaning forward as if eager to hear whatever news it is that she brings him. More pleasantries and courtesies are exchanged – the health and wealth of many mutual acquaintances, of family, of vassals, have to be reported on. The Marchioness has news for many of his young men too, and they gather around the pair in a semi-circle. She flirts with some of them, with the ones who know how to, who enjoy this game; careful not to do so with the too young or too old – the ones who could take her attentions too seriously. The human heart is a fragile flower, seemingly the more so for being encased in strong bodies and the other armoury of men.

And she is careful too, for another reason. For Henry once used to disfavour any of his men who showed too great a delight in the Marchioness.

This art of conversation they play at for some time, until reluctantly she brings it to an end, for she sees that despite his enjoyment of the courtesies, the Lord is waiting to hear her real reason for coming to Mainz. He is tired. She regrets that her news will empty the room of the light and joyous atmosphere she has been cultivating, has been cultivating all her life, it seems. And always, so it also seems, this garden of delights has been challenged and threatened by her daughter Richardis. At first as a stubborn young fighter in the flesh, and now still challenging her mother from a distance. From the side of the woman she claims is her real mother, Richardis von Stade's power to disrupt

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the courts of the Marchioness has not lessened.

'My Lord,' Rikkarda says, coming finally to her business, 'the magistra Hildegard is lying on her bed, unable to speak or move. They think she may be dying.'

The surrounding men exclaim; there is concern, alarm, excitement. And an explosion of breath from the Archbishop. She smiles and raises her hand, in a gesture that acknowledges the rightness of his response, that she too experienced anger at the news.

'What, madam, am I expected to do about this affair?' Henry snaps, 'Am I expected to heal her? She is the expert in those arts!'

'I do not think it is medicine that can cure her malady,' Rikkarda waits.

'Well what?' Henry asks with impatience, refusing the game. 'What is it, then, that the magistra wants from me now?'

'She has received further instructions from the Living Light. She has been told to leave the abbey. There is a property downriver from Disibodenberg, at Mount St Rupert. I believe that your canons own some of the lands there -'

'Jesu!' Henry leaps from his chair. 'After all this-.' He looks ready to explode. Immediately all signs of sympathy with the prophetess vanish from his men's faces.

But the Marchioness keeps her face steady and clear. From deep inside her she fights down her fear of him and produces instead, from a region she visualises as a lake of ice, a cool laugh at his anger. The laugh says it is useless to protest. The men in the room are shocked at it, but Henry looks quickly at her. He remains for a moment poised in mid air, as if choosing whether he might fly further into a rebellious rage. She keeps her gaze

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upon him, cool, steady, bringing him back from such an indignity, to him and to her. She can see he is already detaching from his rage. And then, decision made, he gives her a quick nod. She feels some of the tension leave her body. She knows she can trust him to continue their work, even if he has to punish her for it on occasion.

But for his men's benefit he sinks back slowly into his chair, and, covering his face with his strong brown hands, groans aloud. 'Madam,' he says from behind his palms, in a muffled voice of long-suffering humour, 'please tell me all about it.'