

# **King John**

**by William Shakespeare**

Presented by Paul W. Collins

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## Chapter One Possession and Right

From his throne, King John of England addresses the ambassador. “Now say, Chatillon: what would France with us?”

The visitor nods. “After greeting, thus speaks the King of France of my behavior to the majesty, the borrowed majesty, of England here—”

“A *strange* beginning: ‘*borrowed*’ majesty!” says the white-haired queen mother, frowning as she stands beside the king. Eleanor of Aquitaine is the widow of King Henry II.

“In silence, good mother, *hear* the embassy.”

Annoyed, Lord Chatillon resumes, haughtily: “*France*, in right and true behalf of thy deceased brother Geoffrey’s son, *Arthur Plantagenet*, lays most *lawful* claim to this fair island, to Ireland and the territories of Poitiers, Anjou, Touraine, and Maine,”—four areas of France now held by the English, “desiring thee to lay aside the sword which sways *usurpingly* in these several titles, and put these same into young *Arthur*’s hand—thy nephew and, *rightly*, thy *royal sovereign!*”

John, new to the throne—his older brother, King Richard, died in France, fighting King Philip’s forces—has expected a challenge to his rule centered on the boy Arthur, nominal Duke of Brittany. “What follows if we disallow of this?”

Chatillon’s face darkens. “The proud control of *fierce and bloody war*, to *enforce* these rights so forcibly withheld!”

King John is calm. “We here have *controlment* for control, *warfare* for war—and *blood* for *blood!* So answer France.”

“Then take my king’s *defiance* from my mouth, to the farthest limit of my embassy!”

“Bear mine to him,” says the king, “and so depart in peace.” But, anger rising, he offers a warning: “Go thou as *lightning* toward the eyes of France!—for ere thou canst report, *I will be there!*—and the *thunder* of my *cannon* shall be heard!

“So *hence!* Be thou the trumpet of *our wrath!*—and sullen presage of your own *decay!*”

“An honourable conduct let him have. Pembroke, look to ’t,” he tells the earl. “Farewell, Chatillon.”

The ambassador bows curtly and strides away. He leaves the throne room, with Lord Pembroke and both noblemen’s attendants hurrying behind.

- As the stunned courtiers exchange comments, Eleanor speaks privately. “What *now*, my son? Have I not ever said how that ambitious Constance would not cease till she had kindled France, and all the world, upon the right and party of her son?”

- “This might have been prevented and made whole with very easy *arguments of love*—which now the manage of two kingdoms must with fearful, *bloody issue* arbitrate!”

- John is fully confident. “Our strong *right* and our possession are for *us.*”

- “Your strong *possession* much more than your right!—or else it must go *wrong* with you and me! So much my thinking whispers in your ear, which none but heaven and you and I shall hear.”

A rural sheriff has come into the hall and approached Lord Essex. The earl listens, then walks to the throne. “My liege, here is the *strangest* controversy that e’er I heard, come from the country to be judged by you! Shall I produce the men?”

John nods. “Let them approach.”

The king has decided how to secure money for the war; he announces to the court, “Our abbeys and our priories shall pay this expedition’s charge.” An immediate stir follows; the Church will not willingly yield to the taxation.

The sheriff’s two disputants now come before King John. “What men are you?”

“Your faithful subject, I!” The tall, powerfully built one bows. “A gentleman born in Northamptonshire, and eldest son, as I suppose, to Robert Faulconbridge, a soldier knighted in the field by the honour-giving hand of Coeur de Lion!”—the late King Richard.

“What art thou?” John asks the other, a slender, sharp-faced young man.

“The son and *heir* to that same Faulconbridge,” says Robert.

“Is that the *elder*, yet art *thou* the heir?” the king asks him. “You came not of one mother then, it seems....”

Says Philip, “Most certainly of one *mother*, mighty king; that is well known; and, as is *thought*, one father. But for the certain *knowledge* of that truth, I put you o’er to Heaven and to my mother. Of that I might doubt, as *all men’s* children may.”

“*Out on thee*, rude man!” protests Lady Eleanor. “Thou dost *shame* thy mother, and wound her *honour* with this diffidence!”

“*I*, madam? *No!*—I have no *reason* for it! That is my *brother’s* plea, and none of mine!—the which if he can prove, he thereby pops me out from at least *five hundred pound a year!* Heaven *guard* my mother’s honour—and *my land!*” The money is the income it produces, paid by tenant farmers.

“A good, blunt fellow!” says John, accustomed to hearing courtiers’ roundabout rhetoric. “Why, being younger born, doth he lay claim to thy inheritance?”

“I know not why, except to get the land,” says Philip. “Only this *once* has he slandered me with bastardy.

“As to whether I be as *truly* begot or no, that still I lay upon my mother’s head. But that I am as *well* begot, my liege, *fair* befall the bones that took the pains for me!” he adds.

He motions toward his brother. “Compare our *faces*, and be judge yourself.

“If old Sir Robert *did* beget us both, and his son Robert were *like him*, O Father, *on my knee* I give *heaven* thanks I was *not* like to thee!” Philip is certainly more handsome and physically impressive than Robert.

King John chuckles, as do his courtiers. “Why, what a madcap hath heaven lent us here!”

- The queen mother, leaning closer to the king, whispers. “He hath a trick of *Coeur de Lion’s* face!—and the *accent of his tongue* seems like his! Do *you* not read some tokens of my son in the *large* composition of this man?”

- John nods, remembering his strong, bold brother, a warrior of renown whose exploits are already sounding legendary. “Mine eye hath well examined his parts, and finds them perfect *Richard!*”

The king turns to Robert, “Sirrah, speak: what doth move you to claim your brother’s land?”

But Philip answers: “Because he hath a face *half* like my *mother’s*; with that, Half-face would he have *all my land!* For a half-faced *groat*,”—a small, well worn coin, “*five hundred pound a year!*”

Now, finally, Robert begins his suit: “My gracious liege, when that my father lived, *your brother* did employ my father much—”

“Well, sir, by *that* you cannot get my land!—your tale must be how he employed my *mother*,” quips Philip.

“—and once dispatched him in an embassy to Germany, there with the emperor to treat of high affairs touching that time,” says Robert. “The king took the advantage of his absence, and in the mean time sojourned at my father’s—where how he did *prevail* I shame to speak! But truth is truth.

“When this same lusty gentleman was begot, large lengths of sea and shore between my father and my mother lay—as I have heard my father speak himself,” says Robert. “Upon his death he *by will* bequeathed his lands to *me*, and took it on his death-bed that this, my *mother’s* son, was none of *his!*—that if he *were*, he came into the world full *fourteen weeks* before the course of time!

“Then, good my liege, let me have what is *mine*—my father’s land—as was my father’s *will!*”

King John considers the law. "Sirrah, your brother is *legitimate*," he tells Robert. "Your father's wife did after wedlock bear him; and if she did play false, the fault was *hers*—which fault lies as the hazard of all husbands that marry wives.

"Tell me, what if my brother, who, as you say, took pains to beget this son, had from your father *claimed* this son for *his*? In sooth, good friend, your father might have *kept* this calf, bred from his cow, from all the *world*—in sooth he *might*!

"If he *were* my brother's, my brother could not claim him; nor could your father *reject* him, even being none of his.

"Thus I conclude: *my* mother's son did beget *your* father's *heir*; and your father's heir must have your father's *land*."

Robert is stunned. "Shall then my father's *will* be of no force to *dispossess* that child which is *not his*?"

Says Philip dryly, "Of no more force to dispossess me, sir, than was his will to *beget* me, as I think."

Queen Eleanor regards him. "Which hadst thou rather be: a Faulconbridge like thy brother, and enjoy thy *land*; or the reputed son of Coeur de Lion, in thy *presence* a *lord*—but no land beside."

Replies Philip, "Madam, if my brother had *my* shape, and I had *his*—Sir Robert's, like him—and if my *legs* were two such *riding-rods*, my *arms* such stuffed *eel-skins*, my *face* so thin that by mine ear I durst not stick a rose, lest men should say, 'Look, where *three-farthings*'—a rose-embossed coin—"goes!" And if in *his* shape were I heir to *all* land...

"I would I might never stir from off this place! I would *give* it, every foot, *not to have his face*! I would not be Sir Bob in *any* case!"

"I like thee well!" laughs old Queen Eleanor. "Wilt thou forsake thy fortune, bequeath thy land to him, and follow me? I am a *soldier* now, and bound for France!"

Philip turns to Robert, "Brother, *take* you my land—I'll take my chance! Sell your face for *five pence* and 'tis *dear*"—overpriced. "Yet your face hath got five hundred pound a year!"

"Madam, I'll follow you unto the death!" vows Philip.

She laughs again. "Nay, I would have you go *before* me *thither*!"

Laughing, he bows. "Our country manners give way to our betters'!"

John rises to stand before his nephew. "What is thy name?"

"Philip, my liege; so is my name *begun*: 'Philip, good old Sir Robert's wife's eldest son.'"

The king steps forward. "From hence forth, bear his name whose *form* thou bear'st! Kneel thee down Philip, but rise more great!" He places the flat of his sword on the man's shoulder. "Arise, *Sir Richard*, and *Plantagenet*!"—a family name of kings.

The new nobleman, just knighted, rises and bows to the king and queen mother. He turns to Robert. "Brother by the mother's side, give me your hand! *My* father gave me *honour*, yours gave land. Now *blessèd* be that hour, by night or day: when *I* was begot, Sir Robert was *away*!"

Eleanor is delighted. "The very *spirit* of Plantagenet!"—especially of King Henry II, her second husband. "I am thy *grandam*, Richard; *call* me so!"

"Madam, by chance, but not by *truth*"—not by his mother's being true, says Sir Richard. He shrugs. "What, though? *Something's* about: a little out of the light, in at the window, or else o'er the hatch. Who dares not '*stir*' by day must walk by night!"

"And have is *have*, however men do catch! Near or far off, well *won* is still well *shot*—and I am *I*, howe'er I was begot!"

King John tells Robert, "Go, Faulconbridge. Now hast thou thy desire; a landless knight makes *thee* a landed squire!"

"Come, madam, and come, Richard, we must speed for *France*!"

"To France—for it is more in *need*!"

"Brother, adieu," says Richard to Robert kindly. "Good fortune come to thee, for thou hast gotten i' the path of honesty."

The king and queen mother head toward the Privy Council chamber, followed by several lords; the other courtiers leave the throne room, gesticulating in urgent, wartime conversation. The now-secure county squire heads for home.

Thinks Sir Richard, *Afoot of honour, better than I was—but by a-many foot of land the worse!*

Pondering his new role as a noble agent of chivalry, he considers marriage—sourly. *Well, now can I make any 'Joan'—a term for a common woman, or worse—a lady!*

His imagination roams; he pictures a gentleman bowing and greeting him: *'Good e'en, Sir Richard!'*

*'God-a-mercy, fellow.' And if his name be George, I'll call him Peter, for new-made honour doth forget men's names: 'tis too respectable and too unsociable for your conversation!*

He sees himself at an inn. *Now your traveller—he and his toothpick—is at My Worship's meal; and when my knightly stomach is stuffed, why then I suck my pickèd teeth, and catechise my man of countries. 'My dear sir,'—thus, leaning on mine elbow I begin. 'I shall beseech you—that is, question you now.'*

*And then comes answer like an ABCs book's: 'O sir,' says Answer, 'At your Best Command!—at your employment!—at your service, sir!' 'No, sir,' says Question, 'I, sweet sir, at yours!'*

*Then, ere Answer knows what Question would ask—save in dialogue of compliment, and talk of the Alps and Apennines, the Pyrenees and the river Po—it draws toward supper, and so concludes.*

*But this is 'Your Worship'-ful society, as befits a mounting spirit like myself—for he is but a bastard of the time who doth not smack of observation!—reflect its trends. Richard laughs. And so am I, whether I smack or no!*

*And not only in dress and device, exterior form, outward accoutrement, but also from the inner motion to deliver sweet, sweet, sweet poison for the age's tooth!—treachery. Which, though I will not practise deceit, yet to avoid being deceived I mean to learn—for deceptions shall strew the footsteps of my rising.*

Going to the throne-room doors, he spots a lady hurrying down the corridor from the palace entrance.

*But who comes in such haste in riding robes? What woman-post is this? Hath she no husband that will take pains to blow a horn before her? Oh, me—it is my mother!*

The beautiful gentlewoman, nearly out of breath, reaches him, followed by her steward.

“How now, good lady! What brings you here to court so hastily?”

Lady Faulconbridge has learned that Robert meant to press his claim with the king; she is furious. “Where is that *slave*, thy brother? Where is he, that holds *mine honour* in chase, up and down?”—high and low.

“My brother *Robert*, old Sir Robert's son?—*Colbrand* the giant—that same mighty man?” he gibes, alluding to a figure of fable. “Is it *Sir Robert's* son that you seek so?”

“Sir Robert's son!—*aye*, thou *unreverent* boy, *Sir Robert's* son! Why scorn'st thou at Sir Robert? He is Sir Robert's son, and so art thou!”

“James Gurney, wilt thou give us leave awhile?” asks Richard.

The man nods. “Good leave, good Philip.” He moves away.

Sir Richard laughs. “*Philip?*—it's the *French king's* name—a *sparrow's*! James, there's *toys* abroad! Anon I'll tell thee more!”

The new knight faces his mother. “Madam, I was *not* old Sir Robert's son. Sir Robert might have eaten *his* part in me upon Good Friday and ne'er broke his *fast*!”

“Sir Robert could do well,” he says gently. “But, marry, do confess—could *he* beget *me*?” asks robust Richard, spreading his strong arms. “Sir Robert could not do it! We know *his* handiwork!”

“Therefore, good mother, to whom *am* I beholden for these limbs?” He smacks a mighty thigh. “Sir Robert never help to make *this* leg!”

But Lady Faulconbridge merely glares. “Hast thou *conspirèd* with thy brother?—thou who for thine *own* gain shouldst *defend* mine honour! What *means* this scorn, thou most-*untoward knave*?”

“Knight, *knight*, good mother! *Basilisco*-like!”—like the comical knight of a popular play. “*What*?—I am *dubbed*!—I had it on my shoulder!

“But, Mother, I am *not* Sir Robert’s son. I have disclaimèd Sir Robert *and* my land: legitimation, name and all, is gone.

“Then, good my mother, let me know my *father*,” he pleads earnestly. “Some proper man, I hope. Who *was* it, Mother?”

“Hast thou denied thyself a *Faulconbridge*?”

“As faithfully as I deny the Devil.”

The lady, now thoughtful, studies his face. She sighs. “King Richard, Coeur de Lion, was thy father.

“By *long and vehement suit* I was seducèd to make room for him in my husband’s bed; Heaven, lay not my transgression to *my* charge!

“Thou art the issue of my dear offence, which was so strongly urgèd past my defence!”

He smiles at her. “Now, by this light, were I to be got again, madam, I would not wish a *better* father!

“Some sins do bear their *privilege* on earth; and so doth yours,” he tells her. “Your fault was not your *folly*; you must *needs* have lain your heart at *his* dispose, subjected tribute to *commanding* love, against whose fury and unmatched force the fearless *lion* could not wage a fight!—nor keep its princely *heart* from *Richard’s* hand!

“He that perforce robs *lions* of their hearts may easily win a woman’s!

“*Aye*, my mother, with all *my* heart I *thank* thee for my father!

“Who dares but say thou didst not *well* when I was begot, I’ll send his soul to hell!

“Come, lady, I will show thee to my *kin*—and they shall say: when Richard me begot, if thou hadst said him *nay* it had been sin!

“Who says it *was*, he *lies*! I say ’twas *not*!”

She ignores his rascally jest on *naught*.

## Chapter Two Confrontations

**H**ere in France, Guiomar, Archduke of Austria, is also the Viscount of Limoges; he has led his forces north from the Aquitaine region to join with the army of King Philip in besieging an English-held city about fifty-five leagues southwest of Paris.

The sovereign is beginning the war against King John, from whom he first intends to wrest control of the territories in France occupied by the English.

“Here before Angiers, well *met*, brave Austria!” says the king’s son Louis, known as *the dauphin*, as he and his father prepare to introduce the foreign nobleman to King John’s young nephew. The French are pressing the boy’s hereditary claim to England’s crown—his deceased father, Geoffrey, was an older brother of John’s—to bolster their own cause.

King Philip solemnly addresses the pretender, who is eleven: “Arthur, that great forerunner of thy blood, *Richard*, who robbed the lion of his heart, and fought the holy wars in Palestine, by this brave duke came early to his grave. And, for amends to his posterity, at our importuning he is come hither to spread his colours, boy, *in thy behalf*, and to rebuke the *usurpation* of thine unnatural uncle, English John!

“*Embrace* him, love him, give him *welcome* hither!”

As the lords listen, Arthur, standing beside his mother, looks up at Limoges—who sports King Richard’s cape, made from a lion’s hide—and says, as he has been taught to say, “God shall forgive you Coeur de Lion’s *death* for what you rather give his offspring: *life*, by shadowing their *right* under your *wings of war*! I give you welcome with a powerless hand, but with a *heart* full of unstained love! Welcome before the gates of Angiers, duke!”

“Ah, noble boy!” says the dauphin. “Who would not do *thee* right?”

The Austrian leans toward Arthur. “Upon thy cheek lay I this zealous kiss, as seal to this indenture of my love: that to my home I will no more return,” he says, straightening, “till Angiers and the rights thou hast in France, together with that pale, that white-faced shore”—the chalky cliffs of Dover—“whose foot spurns back the ocean’s roaring tides, and coops from other lands her islanders, even until *England*, hedged in by the main,”—the sea, “that water-walled bulwark, ever secure and confident from foreign purposes—even till that utmost corner of the west *salute* thee for her *king*!”

“Till then, fair boy, I will not think of home, but *follow arms*!”

Cries Lady Constance, “Oh, take his *mother’s* thanks, a *widow’s* thanks, till your strong hand shall help to give him strength to make *more* requital to your love!”

The ambitious Austrian’s smile seems gracious. “The peace of *heaven* is theirs that lift their swords in such a *just* and *charitable* war!”

“Well, then, to *work*!” says King Philip. “Our *cannon* shall be bent against the brows of this resisting town!” He turns to his herald, nearby, beside the royal tent. “Call for our chiefest men of the discipline, to cull the plots of best advantage”—to select targets. “We’ll lay before this town our royal bones!—wade to the market-place in *French men’s blood*!—but we will make it *subject to this boy*!”

But the duchess hopes for a simpler victory—and one less costly to the nation her boy is to rule. “Stay for an answer to your *embassy*,” she urges, “lest, unadvised, you stain your swords with blood! My lord Chatillon may from England bring that right in *peace* which here we urge in war; and then we shall repent each drop of blood that hot, rash haste so incorrectly shed.”

The king points. “A wonder, lady!—*lo*, upon thy wish, our messenger Chatillon is arrived!”

The rider quickly dismounts, and, after a servant receives the reins, hurries toward the king.

“What England says, say *briefly*, gentle lord!” Philip tells him as he bows. “We coldly *pause* for thee, Chatillon. Speak!”

“Then turn your forces from *this paltry siege*,” says the ambassador, “and stir them up against a *mightier* task!”

“The King of England, impatient of your just demands, hath *put himself in arms*! The adverse winds by whose leisure I have been stayed have given him time *to land his legions all as soon as I*!”

“His marches are expedient *to this town*!—his forces *strong*, his soldiers *confident*!”

“With him along is come the mother-queen, an *Ate*”—goddess of vengeance—“stirring him to blood and strife! With her, her granddaughter, the Lady Blanche of Spain; with them a bastard of the deceased king—and *all the unsettled youths of the land*!”

“Rash, inconsidering, fiery *voluntaries*, with ladies’ faces but fierce *dragons’* spleens, have sold their fortunes at their native homes, bearing their birthrights proudly *on their backs* to make hazard of *new* fortunes here!”

“In brief, the heavy English hulls have now wafted across a *braver* choice of *dauntless spirits* than did ever float upon the swelling tide to do offence and scathe in Christendom!”

The nobles are silent, stunned. Urgently, Chatillon points west. “The interruption of their churlish *drums* cuts off more circumstance!” he cries. “They are *at hand*!—therefore *prepare*, to parley or to *fight*!”

Philip is amazed. “How much unlooked-for is this *expedition*!”—speed.

“By however much unexpected, by *so much* we must awake *endeavor for defence*!” says the archduke. “For *courage* mounteth with *occasion*! Let them be *welcome* then: *we are prepared*!”



King Philip nods to his captains, who hurry away to rouse their ranks of foot-soldiers.

The royal parties have agreed to talk, and they soon convene just outside the heavy, barred doors of the main gate in the massive stone walls surrounding Angiers.

King John strides past the guards and attendants to face King Philip. “*Peace* be to France—if France in peace permit our just and lineal entrance to *our own*! If not: *bleed, France!*—and peace ascend to heaven, whiles we, God’s wrathful agent, do *correct* their proud contempt who *drive* his peace to heaven!”

“Peace be to *England*, if *war* return from France to England, there to live in peace!” retorts Philip. “England we *love*, and for *England’s sake* with the burden of our *armour* here we sweat! This *toil* of ours should be a work of *thine*—but thou art so far from *loving* England that thou hast under-wrought its *lawful* king, *cut off* the sequence of posterity, *out-faced* an infant state, and done a *rape* upon the maiden virtue of the crown!”

Philip pulls the boy forward. “Look here upon thy brother *Geoffrey’s* face—these eyes, these brows, were moulded out of *his*! This little abstract doth contain that *large* which died in Geoffrey, and the hand of Time shall draw this brief into as huge a volume!

“That Geoffrey was thy *elder brother* born, and this is his son! *England* was Geoffrey’s right, and thus is *his son’s*!

“How in the name of God comes it, then, that *thou* art called a king, when *living blood* doth beat in *these* temples, which *own the crown* that thou o’ermasterest?”

King John demands, indignantly, “From *whom* hast *thou* this great commission, France, to draw my answer from thine articles?”

Says Philip, “From the *supernal Judge* that stirs good thoughts in *any* breast of strong authority to look into blots and stains on *right*! *That Judge* hath made me *guardian* to this boy!—under whose warrant I *impeach* thy wrong, and by whose help I mean to *chastise* it!”

King John scoffs. “*Alack*, thou dost *usurp* authority!”

“*Excused* it is,” King Philip replies scornfully, “to *beat usurping down*!”

Lady Eleanor now steps forward to challenge: “Who is it thou dost call *usurper*, France?”

Lady Constance faces her English mother-in-law. “Let *me* make answer!—*thy usurping son*!”

“*Out, insolent!*” says Eleanor, waving her away. “Shall *thy bastard* be king?—so that *thou* mayst be a *queen*, and check the world?”

Says Constance, bitterly, “My bed was ever to thy *son* as true as *thine* was to thy *husband*!” Eleanor’s infidelity, while her first husband was away at war, led to her divorce. “And this boy is liker in feature to his father, Geoffrey, than *thou* and *John*—who are as like as *rain* to *water*, or *Devil* to his *dam*, in *manners*!

“*My boy* a bastard? By my soul, I think his *father* was never so true-begot!—it cannot be, if *thou* wert his mother!”

Eleanor says sourly to Arthur, “*There’s* a good mother, boy—who *blots thy father*!”

Constance tells him, “*There’s* a good *grandam*, boy, that would blot *thee*!”

“*Peace!*” says the Austrian, irked by the women’s shrill exchange.

“Hear the *crier!*” laughs Sir Richard contemptuously.

Limoges frowns at the him. “Who the devil art *thou*?”

“One, sir, that will *play* the devil with you, if he may catch your *hide* and you alone! You are the *hare* of the *proverb*, whose valour plucks *dead* lions by the beard! I’ll *stroke* your skin-coat, all right, if I catch you! Sirrah, *look* to’t!—in faith, *I will*, i’ faith!”

John’s niece glares at the duke, “Oh, *well* did he become that lion’s robe who did *disrobe* the lion of that robe!”—King Richard. Lady Blanche’s father is the King of Castile in Spain.

Sir Richard laughs at Limoges. “It lies as sightly on the back of *him* as great *Alcides*”—Hercules—“shows upon an *ass*!”

“But, ass, I’ll *lay on* what shall make your shoulders *crack*—and take that burthen from your back!”

Demands the angry duke, “What *cracker* is this same that deafs our ears with such abundance of superfluous breath?”

But King Philip turns impatiently to the dauphin. “Louis, describe straight what *we shall do!*”

“*Women and fools, break off your conference!*” the prince tells the English side. He lays a hand on Arthur’s slender shoulder. “King John, this is the very sum of all: England and Ireland, Anjou, Touraine, Maine and Poitiers, in right of *Arthur* do I *claim from thee!* Wilt thou *resign* them, and lay down thine arms?”

“*My life as soon!*” growls King John—to King Philip. “I do *defy* thee, France!” He addresses the boy: “Arthur of Bretagne, yield thee to my hand, and out of my dear love I’ll *give* thee more than e’er the coward hand of *France* can *win!* Submit thee, boy!”

And Eleanor smiles kindly. “Come to thy *grandam*, child!”

Says Constance sourly, “*Do*, child!—*go* to Grandam, child! Give Grandam a *kingdom*, and Grandam will give you a *plum*, a *cherry*—and a *fig!*”—a rude gesture. “*There’s a good grandam!*”

“Good my mother, *peace!*” moans Arthur. “I would that I were low in my *grave*; I am not worth this coil that’s made for me!”

“His mother shames him so, poor boy, that he *weeps,*” says Eleanor.

“Now *shame* upon *you*, whether he does or no!” cries Constance. “His *grandam’s wrongs*, and not his mother’s shames, draw from his poor eyes those heaven-moving pearls—which *Heaven* shall take in the nature of a *fee!*—*aye*, with these crystal beads, *Heaven* shall be bribèd to *do him justice*—and take *revenge* on *you!*”

“Thou *monstrous slanderer* of heaven and earth!” cries Eleanor.

Constance retorts fiercely: “Thou monstrous *injurer* of heaven and earth! Call not me slanderer!—thou and thine *usurp* the dominions, royalties and rights of this oppressèd boy! This is thy *eldest son’s son*, unfortunate in nothing but in *thee!*—*thy sins* are visited on this poor *child!*

“But the *canon of the law* is laid on him, being but the second generation removèd from thy *sin-conceiving* womb!”

“*Bedlam*, have *done!*” demands King John.

The duchess is defiant. “I have but *this* to say: that not only *she* is plaguèd for her sin, but God hath laid her plague on this removèd issue!—plaguèd *by* her and *with* her plague!—her *sin* his *injury!*—and the beadle”—whipper—“of *her sin* ill-punishes the person of this *child!* And all for *her!* *A plague upon her!*”

Eleanor draws herself up with stern dignity. “Thou unadvisèd scold, I can produce a *will* that *bars* the title of thy son!”

The other lady scoffs. “Oh, who doubts *that?* A will?—a *wicked* will; a *woman’s* will!—a *cankered grandam’s* will!”

Even King Philip is exasperated with Constance. “*Peace*, lady!” he tells her. “Pause, or be more *temperate!* It ill beseems this royal presence to cry aim to these ill-tunèd repetitions!”—to invite echoing replies.

He motions to his herald. “Some trumpet summon hither to these walls *the men of Angiers!* Let us hear them say whose title *they* admit, Arthur’s or John’s!”

The horn sounds; soon, citizens come to the parapet. The most corpulent calls down, “Who is it that hath warnèd us to the walls?”

King Philip, still beside the child, replies, loudly: “’Tis *France*, in behalf of *England!*”

“*England*, for *itself!*” cries King John. “You men of Angiers, and my loving subjects—”

Philip interrupts: “You men of Angiers, *Arthur’s* loving subjects, *our* trumpet called you to this gentle *parle*—”

“Under our advance!” says John. “Therefore hear us *first!*” He turns, and makes a broad gesture that sweeps the French positions—and gun batteries. “These flags of *France* that are here before the eye and prospect of your town, have hither marchèd to your *endamagement!*”

“Their *cannons* have *bowels full of wrath!*—already *mounted* are they to spit forth their iron indignation *'gainst your walls!*—all in preparation for a *bloody siege*, a merciless proceeding by these *French* confronting your city’s eyes, your wincing gates!

“And *but for our approach*, by this time those sleeping stones, that girdle you about as doth a vest, by the *compulsion* of their ord’nance had been *dishabited* from their fixèd beds of lime!—made wide for a *bloody power* to rush upon your peace in *havoc!*”

“But on the sight of *us*—your *lawful* king, who painfully, with *much expedient march*, have brought a *countercheck* before your gates, to *save unscratched* your city’s threatened face—*behold!*—the French, *amazèd*, vouchsafe a *parole!*”

“And *now*, instead of *shot-iron wrapped in fire* to make a shaking *fever* in your *walls*, they shoot but calm *words*, folded up in smoke to make a faithless *error* in your *ears!*”

“Trust which *accordingly*, kind citizens, and *let us in!* For your *king*, whose laboured spirits, wearied in this action of swift speed, craves harbourage within your city walls!”

King Philip glares up at the city men. “When *I* have said, then make answer to us *both!*”

He grips Arthur by the shoulder and pulls him forward. “*Lo*, in this right hand, whose protection is most divinely vowèd upon the right of him it holds, stands young *Plantagenet*, son to the *elder brother* of this man!—and *king* o’er him and all that he enjoys!

“For *his down-trodden equity* we tread in warlike march these greens before your town, bearing no further enmity to *you* than the constraint of hospitable zeal for the *relief* of this *oppressèd child* provokes *religiously!*”

“Be pleasèd, then, to pay that *duty* which you truly owe to him that *owns* it!—namely, *this young prince!*—and then hath our arms, like to a muzzled bear, all *offence* sealèd up, save in *aspect!* Our cannons’ malice vainly shall be spent against the invulnerable *clouds of heaven!*—and with a blessèd and unvexèd retire, with swords unhacked and helmets all unbruiseèd, we will bear *home* again that lusty blood which we came here to spout against your town, and leave your children, wives, and you in peace!”

Philip steps closer—frowning, now. “But if you unwisely *pass* our profferèd offer, ’tis not the roundure of your old-faceèd *walls* can hide you from our messengers of war,”—cannon, “though *all these English* and their military men were harboured within their rude circumference!

“Then *tell us*: shall your city call *us* lord, in that behalf which we have challenged it?—or shall we give the signal to our *rage*, and *stalk in blood* to our possession!”

The leading burgher speaks: “In brief: we are the *King of England’s* subjects; for him, and in his right, we hold this town.”

“Then *acknowledge* the king, and let me in!” calls King John.

The townsman demurs. “That can we not. But he that *proves* to be the king, to him will we prove *loyal!* Till that time have we rammed up our gates against the world.”

King John points to his own head. “Doth not the *crown of England* prove the king?”

“And if not *that*, I bring you *witnesses*,” he cries, pointing toward the army still marching up in legions behind him. “*Twice fifteen thousand* hearts of England’s breed—”

- *Bastards and else*, thinks Sir Richard.

“—to *verify* our title with their *lives!*”

King Philip responds: “As *many* and as *well-born* bloods as those—”

- *Some bastards, too*, thinks the knight.

“—stand in his face to *contradict* his claim!”

The gentleman of Angiers shrugs. “Till you compound whose right is worthier, we *for* the worthier withhold the right from *both.*”

King John sees that the city men are resolute. “Then God forgive the sin of all those souls that, before the dew of evening fall, shall fleet to their *everlasting* residence in dreadful trial over *our kingdom’s* king!”

“Amen, *amen!*” cries King Philip. “*Mount*, chevaliers! *To arms!*”

As the noblemen begin to move, the knight invokes chivalry: “*Saint George*, who thrashed the *dragon!*—and e’er since sits on his horse’s back at *mine hostess’ door*,” says Sir Richard, picturing the common tavern sign, “teach us some *fencing!*”

He sneers at the tawny-caped Austrian. “Sirrah, were we at home in *your* den, sirrah, I would put an *ass’s* head on your *lion’s* hide—and make a *monster* of you!”

“*Peace!* No more!” says the disgusted duke, turning away.

“*Oh, tremble!*” Richard warns those about him, “for you hear the *lion roar!*”

But King John, done with talking, grasps his arm and points west. “*Up, higher*—to the plain where we’ll set forth in best appointment all our regiments!”

Richard nods. “*Speed* then, to take advantage in the field!”

The English commanders return to their companies of troops.

King Philip is more than ready to fight them. “It shall be so!” He directs his lords east. “And at the *other* hill command the rest to stand!

“*For God* and *our right!*”

### Chapter Three Variable Victories

Streaming down from their respective hillsides, the kings’ armies collide—nobles on horseback, common soldiers on foot—piercing, slashing and hacking each other with lance, sword and dagger, pounding and pummeling with cudgel and fist.

After much fighting and many excursions large and small, the French king’s herald again comes to summon the city’s officials to the top of their front wall.

“You men of Angiers!—open wide your gates and let in young *Arthur*, Duke of *Bretagne!*—who by the hand of France this day hath made much work for *tears* in many an English mother, whose sons lie scattered, bleeding on the ground! Many a widow’s husband lies grovelling, coldly embracing the discoloured earth!

“And *victory* with *little loss* doth play upon the dancing banners, *triumphantly* displayed, of *the French!*—who are at hand to enter as *conquerors*, and to proclaim *Arthur* of Britain *England’s king!*—and *yours!*”

But now the English herald rides toward the gates and sounds his own trumpet. “*Rejoice*, you men of Angiers!—*ring your bells!* King John, *your king* and *England’s*, doth approach—*commander* of this hot, malicious day!

“*Their* armours that marchèd hence so *silver-bright* return hither all *gilt* with Frenchmen’s *blood!* There stuck no plume in *any English crest* that is removed by a staff of France!—*our* colours do return in those same hands that did display them when we first marchèd forth!—and, like a troop of jolly *huntsmen* come our lusty English, all with purpled hands dyèd in the slaughter of their dying foes!

“*Open your gates*, and give the *victors* way!”

The town’s most eminent citizen regards the horsemen—unimpressed. “Heralds, from off our towers we might behold, from first to last, the onset and retire of both your armies—whose *equality* our best eyes cannot but see!

“Blood hath bought blood, and blows have answered blows; strength was matched by strength, and power confronted power. Both are *alike!*—and both alike *we* like.

“One must *prove* greatest! While they weigh so even, we hold our town for neither, yet for *both.*”

King John and King Philip have agreed to a brief truce. On horseback, they now approach the wall and its towers, each with his attendants and several knights. Their retinues follow to join them before the gate.

“France, hast thou *yet more* blood to *cast away*?” asks John. “Say: shall the *current* of our right *run on*?—whose *passage*, vexèd with thy impediment, shall leave its native channel, and with course disturbèd *o’erswell* even thy confining shores!—unless thou let its silver water keep a peaceful progress to the ocean!”

Philip snorts. “England, thou hast not saved one *drop* of blood in this hot trial more than we of France!—rather, *lost more*! And I swear by *this hand*—that sways the *earth* this climate overlooks!—before we will lay down our justly borne arms, we’ll *put down thee* ’gainst whom these arms we bear!—or add a *royal* number to the dead, gracing the scroll that tells of this war’s loss, with slaughter coupled to the names of kings!”

Sir Richard is still elated after his strenuous first efforts in the thick of frenzied fighting, but he feels some frustration. *Hah! Majesty!—how high thy glory towers when the rich blood of kings is set on fire!*

*Oh, now doth Death line his dead jowls with steel: the swords of soldiers are his teeth, his fangs! And now he feasts, mouthing the flesh of men in undeterminate differences of kings!*

He watches as the monarchs dismount and walk toward the wall to parley. *Why stand these royal fronts amazèd thus? Cry ‘Havoc!’ kings!—back to the stainèd field, you equal potents, fiery-kindled spirits, and let destruction of one part confirm the other’s peace!*

*’Till then, blows, blood and death!*

King John calls to the observers above, “Whose party do ye townsmen yet admit?”

“*Speak, citizens!*” demands King Philip. “For *England*, who’s your *king*!”

The burgher replies: “The King of England, when we *know* the king.”

“Know him in *us*, that here hold up his *right*!” cries Philip.

“In *us*, that are *our own* great deputy, and bear possession here in our *person*!” shouts John, slapping his own breastplate, “lord of our presence, of Angiers, and of *you*!”

The city’s heavy dignitary, having watched their armies’ combat, is not convinced; he tells both, “A greater power than we *denies* all this! And till it be undoubted, we do lock our former scruple in our strong-barred gates, kingèd by our *fears* until our fears be *resolved*—purged and deposèd by some *certain* king!”

Sir Richard is disgusted—and he speaks out. “By heaven, these scoundrels of Angiers *flout* you kings, and stand securely on their battlements as if in a *theatre*, whence they gape and point at your industrious *scenes*—and *acts* of *Death*!

“You royal presences, be ruled by me! Do like the mutines of *Jerusalem*!”—the holy city’s contentious factions, when besieged by Romans. “Be *friends* awhile, and both, conjointly, bend your sharpest deeds of malice *on this town*! *East* and *west*, let France and England mount their battering cannon, chargèd *to the mouths*,”—packed full of gunpowder, “till their *soul-scarring* clamours have *brawled down* the flinty ribs of this *contemptuous* city!

“I’d play *incessantly* upon these jades,”—whores, “even till *unfencèd desolation* leave them as naked as the *vulgar air*!

“That done, *dissever* your united strengths,” Richard urges the sovereigns, “and part your mingled colours”—banners—“once again—turn face to face, and bloody *point* to *point*! Then, in a moment, Fortune shall cull forth out of one side her happy minion, to whom in favour she shall give the day, and kiss him with a glorious *victory*!

“How like you *this* wild counsel, mighty states?—smacks it not somewhat *judicious*?”

Says King John, “Now by the sky that hangs above our heads, *I like it well*! France, shall we knit our powers and lay this Angiers even with the ground?—then, after, fight over who shall be king of it?”

Sir Richard challenges King Philip: “If thou hast the *mettle* of a *king*, being as wronged as we are by this peevish town, turn thou the mouths of thine artillery, as we will *ours*, against these saucy walls!

“And when that we have dashed them to the ground, why then defy *each other*—and pell-mell make work upon ourselves, for heaven or hell!”

“Let it be so!” cries King Philip. “Say: where will *you* assault?”

King John is eager. “We from the west we’ll send *destruction* into this city’s bosom!”

Limoges nods. “I from the north!” says the Austrian duke.

“Our thunders from the south shall *rain* their drift of bullets on this town!” says King Philip.

Sir Richard is privately delighted: *Oh, prudent discipline!—from north to south, Austria and France shoot—into each other’s mouth! I’ll stir them to it!* “Come, away, away!” he cries, urging on both monarchs.

But the wealthy citizens above have thought of an alternative. “*Hear us, great kings!*” cries the leader. “Vouchsafe to *stay* awhile, and I shall show you *peace* and fair-faced *league!* Win you this city without *stroke* or *wound!*—rescue those breathing lives to die in *beds*, who’d here become sacrifices for the *field!*”

“Persever not, but *hear* me, mighty kings!” he calls down.

“Speak on, with favour,” says King John. “We are bent to hear.”

The fat man leans from a crenel in the stone battlement, and points. “That daughter, there, of Spain, the Lady *Blanche*, is *niece* to England.

“Look upon the years of *Louis* the dauphin and that lovely maid’s!

“If *lusty* Love”—Cupid—“should go in quest of *beauty*, where should he find it fairer than in *Blanche*? If *zealous* Love should go in search of *virtue*, where should he find it purer than in *Blanche*? If *ambitious* Love sought a *match of birth*, in whose veins abounds richer blood than in *Lady Blanche*?”

“Such as *she* is in beauty, virtue, birth, is the young *dauphin* in every way completed!

“Yet *not complete*—nay, he is not *she*; and *she*, again, lacks nothing to *name* lack, if lack it be, but that *she* is not *he!* He is the *half* part of a blessed man, left to be *finishèd* by such as she; and she a fair *divided* excellence, whose *fulness* of perfecting lies in him!

“Oh, two such silver currents, when they join, do *glorify* the banks that bound them in! And two such shores to two such streams *made one*, two such controlling bounds shall *you* be, kings, to these two princely persons—if you *marry* them!

“This union shall do more than *battering* can to our fast-closèd gates!—for at this match, with swifter speed than *powder* can enforce, the mouth of passage shall we *fling wide ope*, and give you *entrance!*”

“But *without* this match, the *sea enragèd* is not half so *deaf*, nor *lion* more *confident*, nor *mountains* of rock more free from *motion*—no, not *Death himself* in mortal fury *half so peremptory*—as we to *keep* this city!”

King Philip mocks the townsman’s words of defiance. “Here’s a threat that shakes the rotten carcass of old *Death* out of his rags! Here’s a *large* mouth, indeed, that spits forth death and mountains, rocks and seas!—talks as familiarly of roaring *lions* as maids of thirteen do of *puppy-dogs!* What *cannoneer* begot *this* lusty blood?—he *speaks* plain cannon-fire!—*smoke* and *belch!* He gives the *bastinado*”—torturous pounding of a prisoner’s feet—“with his *tongue!* Our ears are *cudgelled!*—not a *word* of his but buffets better than a *fist* of France!

“*Zounds*, I was never so *bethumped* with words since I first called my brother’s father ‘*Dad!*’” The late king was to be addressed—by everyone—as “Your Majesty.”

- As Philip gibes on, Lady Eleanor speaks quietly to John. “Son, list to this injunction: *make this match!*—give *with* your niece a *dowry large enough!* For by this knot thou shalt tie surely thy now-unsure assurance to the *crown*, so that yon green boy shall have no sun to ripen the bloom that promiseth a mighty fruit!”

- She watches Philip, who is now conferring with the handsome dauphin. “I see a *yielding* in the looks of France! Mark, how they whisper! *Urge* them now, while their souls are capable of this ambition, lest now-*molten* zeal *cool* in the windy breath of soft petitions, pity and remorse, and congeal again to what it was!”

The men of Angiers stare down. “Why *answer* not the double majesties this friendly entreaty of our threatened town?”

Philip looks to John. "Speak *England* first—who hath been *forward* to speak first unto this city. What say *you*?"

John moves to stand beside Blanche. "If that the *dauphin* there, thy princely son, can in this book of beauty read '*I love*,' her *dowry* shall weigh equal with a *queen's*!—for *Anjou* and fair *Touraine, Maine, Poitiers*, and *all* that upon this side the sea we find liable to our crown and dignity—except this city now by us besieged—shall gild her *bridal* bed, and make her as rich in *titles, honours* and *promotions* as she, in *beauty, education, blood*, can hold with any princess of the *world*!"

Philip asks his son. "What say'st thou, boy? Look on the lady's face."

"I *do*, my lord," says Louis happily, "and in her eye I find a *wonder*!—or a wondrous *miracle*: the shadow of myself formed in her eye, which being but the shadow of your son, becomes a *sun*, and makes your son a shadow! I do protest I never loved *myself* till now!

"I behold myself infixed, drawn in the flattering tablet of *her eye*!"

He turns to the lovely lady, and soon they are speaking softly, shyly, together.

- Sir Richard the watches the couple—cynically. '*Drawn in the flattering tablet of her eye!*' Hanged in *the frowning wrinkle of her brow*, and quartered in *her heart*, doth he espy himself—*Love's* traitor!

- He looks at the dauphin. *This is a pity, now, that there should be such a lover!*—so vile a lout as he!—*even hanged and drawn and quartered!*

Blanche tells the French prince, "My *uncle's* will in this respect is *mine*; if he see aught in you that makes him like—anything sees which moves *his* liking—I can with ease translate it to *my will*!" She blushes. "Or if *you* will, to speak more properly, I will enforce it easily to *my love*!"

"I will not flatter you, my lord, that *all* I see in you is worthy of love, further than *this*: I do see nothing in you, though *churlish thoughts themselves* should be your judge, that I can find should merit any hate!"

King John goes to them. "What say these young ones? What say *you*, my niece?"

Blanche curtseys. "That she is bound in honour ever to do what *you* in wisdom vouchsafe to say."

John turns to Louis. "Speak then, Prince Dauphin; can you love this lady?"

The young man beams. "Nay, ask me if I can *refrain* from love!—for I *do* love her, most unfeignedly!"

King John is pleased. "Then do I give *Volquessen*, Touraine, Maine, Poitiers and Anjou, those *five* provinces, *with* her to thee!—and this addition *more*: full *thirty thousand marks* of English coin!

"Philip of France, if thou be pleased withal, command thy son and daughter-in-law to join hands!"

"It likes us well!" says the French sovereign, smiling. "Young princes, close your hands!"

"And your *lips*, too!" adds the Austrian duke, "for I am well assured that I did so when I was first assured!"

King Philip faces the city. "*Now*, citizens of Angiers, *open your gates!*" he calls. "Let in that amity which you have made!—for at Saint Mary's chapel the rites of *marriage* shall be solemnized *immediately!*"

He glances around his French contingent. "Is not the Lady Constance in this troop? I *know* she is not—*her* presence would have interrupted *much* for this match made up!

"Where is she—and her son? Tell me, who knows."

"She is at Your Highness' tent, sad and worried," the Earl of Salisbury informs him.

Philip frowns. "And, by my faith, this league that we have made will give her sadness very little cure!" He turns to John. "Brother of England, how may we content this widow lady? In her right we came—which we, God knows, have turned *another* way, to our own advantage!"

"We will heal up all," King John assures him. "For we'll create young Arthur *Duke of Bretagne* and *Earl of Richmond!*—and *this* rich, fair town we make him *lord* of!"

“Call the Lady Constance; some speedy messenger bid her repair to our solemnity.” Lord Salisbury himself bows and goes. “I trust we shall, if not *fill up* the measure of her will, yet in some measure satisfy her so that we shall stop her *exclamation*.”

Philip shares that hope.

King John addresses both royal parties: “Go we, as well as haste will suffer us, to this unlooked for, unprepared pomp!”

The erstwhile combatants amble amiably through the now-open entrance, warmly welcomed by the city fathers.

Sir Richard watches them all. *Mad world! Mad kings!*

*Mad compromises!* he thinks, as the English and French captains turn away, and go to tell their surviving troops the news.

*John, to stop Arthur’s title to the whole, hath willingly parted with a part!*

*And Philip—whose armour ‘conscience’ buckled on, whom zeal and charity brought to the field as God’s own soldier, is wounded in the ear by that same purpose-changer!—that sly devil, that broker who ever breaks the pate of Faith!—that daily break-vow!—he who wins from all, from kings, from beggars, old men, young men—from maid who, having no external thing to lose but the word ‘maid,’ cheats the poor maiden out of that!—that smooth-faced gentleman, tickling Accommodation!*

*Accommodation: the slanting of the world!*

*The world itself is poisèd well, made to run evenly upon even ground—till this vile, inventive, pulling bias, this swaying of motion—this same basis makes it take heed!—away from all dispassionate direction, purpose, course, intent!*

*And thus hath Accommodation—this bawd, this broker, this all-changing word—clapped onto the outward eye of fickle France—drawn him from his own determinèd aid, from a resolved and honourable war to a most base and vilely concluded peace!*

Richard laughs; his smile is wry. *And why rail I on Accommodation? Only because he hath not wooèd me yet!—not because I have no power to clutch my hand when his fair angels would salute my palm, but because my hand is yet untempted!*

Those *angels*—gold coins embossed with such images—are beyond the grasp of the landless knight. *Like a poor beggar I rail on the rich!*

*Well, whiles I am a beggar, I will rail!—and say there is no sin but to be rich!*

*Then, being rich, my virtue shall be to say there is no vice but beggary!*

*Since kings break faith upon accommodation, Gain, be my lord—for I will worship thee!*

## Chapter Four Peace Protested

**I**n the French king’s canvas pavilion, Lady Constance stares, incredulous. “Gone to be married? Gone to swear a *peace*? *False* blood to false blood *joinèd*—gone to be *friends*! “Shall Louis have *Blanche*—and *Blanche* those *provinces*?” she demands angrily of Lord Salisbury.

“*It is not so!*” she cries, as young Arthur watches, wide-eyed. “Thou hast misspoken—*misheard!*—be well advisèd: tell thy tale *again!* *It cannot be!*—thou dost but *say* ’tis so! I trust I may not trust *thee*, for thy word is but the vain breath of a *common* man! Believe me, I do not believe *thee*, man!—I have a *king’s oath* to the *contrary!*”

“Thou shalt be *punished* for thus frightening me!” she groans, “for I am *sick*, and vulnerable to *fears*—oppressèd with *wrongs*, and therefore *full* of fears!—a *widow*, husbandless, *subject* to fears; a *woman*, naturally *born* to fears!

“And though thou now confess thou didst but jest, *I* cannot make a truce with my vexèd *spirits*—they will quake and tremble all this day!”



Fuming fretfully she regards the old nobleman, who feels great pity. "What dost thou mean by shaking of thy head? Why dost thou look so sadly on my son? What means that hand upon that breast of thine? Why holds thine eye that lamentable rheum, like a proud river peering o'er his bounds? Be these sad signs *confirmers* of thy words?"

"Then speak *again*—not all thy former tale, but *this one word*: whether thy tale be *true*."

Salisbury nods. "As true as I believe you think those *false* who give thee cause to doubt my saying true."

The duchess moans. "Oh, if thou teach me to *believe* this sorrow, teach thou this *sorrow* how to make me *die!*—let *belief* and *life* encounter as do two desperate *men* who in the very fury of *meeting* fall and die!

"*Louis* marry *Blanche!*" She looks at Arthur. "Oh, my boy, then where art *thou*? France friend with England, what becomes of *me*?"

"*Fellow*, begone!" she orders the earl. "I cannot brook thy *sight!* This news hath made thee a most *ugly* man!"

"What other harm have I done, good lady, but to speak the harm that is by *others* done?"

"Which harm within itself is so *heinous* as makes harmful all that *speak of it!*"

She starts to sob.

The boy is alarmed. "I do *beseech* you, madam, *be content!*"

She will not. "If *thou*, that bid'st me be content, wert *grim—ugly*, and slanderous to thy mother's womb, full of unpleasing blots and concealèd stains—lame, foolish, crooked, swart, prodigiously patched with foul moles and eye-offending marks—I would not *care!* Then I *would* be content; for then I should not *love* thee!—no, nor thou *become* thy great birth, nor *deserve* a crown!

"But thou art *fair!*—and at thy birth, dear boy, *Nature* and *Fortune* joined to make thee *great!* Of Nature's gifts thou mayst with *lilies* boast, and with the half-opened *rose!*" She paces. "But Fortune, oh, she is changèd!—*corrupted*, and won *from* thee!

"She *adulterates*, hourly, with thine uncle *John!*—and with her golden hand hath plucked-on *France* to tread down fair *respect for sovereignty*, and made *his* majesty the *bawd* to *hers!* Philip is a bawd to Fortune, and King John, that *usurping* John, a *strumpet* to Fortune!

"Tell me, thou *fellow*," she demands of Lord Salisbury, "is not France *forsworn*? Envenom him with *words*," she wails, "or *get thee gone*, and leave these woes which *I* am bound to underbear alone."

"Pardon me, madam, I may not go without you to the kings...."

"Thou *mayst!*—thou *shalt!*—I will not go with thee! I will instruct my sorrows to be *proud*; for grief *is* proud, and makes its debtor *stoop!*"

"Let *kings* assemble to *me*, and come unto the great 'state' of *my grief!*—for my grief is so great that no supporter but the huge, firm *earth* can hold it up!"

Seemingly about to faint, she places a hand over her heart, and, grasping the arm of a heavy chair with the other, sinks to the ground. "Here I and *Sorrow* sit! *Here* is *my throne!*—bid kings come *bow* to it!"

A call of cornets from outside interrupts her moaning.

The kings, coming from the just-concluded nuptials, walk side by side, followed by the bride and groom, and by nobles of the wedding party.

King Philip beams as he replies to Blanche: "'Tis *true*, fair daughter-in-law! To solemnize this day, the glorious sun stays in his course and plays the *alchemist*, turning, with the splendor of his precious eye, the meagre, cloddy earth to glittering *gold!* And this blessèd day in France shall ever be *kept* estival! The yearly course that brings this day about shall never see it but as *holiday!*"

The monarchs face other; each grips the other's right hand to signify their new accord.

"A *wicked* day, and not a holy day!" cries Constance, pulling herself to her feet. "What hath *this* day deservèd? What hath *it* done that it in golden letters should be set among the high tides in

the calendar? *Nay*, rather *turn this day out of the week!*—this day of *shame, oppression, perjury!* Or, if it must still stand, let wives *with child* pray that their burthens may not fall”—children be born—“*this* day, lest that their hopes be ominously *crossèd!*”

“On this day let *seamen* fear to *wreck!*”

“No bargains *break* that are not made *this* day! But may *all* things begun *this* day come to *ill end!*—yea, *faith itself* to hollow *falsehood* change!”

King Philip protests: “By heaven, lady, you shall have *no cause* to curse the fair proceedings of this day! Have I not pawned to you my *majesty?*”

“You have *beguiled* me with a *counterfeit resembling* majesty!—which, being touched and tried, proves *valueless!*” she retorts. “You are *forsworn!*—*forsworn!* You came *in arms* to spill mine enemies’ *blood!*—but now you *strengthen* it with *yours!* The grappling vigour and rough frown of *war* is *cold!*—in *amity*, and *painted* peace!—and *our oppression* hath made up this league!”

She looks upward. “Arm, *arm*, you heavens, against *these perjured kings!* A widow cries, ‘Be *husband* to me, heavens! Let not the hours of this ungodly day wear out the day in *peace*, but ere sunset set *armèd discord* ’twixt these perjured kings!’ *Hear me, oh, hear me!*”

The archduke, standing with Philip, is appalled. “Lady Constance, *peace!*”

“War! *War!* No *peace!*” cries the duchess. “Peace is to *me* a *war!*”

“Oh, Limoges!—*oh, Austria!*—thou dost *shame* that bloody spoil,”—the lion’s hide, “thou *slave*, thou *wretch*, thou *coward!*—thou *little* valiant, great in *villainy!*” She sneers. “Thou, *ever strong*—upon the stronger *side!* Thou, Fortune’s *champion*, that dost never fight but when her capricious ladyship is nearby to teach thee *safety!*”

“*Thou art perjured too!* What a *fool* art thou, a tramping *clown*, to brag and stamp and swear upon my part! Thou *cold-blooded slave*, hast thou not spoken like *thunder* on my side?—been *sworn* my *soldier*, bidding me depend upon thy stars, thy fortune and thy *strength?*—and dost thou now fall over to my *foes?*—only *smoothing-up* greatness?”

“*Thou*, wear a *lion’s* hide?—*doff* it, for *shame!*—and hang a *calf’s* skin on those recreant limbs!”

The duke is puffing with rage, livid. “Oh, that a *man* should speak those words to me!”

“And *hang a calf’s* skin on those recreant limbs!” adds Sir Richard, laughing.

Limoges turns, a hand at the hilt of his sword. “Thou *darest* not say so, villain, for thy *life!*”

Richard steps forward. ““*And hang a calf’s* skin on those recreant limbs!”” he growls.

King John frowns at the knight. “We like this *not!*—thou dost *forget* thyself!”

The arrival of a red-robed visitor, with several other priests in attendance, halts the exchange. “Here comes the holy legate of the *Pope!*” says King Philip, smiling.

The churchman greets them—unsmiling. “Hail, you anointed *deputies* of *Heaven.*”

“To *thee*, King John, my holy errand is. I, Pandulph, of fair Milan cardinal, and from Pope Innocent the legate here, do in his name demand, religiously, why thou against the Church, our holy mother, so willfully dost *spurn*—force and perforce *keep*—Stephen Langton, chosen Archbishop of Canterbury, from that holy see!”—jurisdiction. “This, in our foresaid holy father’s name, *Pope Innocent*, I do demand of thee!”

John is indignant. “What *earthy* name can task the free breath of a *sacred king* with *interrogatories?* Thou canst not, cardinal, *devise* a name so *slight, unworthy* and *ridiculous* to charge *me* to an answer, as the *Pope’s!*”

“*Tell* him that!—and from the mouth of England add this much *more*: that no *Italian priest* shall tithe or toll in *our* dominions!—that, as *we* under Heaven are supreme head, so under Him that great supremacy where we do reign *we alone* will uphold—without the assistance of a *mortal* hand!”

“So tell the Pope—all reverence *set apart* from him and his usurpèd authority!”

“Brother of England, you *blaspheme* in this!” gasps King Philip, highly perturbed.

John scoffs. “Though *you* and all the kings of *Christendom* are led so grossly by that meddling priest—dreading the curse that *money* may *buy out*, by the merit of vile *gold—dross, dust!*—and purchasing *corrupted* pardon from a man who in that sale *seals pardon from himself!*—though you, and all the rest so led, *cherish* this juggling *witchcraft* with *revenue*, yet I alone, *alone* do oppose me against the Pope, and count his *friends* my *foes!*”

Cardinal Pandulph pronounces grimly, “Then, by the lawful power that I have, thou shalt stand *cursèd* and *excommunicate!*”

“And *blessèd* shall be he who doth revolt from his allegiance to an *heretic!*”

“And *meritorious* shall that man be callèd—canonized and worshipped as a *saint!*—that takes away, by any secret course, *thy hateful life!*”

Constance steps forward. “Oh, lawful let it be that *I* have room to curse awhile *with* Rome! Good father cardinal, cry thou *amen* to my keening curses!—for beyond *my* wrong there is no tongue hath power to curse him *rightly!*”

The priest, annoyed, tells her, “There’s *law*, and *warrant*, lady, for my curse.”

“And for *mine too!*” she cries. “When law can *do no right*, let it be lawful that law *bar no wrong!* Law cannot give my child, here, his *kingdom*, for he that *holds* his kingdom *holds the law!* Therefore, since law itself is defected to *wrong*, how can the law forbid my tongue to *curse?*”

The cardinal faces the other king. “Philip of France, on *peril* of a curse, *let go the hand* of that arch-heretic!—and *raise the power of France* against his head, unless he do submit himself to Rome!”

The queen mother is watching Philip. “Thou look’st pale, France—*do not let go thy hand!*” she warns.

“*Look to that, Devil,*” Constance tells John, “lest France *repent*, and by a disjoining of hands, Hell lose a soul!”

“King Philip, listen to the cardinal!” urges Limoges.

“*And hang a calf’s skin on his recreant limbs!*” prods Sir Richard, moving closer to the Austrian.

The duke scowls at the knight. “Well, *ruffian*, I must pocket up these wrongs, because—”

“—your *breeches* best may *carry* them!” says Richard, sending a booted foot in his direction. The duke dodges, barely avoiding the kick.

King John is watching the French king. “Philip, what say’st thou to the cardinal?”

“What *should* he say but as the *cardinal* says?” demands Lady Constance.

“*Bethink* you, Father, of the *difference!*” the dauphin warns Philip. “*Heavy* purchase of a curse from *Rome*, or the *light* loss of England as a *friend*. Forego the *less costly!*”

“That’s the curse of Rome!” argues Blanche, pulling her hand away from her husband’s.

“Oh, Louis, *stand fast!*” urges Constance. “*The Devil* tempts thee here, in likeness of a new, *untrimmèd bride!*”—one still virginal.

Blanche scoffs: “The Lady Constance speaks not from her *faith*, but from her *need!*”

“Oh, if thou grant my need, which *lives* only because of the *death of faith,*” counters Constance, “thou must needs infer *this* principle: that faith would *live* again by death of *need*. Then *tread down* my need, and faith *mounts up!* Keep my *need* up, and *faith* is trodden down!”

John, watching Louis’s troubled face, waves her away with his free hand. “The king is *movèd,*”—angered, “and answers not to *thee!*”

“Oh, be *re-movèd*—from *him,*” Constance tells Philip, “and answer *well!*”

“*Do so,* King Philip!” urges Limoges. “Hang no more in doubt!”

“Hang nothing but a *calf’s skin*, most sweet *lout!*” rhymes Richard to the duke.

King Philip confesses, “I am perplexed, and know not *what* to say!”

Asks Cardinal Pandulph, “What canst thou say but what will perplex thee *more*, if thou stand *excommunicate*, and *cursèd!*”

“Good reverend father, make *my* position as yours,” says Philip, “and tell me how *you* would bestow yourself!” He nods toward King John. “His royal hand and mine are newly knit, and the conjunction of our inward *souls* married *in league!*—coupled and linkèd together with all *religious* strength of *sacred* vows!

“The latest breath that gave the sound of words was *in faith deep-sworn!*—pledges for *peace, amity, true love* between our kingdoms and our royal *selves!* And just before this, *truce* took no longer than we could *wash our hands* well to clasp in this royal bargain of *peace!* Heaven knows they were besmeared and over-stainèd by *slaughter’s* strokes, when *revenge* did paint the fearful difference of incensèd kings!

“Then shall these hands, so lately purged of blood, so newly joined in love—so strong in both!—*unyoke* this grasp and this kind regret?—play fast and loose with *faith?*—*jest* with *Heaven?*—make such *unconstant children* of ourselves as now to snatch *palm*”—emblem of devotion—“again from our palms?—*unswear* faith *sworn?*—and to the marriage-bed of smiling *peace* march a bloody host, and make ruts in the gentle brow of true sincerity?”

“O holy sir, my reverend father, *let it not be so!* Out of your *grace*, devise, ordain—*impose* some gentle order! And then we shall be *blest:* to do your pleasure, and continue as friends!”

Pandulph is stone-faced. “All form is *formless*, order *orderless*, save what is *opposite* to England’s love,” he insists. “Therefore *to arms!* Be *champion* of our Church!—or let the Church, our mother, breathe her *curse*, a *mother’s* curse, on her revolting son!

“France, thou mayst safer hold a *serpent* by the *tongue*, a chafèd *lion* by the deadly *paw*, a fasting *tiger* by the *tooth*, than keep in *peace* that hand which thou dost hold!”

But King Philip retains his grip. “I may disjoin my *hand*, but not my *faith!*”—honorable pledge.

“So makest thou ‘faith’ an enemy to *faith!*” says Cardinal Pandulph, “and like a civil war, set’st oath to oath, thy tongue against thy tongue!”

“Oh, let thy vow first made to *heaven* be to heaven first *performèd!*—that is, to be the champion of our *Church!* What *since* thou swore’st was sworn *against thyself*, and may not be performèd *by thyself!*”

“As for that which thou hast sworn to *do:* *amiss* is *not* amiss when it is *truly* done; and when *doing* tends to *ill*, thy being true is best done by *not doing it!*”

“Though indirect, yet indirection thereby *grows direct*, and falsehood falsehood *cures*, as fire *cools* fire within the scorchèd veins of one new-burned!”—the proverbial explanation for liquor’s easing of pain. “The better act for *mis-taken* purpose is to mis-take *again!*”

“It is *religion* that doth make vows kept; but thou hast sworn *against* religion!—thou swear’st *against* the thing thou swear’st *by*, and makest an *oath* the surety for thy perseverance *against* an oath!

“The truth thou art *unsure* to swear swears only *not to be forsworn*—else what a mockery should it be to swear! But *thou* dost swear only to *be forsworn!*—are *most* forsworn in *maintaining* what thou dost swear!

“Therefore thy later vows against thy first are *in thyself* rebellion *against thyself!* And better conquest never canst thou make than to arm thy *constant* and *nobler* parts against these giddy, loose notions!—upon which better part, *our prayers* come in—if thou vouchsafe them!

“But if *not*, then know: the peril of our *curses* will light on thee so heavily as thou shalt not shake them off, but *die in despair* under their dark weight!”

Limoges notes with dismay the kings’ still-joined hands. “Rebellion, flat *rebellion!*”

Sir Richard again taunts the duke: “Will’t not *be?*” he demands. “Will not ‘a *calf’s* skin’ stop-up that mouth of thine?”

The dauphin, too, has lost patience. “Father, to *arms!*”

“Upon thy *wedding* day?” cries Blanche, “against the blood that thou hast *marrièd?* What?—shall our feast be held with *slaughtered* men? Shall braying trumpets and loud, churlish drums, clamours of *hell* be the music to our pomp?”

“O husband, *hear me!*—*ay, alack*, how new is ‘husband’ in my mouth!

“Even for that *name*,” she says, kneeling, “which till this time my tongue did ne’er pronounce, upon my *knee* I beg: *go not to arms against mine uncle!*”

Lady Constance steps toward Louis to counter that plea. “Oh, upon *my* knee, made *hard* with kneeling, *I* do pray thee too, thou virtuous dauphin: *alter* not the fate forethought by *Heaven!*”

His bride looks up at the French prince. “Now shall I *see* thy love? What motive may be stronger with thee than the name of *wife?*”

Constance replies, “That which upholdeth him that *thee* upholds: his *honour!* *Oh*, thine *honour*, Louis, thine *honour!*”

The dauphin has been staring at his father. “I muse that Your Majesty doth seem so cold, when such profound respects do pull you on!”

“*I will pronounce a curse upon his head!*” warns Cardinal Pandulph.

King Philip surrenders. “Thou shalt not need.” He looks at John. “England, I will fall from thee.”

“*Oh, fair return of banished majesty!*” cries Constance, as their hands separate.

“*Oh*, foul revolt by French *inconstancy!*” mutters Eleanor.

King John is furious. “France, thou shalt *rue* this hour *within* this hour!”

King Philip nods, sadly. “Old Time, the clock-setter... that bald sexton, Time... is it as *he* rules? Well then, France shall *rue*,” he says, resigned.

Blanche looks tearfully toward the western horizon. “The sun’s o’ercast with *blood!* *Fair* day, adieu! Which is the side that *I* must go withal? I am with *both!* Each army hath one hand, I having hold of *both*, and in their *rage* they *swirl asunder* and *dismember* me!

“Husband, I *cannot* pray that thou mayst *win*; Uncle, I *must needs* pray that thou mayst *lose!* Father, I may not wish good fortune *thine*,” she tells the priest. “Grandam, I will not wish thy fortunes *thrive*,” she tells Eleanor. “*Whoever* wins, on that side shall *I lose!*—*assured* of loss before the match be played!”

Her husband pleads: “Lady, with me, *with me* thy fortune lies!”

“Then where my *fortune* lives, there my *life* dies!” she sobs.

King John turns to Sir Richard. “Cousin, go draw our puissance together!” The eager warrior bows happily and goes. “France, I am *burning with inflaming wrath!*—a *rage* whose heat hath such condition that nothing can allay it!—nothing but *blood!*—the blood, and *dearest-valued* blood, of France!”—Philip’s.

The French ruler is not intimidated. “Thy rage shall *burn thee up* and thou shalt turn to *ashes*, ere *our* blood shall quench that fire! Look to *thyself!*—*thou* art in jeopardy!”

“No more than he who *threatens!*” sneers John.

He motions to his train. “*To arms let’s hie!*”

## Chapter Five Schemes Are Set

**O**n the plains outside high-walled Angiers, an English knight, resplendent in carefully refurbished armor, stands amid the battle, nearly out of breath. Helmet off, he has been kneeling to work; he rises, looking down with considerable satisfaction.

He wipes sweat from his forehead. *Now, by my life, this day grows wondrous hot! Some airy devil hovers in the sky and pours down mischief!* He is wearing a heavy, tawny cape.

*Austria’s head lies there, while Philip breathes!* he thinks, triumphant; Philip Faulconbridge—now Sir Richard Plantagenet—pulled his father’s lion-skin from the archduke after slaying him.

He looks up to see King John rushing across the field toward him, pulling along by the arm young Arthur, whom he has taken prisoner. With them is Hubert de Burgh.

“Hubert, keep this boy,” the king tells the royal chamberlain. “Richard, *make up!*”—prepare to fight again. “My *mother* is *assailèd at our tent*—and *ta’en*, I fear!”

“My lord, I *rescued* her—her highness is in *safety!* Fear you not,” Richard assures him—to the king’s great relief.

“But *on*, my liege!” cries the knight, “for very little pains will bring this labour to a happy end!”

De Burgh hurries the captive boy along after them.

“So shall it be,” King John tells his mother. “Your Grace shall stay behind—*strongly guarded!*” A cordon of troops will soon shield her on the open field, not far from where fighting continues—and where she insists on being, to observe.

“Cousin, look not sad,” he tells Arthur. “Thy grandam *loves* thee!—and thine *uncle* will be as dear to thee as thy *father* was!”

But the boy frets. “Oh, this will make my mother die with grief!”

John tells Sir Richard, “Cousin, away to England! Haste *before*—and, ere our coming, see that thou *shake the bags* of hoarding *abbots!*—set at liberty imprisoned *angels!*”—gold coins. The king needs money for the war, and he will take it from the Church. “The *hungry* must now be fed upon the *fat ribs* of peace! Use our commission in its utmost force!”

Richard grins. “Bell, book, and candle”—emblems of excommunication—“shall not drive me back, when *gold* and *silver* beckon me to come on!” He bows. “I leave, Your Highness.”

The knight kneels before Lady Eleanor. “Grandam, I will pray—if ever I remember to be *holy*—for your fair safety! Doing so, I kiss your hand.”

The venerable queen mother smiles. “Farewell, gentle cousin!”

“Coz, farewell!” says King John, as Richard strides away.

Eleanor waves Arthur forward. “Come hither, little kinsman! Hark, a word....” The boy listens, nodding, as his white-haired grandmother reassures him.

“Come hither, Hubert,” says John, taking the gentleman aside, away from the noblemen attending the king. “Oh, my gentle Hubert, we owe thee much!” He puts a hand to his own heart. “Within this wall of flesh there is a soul counts thee its *creditor*, and with advantage means to *pay* thy love! And, my good friend, thy voluntary oath lives in this bosom, dearly cherished! Give me thy hand!”

As he shakes the chamberlain’s hand, John pauses, apparently thinking. “I had a thing to say... but I will fit it with some better time.

“By heaven, Hubert, I am almost ashamed... to say what good *respect* I have for *thee!*”

The chamberlain is highly flattered. “I am much bounden to Your Majesty!”

“Good friend, thou hast no cause to say so *yet*, but thou *shalt* have; and creep time ne’er so slow, yet it shall come for me to *do thee good!*”

“I had a thing to say... but let it go.” He glances, frowning, up at the sky. “The sun is in the heavens, and the proud *day*, attended with the pleasures of the world, is all too wanton, and too full of gawds to give me audience—making that idiot *Laughter* keep in men’s eyes, and strain their cheeks to idle *merriment!*—a passion hateful to my purposes....”

John looks at the gentleman for a moment, and then begins to speak—his voice ominously, chillingly low—even more privately. “If the *midnight* bell, with its iron tongue and brazen mouth, did sound into the drowsy *night*—if this same where we stand were a *churchyard*, and thou possessed with a thousand *wrongs*—or if that surly spirit *Melancholy* had bulked thy blood, which else runs tickling up and down the veins, and made it *heavy*....”

He moves closer. “Or if that thou couldst *see* me without eyes, *hear* me without thine ears, and make *reply* without a tongue—using impression alone, without eyes, ears and harmful sound of *words*—then, in despite of broad and watchful day, I would into thy bosom pour my thoughts.”

He shrugs. “*Ah*, but, I will not.

“Yet I love thee *well*; and, by my troth, I think thou lovest *me* well....”

“So well,” says de Burgh, “that what you bid me undertake, though that my *death* were adjunct to my act, by heaven, I would do it!”

King John nods. “Do not I *know* thou wouldst?” He moves even closer and grasps the gentleman’s shoulder. “Good Hubert, Hubert, Hubert,” he whispers, “throw thine eye on yon young boy. I’ll tell thee what, my friend: he is a very *serpent* in my *way!*—and whereso’er this foot of mine doth tread, *he* lies before me! Dost thou understand me? Thou art his keeper....”

“And I’ll keep him so that he shall not offend Your Majesty!”

“Death.”

Hubert blinks. “My lord?”

“A *grave.*”

Now De Burgh understands. He pales and swallows—but he bows. “He shall not live.”

“Enough.” They move toward the queen mother. “I could be *merry* now,” says King John.

“Hubert, I love thee *well!* I’ll not say what I *intend* for thee!” But he adds, “*Remember!*”

“Madam, fare you well!” John tells his mother, kissing her cheek. “I’ll send those powers o’er to Your Majesty.”

Eleanor will accept the soldiers’ protection. “My blessing go with thee!”

“For *England*, cousin, go,” John tells the boy. “Hubert shall be your man, attend on you”—he looks meaningfully at Hubert—“with all true *duty.*”

Hubert bows, and the two begin their journey, through English-held lands in France, then by ship across to Dover.

The king returns to his commanders. “On toward *Calais*, *ho!*”

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In the royal palace at Paris, King Philip is dismayed by news of his fleet. “So, by a roaring *tempest* on the flood, our *whole armado* of convected sail is *scattered*, and disjoined from fellowship!” Pursuit of John’s ships in the channel has been stalled by the storm.

“Courage and comfort,” says Cardinal Pandulph calmly. “All shall yet go well.”

“What can go *well* when we have run so *ill?* Are we not *beaten?* Is not Angiers *lost?*—Arthur ta’en *prisoner?*—divers dear friends *slain?*” He frowns. “And bloody *England?*—King John—“into England gone, o’erbearing interruption *in despite of France!*”

Notes Louis, shaking his head, “And what he had *won*, that hath he *fortified!*”

“So hot a *speed!*—such temperate *order*, with such *advice* dispensed in so fierce a cause *doth want example!*”—lack precedent. “Who hath read or heard of any kindred action like to this?” he asks, still amazed.

Says Philip glumly, “I would bear well that England *had* this praise; so, we could find some *explanation* for our shame!”

He is rubbing his temples when a distraught, disheveled lady, her hair is disarray, enters the throne room. “Look who comes here: a *grave* unto a *soul!*—holding the eternal spirit, against its will, in the vile prison of afflicted breathing.” As Constance approaches, he hopes to prevent another public eruption. “I prithee, lady,” he says, offering his arm, “go away with me....”

“*Lo*, now I now see the *issue* of your peace!” cries the duchess.

“*Patience*, good lady! *Comfort*, gentle Constance!”

“*No!* I *defy* all counsel, all redress but that which *ends* all counsel: *true* redress—*death*, *death!*”

“O amiable, lovely *Death!*—*thou*, odouriferous staunchness, sound rottenness!—arise forth from the couch of lasting night, thou haunting terror to prosperity, and I will *kiss* thy detestable bones, and put *my* eyeballs in thy vaulty brows!—and ring these fingers with thy household *worms!*—and stop-up this gap of breath”—mouth—“with fulsome *dust!*—and be a *carrion monster* like thyself!

“Come!—gape at *me* and I will think thou *smilest*, and buss thee as thy *wife!* Misery’s *lover*, oh *come* to me!”

“O fair *affliction*, *peace!*” pleads the king.

“No, no, I will *not*, having breath to *cry!* Oh, that *my* tongue were in the *Thunderer’s* mouth! Then with a passion would I *shake the world*—and rouse from *sleep* that fell anatomy which cannot hear a *lady’s* feeble voice!—which scorns a *modern* invocation!” She glares, angry even at Death.

Cardinal Pandulph chides: “Lady, you utter *madness*—and not *sorrow!*”

“*Thou* art not *holy* to belie me so! I am *not* mad!—this hair I tear is *mine*; my name is *Constance*; I was *Geoffrey’s* wife; young Arthur is *my son*—and *he is lost!*” she wails. “I am not mad; I would to heaven I *were!*—for then ’tis likely I should forget *my self!* Oh, if I *could*, what *grief* I would forget!”

She grasps the sleeve of the priest’s robe. “Preach some philosophy to *make* me mad, and thou shalt be *canonized*, cardinal! For, being not mad but sensible of grief, my *reasoning* part produces reasons how I may be *delivered* from these woes, and teaches me to *kill!*—or *hang myself!*”

“If I *were* mad, I should *forget* my son, or madly think some swaddled *infant* were he.

“I am not *mad!*” she sobs. “*Too well!*—*too well!* I feel the different plague of each catastrophe!”

“Bind up those tresses,” says King Philip soothingly—pitying her. *Oh, what love I note in the fair multitude of those her hairs, where but by chance a silver drop—a tear—hath fallen. Even to that drop, ten thousand wiry friends do glue themselves in sociable grief, like true, inseparable, faithful loves, sticking together in calamity!*

The duchess challenges: “To *England*, if you will!”

“Bind up your hairs—”

“*Yes, that I will!* And *wherefore* will I do it?—I tore them from their bands, and cried aloud, ‘*Oh, that these hands could so redeem my heir as they have given these hairs their liberty!*’ But now I *envy* their liberty, and *will* again commit them to their *bonds*—because *my poor child is a prisoner!*”

“And, Father Cardinal, I have heard you say that we shall see and know our friends in heaven. If that be true, I should *see my boy again!* For between the birth of Cain, the *first* male child, and him that did first suspire *yesterday* there was not such a *gracious* creature born!

“But now will the canker *sorrow* eat at my bud, and chase the native beauty from his cheek; and he will look as hollow as a *ghost*, dim and meagre as in ague’s fit! And *so* he’ll *die*—and *rising* so, when I shall meet him again in the court of Heaven *I shall not know him!*”

“Therefore *never, never* may I behold my pretty Arthur more!” she wails, clutching her arms to herself.

Cardinal Pandulph frowns. “You hold too heinous an *aspect* of grief!”

“He talks to me that never *had a son!*” she replies.

“You are as fond of *grief* as of your *child!*” counters King Philip.

But Constance, again lost in her thoughts, speaks quite softly now. “Grief fills up the room of my absent child—lies in his bed, walks up and down with me; puts on his pretty looks, repeats his words; reminds me of all his gracious parts, stuffs out his vacant garment within its form.

“Then I have reason to be fond of grief.

“Fare you well. Had you such a loss as I, I could give better comfort than *you* do.” With both hands, she vigorously disturbs her hair further. “I will not keep this *form* upon my head, when there is such *disorder* in my *mind!*”

“Oh, *Lord!* My *boy*, my *Arthur*, my fair *son!*” she cries, shaking with sobs. “My life, my joy, my food, my *all-the-world!*”

She blinks, slowly, then nods. “My widow’s *comfort,*” she murmurs, staggering away, “and my sorrow’s *cure....*” She leaves the throne room.

“I fear some outrage!” King Philip tells the others. “I’ll follow her!” His attendants hurry after him.



The dauphin broods. "There's nothing in this world can make *me* joy; life is as tedious as a twice-told tale vexing the dull ear of a drowsy man—and *shame* hath spoiled the *world's* sweet taste, yields nought but *bitterness!*"

Pandulph tells him, "Before the *curing* of a strong disease, just at the instant of repair and *health*, the fit is strongest. Evils that *take leave* show evil most of all on their *departure*.

"What have you *lost* by the losing of this day?"

"*All* days of glory, joy and *happiness!*" says the young prince.

"If you had *won* it, you certainly had," counters the cardinal. "No, *no!*—when Fortune means to do men the most *good*, she looks upon them with a *threatening* eye." He ponders for a moment. "'Tis strange to think how much *King John* hath lost in this, which he accounts so clearly as won.

"Are you *grievèd* that Arthur is his prisoner?"

"As heartily as he is *glad* he *hath* him!" says the dauphin.

The churchman shakes his head. "Your *mind* is all as youthful as your blood!

"Now hear me speak with a *prophetic* spirit!—for even the breath of what I mean to say shall blow the dust—each *straw*, each little *rub*—out of the path *which shall lead thy foot directly to England's throne!*

"And therefore *mark!* John hath seizèd Arthur; and it cannot be that whiles warm *life* plays in that child's veins the misplacèd John should entertain an hour, one *minute*—nay, one quiet *breath of rest!* A sceptre *snatched* with an unruly hand must be as boisterously *maintained* as *gained!* And he who stands upon a slippery place makes quibble of no vile hold which can stay him up!

"That John may *stand*, then Arthur needs must *fall!*

"So be it," he says sadly, "for it cannot be but so."

Louis is puzzled. "But what shall *I* gain by young Arthur's fall?"

"You—in the right of *Lady Blanche*, your *wife*—may then make all the claim that Arthur did!"

"And *lose* it, life and all, as Arthur did!"

"How *green* you are, and *fresh* in this old world!" says Pandulph. "John lays plots; the *times* conspire *with you!*—for he that *steeps* his safety in true blood shall find but *bloody* safety—and turn it *untrue!* This act, so *evilly* born, shall *cool the hearts of all his people*, and so freeze up their zeal that none-so-small advantage shall step forth to *check* his reign but they *will cherish it!*—no natural exhalation in the sky, no scrape of nature, no distempered day—no common wind nor accustomed event but they will *pluck away* the *natural* cause and call them *meteors*, *prodigies* and *signs*: abortive *presages* and *tongues of Heaven*, plainly announcing *vengeance* upon John!"

Louis considers. "May be he will not touch young Arthur's *life*, but think himself safe in his *prisonment.*"

"Oh, sir, when John shall hear of *your approach*, if Arthur be not gone *already*, even at that news he *dies!*" The priest thinks dourly of the English king. "And then the hearts of all his people shall turn from him, and kiss the lips of unacquainted *change*—and pluck from the bloody finger-ends of John strong matter for *wrath* and *revolt!*

"Methinks I see this hurly all *afoot!*"—already begun. "And, *oh*, what a *better* matter breeds for you than I have named: the bastard *Faulconbridge* is now in England *ransacking the Church*—offending *charity!* If but a *dozen* French were there in arms, they would be as a call to bring *ten thousand English* to their side!—as a little *snow*, tumbled together, anon becomes a *mountain!*

"O noble dauphin, *go with me to the king!* 'Tis wonderful what may be *wrought* out of their discontent, now that their souls are toppèd full of *offence!*

"For *England* go! I will whet onward the *king!*"

Louis is convinced. "Strong reasons make strong *actions!* Let us go!

"If you say *aye*, the king will not say no!"

## Chapter Six Condemned

Heat me these irons *hot*; and, look thou, stand behind the arras," de Burgh tells two rough-looking men, pointing to the thick wall-hanging across from the hearth. "When I strike my foot upon the bosom of the ground, rush forth and *bind* the boy you shall find with me *fast to the chair*. Be heedful! Hence, and *watch*."

The two move from the fire toward the heavy drapery, in a cellar chamber of the palace at London. "I hope your *warrant* will bear out the *deed*," says the heavier knave doubtfully.

*Uncleanly scruples*, thinks the chamberlain dourly. "Fear not *you!* *Look to 't!*" he tells the men, and they are soon concealed. He has received an odious order from the king concerning the serpent in his path.

De Burgh calls toward the door, "Young lad, come *forth!* I have something to say with you."

"Good *morrow*, Hubert!" says Arthur cheerfully, coming in from the corridor.

"Good *morrow*, little prince."

"As little *prince* as may be, having so great a title to be *more* than prince!" says the heir to the throne. He sees the gentleman's expression. "You are sad."

"Indeed, I have been merrier."

"Mercy on me," says the lad apologetically, "methinks nobody should be sad but *I!*"

"Yet I remember: when I was in *France*, young gentlemen would be sad at night simply for *wantonness!* By my Christendom, if I were *out of prison*, and *kept sheep*, I should be as *merry* as the day is long!

"And so I would be *here*, but that I suspect my uncle practises *more* harm to me! He is afraid of me—and *I of him!* Is it *my* fault that I was Geoffrey's son? No, indeed, is't *not!*—and I would to heaven I were *your* son, so you would love me, Hubert."

The royal steward is upset. *If I talk to him, with his innocent prate he will awake my mercy—which lies dead! Therefore I will be sudden, and dispatch!*

Arthur regards him with concern. "Are you *sick*, Hubert?—you look pale today. In sooth, I would you were a *little* sick, so that I might sit all night and watch with you!" He smiles. "I warrant I love *you* more than you do *me*," he says, in playful challenge.

*His words do take possession of my bosom!* Hubert unfolds a document and hands it to the boy. "Read here, young Arthur."

Even as he watches, his vision blurs, eyes stinging. *How now, foolish rheum?—turning despiteous torture out of door! I must be brief, lest resolution drop out at mine eyes in tender, womanish tears!* He asks, gruffly, "Can you not read it? Is it not fair-writ?"

The child is aghast. "*Too* fairly, Hubert, for so *foul effect!* Must you with hot irons *burn out both mine eyes?*"

"Young boy, I must."

"And *will* you?"

"I will."

"Have you the *heart?* When your head did but ache, I knit my handkercher about your brows—the *best I had*—a *princess* wrought it for me!—and I did never ask it from you again. And with my hand at midnight I held your head; and like the watchful minutes to the hour, still and anon cheered up the heavy time, saying, 'What lack you?' and 'Where lies your grief?' Or 'What good love may I perform for you?'"

"Many a *poor* man's son would have lain still, and ne'er have spoke a loving word; but you at your sick service had a *prince!* Nay, you may think my love was *crafty* love, and call it cunning—do, an if you will; if Heaven be pleased that you must use me ill, why then you must.

"Will you *put out mine eyes?*—these eyes that never did, nor never shall, so much as *frown* on you!"

Hubert looks down. "I have sworn to do it; and with hot irons must I burn them out."

"Ah, none but in *this iron age* would do it! The iron *itself*, though heated red-hot, approaching near these eyes would *drink my tears*, and *quench* its fiery indignation even in the matter of mine *innocence!*—and after that, consume away in *rust*, for once containing fire to harm mine eye!

"Are *you* more stubborn, harder, than *hammered iron*? If an *angel* should have come to me and told me Hubert would put out mine eyes, I would not have believed *him!*—no tongue but *Hubert's!*"

"Come *forth!*" cries de Burgh—and the henchmen emerge, bringing cords. "Do as I bid you do!"

The terrified boy falls to his knees. "Oh, *save me*, Hubert, *save me!* My eyes are put out even with the fierce *looks* of these bloody men!"

The chamberlain turns away. "Give me the iron, I say, and bind him there."

"Alas, what need you be so boisterous *rough?*" protests the child, as the short man shoves him onto a chair of dark, scuffed pine, and ties his slender arms behind its back. "I will not struggle; I will stand *stone-still!* For Heaven's sake, Hubert, let me not be *bound!* Nay, *hear me*, Hubert!" he pleads. "Drive these men away, and I will sit as quiet as a lamb! I will not stir, nor wince, nor speak a word, nor look upon the *iron* angrily! But thrust *these men* away, and I'll *forgive you*, whatever torment you do put me to!"

"Go, stand within," de Burgh tells the two. "Let me alone with him."

They don't delay. "*I am best pleased to be from such a deed!*" mutters the heavier as they stamp away.

"Alas, then, I have chid away my *friend!*" moans Arthur watching the man go. "He hath a stern look, but a gentle *heart!* Let him come *back*, that *his* compassion may give life to *yours!*"

De Burgh raises a smoking rod of iron; the searing-hot end is red as he stands before the bound captive. "Come, boy—*prepare yourself.*"

"Is there no *remedy?*"

"None but to lose your eyes."

"Oh, *Heaven*, that there were but a *mote* in *yours!*—a grain of dust, a gnat, a wandering hair—*any* annoyance in that precious sense! Then, feeling what *small* things are boisterous there, your vile intent must needs seem *horrible!*"

"Was *this* your promise?" complains de Burgh. "*Go to*; hold your tongue!"

"Hubert, the utterance of a *set* of tongues must needs lack, when pleading for a *pair of eyes!* Let me *not* hold my tongue, let me *not*, Hubert!—or, Hubert, if you will, *cut out* my tongue, if I may *keep mine eyes!* Oh, *spare* my eyes, though to no use but still to *look on you!*"

He looks from the metal's now-gray point up to the chamberlain. "*Lo*, for my *truth*, the instrument is *cold*—and *would* not harm me!"—does not want to.

"I can heat it, boy."

"No, in good sooth!—the *fire* is dead with *grief*, being created for comfort, then used in undeservèd extremes! See for yourself: there is no *malice* in this burning coal!—else the breath of *heaven* had blown its spirit out, and strewed repentant ashes on its head!"

"But with *my* breath I can revive it, boy."

"If you do, you will but make it *blush*, and glow with *shame* at your proceedings, Hubert! Nay, perchance it will spark into *your eyes!*—and like a dog that is compelled to fight, snatch at his master that doth tarre him on!

"All *things* that you would use to do me wrong *deny their office!* Only *you* do lack that mercy which fierce *fire* and *iron* extend—creatures of note for mercy-*lacking* uses!"

The iron falls with a clank, and de Burgh sobs. He wipes tears from his eyes. "Well, *see to live!*" he groans, overwhelmed. "I will not touch thine eye for all the treasure that thine uncle owns!"

He takes the rod back to the hearth, then stares at the embers. "Yet am I *sworn!*—and I did purpose, boy, with this same very iron to burn them out."

“Oh, *now* you look like *Hubert!*” cries Arthur. “All this while you were *disguisèd!*”

“Peace. No more,” says de Burgh, untying the child. “Your uncle must not know but that you are *dead!* I’ll fill those doggèd spies with false reports.

“*Adieu!* And, pretty child, sleep doubtless and secure, that Hubert, for the wealth of all the world, will not offend thee!”

“Oh *heaven!* I thank you, Hubert!”

“Silence; no more.

“Go closely in with me,” he whispers; and quietly, stealthily, he leads the boy down dark corridors.

Thinks the gentleman, fearfully, *Much danger do I undergo for thee!*

Taking his seat upon the carved-oak throne this evening, King John is quite comfortable after his second coronation; England’s noblemen have reaffirmed allegiance to him, despite the Pope’s condemnation. “Here once again we sit, once again *crownèd*—and looked upon, I hope, with cheerful eyes!”

But the Earl of Pembroke grumbles. “This ‘once *again,*’ but that Your Highness pleased it, was once *superfluous*. You were crowned before, and that high royalty was ne’er pluckèd off, the *faith* of men ne’er stained with *revolt*. Fresh *expectation* troubled not the land with any longed-for change to a better state.”

“Therefore, to be possessèd with *double* pomp,” says the Earl of Salisbury, “to guard a title that was rich before—to *gild* refinèd gold, to paint the lily, throw a perfume on the violet, cool the ice, or add another hue unto the rainbow—were with *taper*-light to seek the beauteous *eye of heaven!*”—the sun. “So to garnish is wasteful and ridiculous *excess!*”

“But that your royal pleasure must be done, this act is as an *ancient* tale new-*told*—and in the last repeating *troublesome*, being urgèd at a time unseasonable!” says Pembroke.

Salisbury nods. “In this, the antique and well-noted face of a plain, old form is much *disfigured*. And, like a wind shifted into a sail, it makes the course of thoughts to *fetch about*—startles and frights *consideration!*—makes sound opinion *sick*, and truth *suspected*, for putting on so new-fashioned a robe!”

“When workmen strive to do better than *well*, they do confound their skill by covetousness,”—greed, says Pembroke. “And oftentimes the excuse for a wrong doth make the wrong the *worse* for the *excusing*—as patches set upon a little breach discredit more in hiding of the fault than did the fault before it was so patchèd.”

“We breathed our counsel to this effect before you were new-crownèd,” Salisbury points out. Seeing the sovereign’s frown, he quickly adds, “But it pleased Your Highness to overbear it; and we are all *well* pleasèd, since all and every part of what *we* would doth make a stand at what *Your Highness* will.”

Says John firmly, “Some *reasons* for this double coronation I have possessed you with, and think them *strong*. And more—more *strong* than lesser, in my fear—I shall imbue you with. Meantime, ask but what you would have *reformèd* which is not well, and well shall you perceive how *willingly* I will both hear and *grant* you your requests!”

Pembroke glances at the other lords, then regards John cautiously. The nobility has already exacted considerable concessions from the king; Arthur, a child, would be even more malleable. “Then I, as but one that am the *tongue* of these, do sound the purpose of all their hearts both for myself *and* them.

“Chief of all, for *your safety*, the which myself and they bend our best studies, we heartily request the *enfranchisement* of Arthur—whose restraint doth move the murmuring lips of Discontent to break into this dangerous argument: if you hold in arrest what you have no *right* to hold, why then your *fears*—which, as they say, ‘attend the steps of *wrong*’—could move you to *mew up* your tender kinsman—to choke his days with barbarous *ignorance*, and deny his youth the rich advantage of *good exercise!*”

“So that the time’s enemies may not use that to grace *incidents*, let it be our suit that *you have bid us* ask his liberty—which, for *our* good, our weal on you depending, we no further ask than, whereupon it heightens *your* weal, he have his *liberty*,” says Lord Pembroke obsequiously.

“Let it be so,” says John calmly; a blind boy cannot threaten his reign. “I do commit his youth to your direction.”

The noblemen are pleased—and relieved.

The king sees the chamberlain, visibly perturbed, come into the throne room. Taking him aside, he asks, “Hubert, what news with you?”

Two earls also confer—privately, in alarm. “This is the man should *do* the bloody deed!” whispers Pembroke angrily. “He showed his *warrant* to a friend of mine! The image of a wicked, heinous *crime* lives on in his eyes!” He leans nearer, still watching de Burgh. “That close aspect of his does show the mood of a much-troubled breast!—and fearfully I do believe *’tis done*, what we so feared he had a charge to do!”

Salisbury watches John. “The colour of the king doth come and go between his purpose and his *conscience*, like heralds ’twixt two dreadful armies sent! His distress is so ripe it needs must break!”

“And *when* it breaks,” says Pembroke, “I fear will issue thence the foul corruption of *the sweet child’s death!*”

John returns to the throne, clearly upset. “We cannot hold back *mortality’s* strong hand,” he says mournfully. “Good lords, although my *will* to give it is living, the suit which you demand is gone and dead.” He motions toward the boy’s keeper. “He tells us Arthur is *deceased* tonight!”

The other nobles gasp, but Salisbury, stone-faced, stares at John. “Indeed we *feared* his sickness was past cure.”

Adds Pembroke pointedly, “Indeed, we *heard* how near his death he was before the child *himself* felt he was sick.” He exchanges grave looks with his friend. “This must be *answered*, either here or hence!”

“Why do you bend such solemn brows on me?” demands King John. “Think you *I* bear the shears of *destiny*? Have *I* commandment on the pulse of life?”

Salisbury grows red-faced with anger. “It is *apparent!*—*foul play!* And ’tis *shame* that greatness should so *grossly offer it!*” He bows stiffly and turns away. “So *shrive* it, for your *name!*—and so, farewell!”

“Stay yet, Lord Salisbury!—*I’ll go with thee!*” says Pembroke, following, “and find the *inheritance* of this poor child: his little kingdom of a *forced grave!* That blood which owned *the breadth of all this isle*, three foot of it doth hold!

“Bad *world* the while! This must not be thus *borne!*” he says, shaking his head angrily as they leave. “This will *break out* to *all* our sorrows!—and *ere long*, I fear!”

King John, affronted and alarmed, watches the noblemen storm away. *They burn in indignation!*

*I repent! There is no sure foundation set on blood—no certain life achieved by others’ death!*

And now a courier, still wearing the heavy cloak of a sea traveler, rushes into the throne room and bows before the distraught king.

“A fearful eye thou hast!” says John. “Where is that blood that I have seen inhabiting those cheeks? So foul a sky clears not without a storm! Pour down thy weather—how goes all in France?”

“*From France to England!*” says the messenger. “Never was such a *power*”—armed force—“for any foreign preparation levied in the body of the land! The copy of *your* speed is learned by them!—for when you should be told they do *prepare*, the tidings come that they are *all arrivèd!*”

King John rises, furious at the failure of his spies and agents. “Oh, then hath our *intelligence* been *drunk!*—where hath it *slept?*”

“Where is my *mother’s* watchful care, that such an army could be drawn in France, and she not *hear* of it?”

“My liege, her ear is stopped with dust: the first of April your noble mother *died!*—and, as I hear, my lord, the Lady *Constance* in a frenzy died three days *before!* But this from Rumour’s tongue I idly heard; if true or false I know not.”

John staggers back to the throne. *Withhold thy speed, O dreadful occurrence!—make a league with me till I have pleased my discontented peers!*

He gapes at the courier. “*What?—Mother dead!* How wildly then walks my estate in France!

“Under whose conduct came those powers of France that thou as truth givest out are *landed* here?”

“Under the *dauphin.*”

John presses fingers against graying temples. “Thou hast made me giddy with these ill tidings!”

Sir Richard comes to the king, bringing in tow an ill-kempt commoner.

John regards the knight sourly. “Now what says the world to *your* proceedings?”—expropriating Church wealth. “Do not seek to stuff my head with *more* ill news, for it is full!”

“But if you be afeard to *hear* the worse,” Richard retorts, “you’ll let the *worst* fall unheard on *your head!*”

“Bear with me cousin,” moans John, “for I was amazed under a *tide!*” Grasping the throne’s arms, he sits up straighter. He motions the two forward. “But now I breathe again aloft the flood, and can give audience to any tongue, speak it of what it will.”

Richard has been seizing money from the Church’s many English holdings. “How I have sped among the clergymen, the *sums* I have collected shall express.

“But as I travelled hither through the land, I found the people strangely *fantasied*—possessed with *rumours*, idle *dreams*—not knowing *what* they fear, but *full* of fear!”

He pushes the man forward. “And here is a *prophet* that I brought with me from forth the streets of Pomfret, whom I found with *many hundreds* treading at his heels!—to whom he sung, in rude, harsh-sounding rhymes, that ere the next Ascension Day at noon, Your Highness should *deliver up your crown!*”

King John glares at the masterless rustic. “Thou *idle dreamer!*—*wherefore* didst thou so?”

“Foreknowing that the truth will fall out so.”

“Hubert, away with him!” cries John. “Imprison him!—and at noon on that day whereon he says I shall *yield up my crown*, let him be *hanged!*” The feast of Ascension is on the fortieth day after Easter.

“Deliver him into secure custody, then return,” says John urgently, “for I must use thee.” De Burgh takes the hapless old soothsayer by the arm and leads him away.

“O my gentle cousin, hear’st thou the news abroad of who are *arrivèd?*” asks John.

“The *French*, my lord—men’s mouths are full of it! And more besides: I met Lord Bigot and Lord Salisbury—with eyes as red as new-enkindled *fire!*—and *others*, going to seek the *grave* of Arthur, who, they say, was *killed* this night *at your instigation!*”

John feels cornered. “Gentle kinsman, go and thrust thyself into their companies. I have a way to win their loves again!—bring them before me!” He will argue that De Burgh exceeded his charge.

“I will seek them out.”

“Aye, but make *haste!*—the *better* foot is *before!* Oh, let me have no *subject* enemies, when adverse *foreigners* affright my towns with dreadful pomp of stout *invasion!* *Be Mercury!*—set *feathers* to thy heels, and fly like *thought* from them to me again!”

“The spirit of the *time* shall *teach* me speed!” says Sir Richard, already hurrying away.

“Spoken like a *spirited*, noble *gentleman!*” calls John. “Go after him,” he tells the courier, “for he perhaps shall need some messenger betwixt me and the peers—and be thou he.”

The messenger bows. “With all my heart, my liege!” He hurries after the knight.

*My mother, dead!* thinks John, forlorn.

Hubert returns—pale, but resolved to equivocate. “My lord, they say *five* moons were seen tonight!—one fixèd, and four that did whirl about the other in wondrous motion!”

“*Five moons!*”

The chamberlain approaches, wringing his hands. “Old men and beldams in the streets do *prophesy* upon it dangerously!—young Arthur’s *death* is common in their mouths! And when they talk of him, they shake their heads and whisper one another in the ear!—and he that speaks doth grip the hearer’s wrist, whilst he who hears makes fearful action!—with wrinkled brows, with nods, with *rolling eyes!*”

“I saw a *smith* stand with his hammer, thus”—an upraised arm hovers, motionless—“whilst his iron did on the anvil cool, with open mouth swallowing a *tailor*’s news—who, with shears and measure in his hand, standing in slippers which his nimble haste had falsely thrust upon *contrary* feet, told of *a-many thousand* warlike *French* that were embattled,”—mustered for war, “and *ranked in Kent!*”—landed on the southeastern coast.

“Then another lean, unwashèd artificer *cuts off* his tale, and talks of *Arthur’s death!*”—widely expected, since his capture.

“Why seek’st thou to possess me with these *fears?*” demands the worried king. “Why urgest thou so oft young Arthur’s death? *Thy* hand hath *murdered* him!” Having ordered—in writing—only a maiming, he seems indignant. “I had a mighty cause to *wish* him dead—but thou hadst none to *kill* him!”

The chamberlain stands aghast. “*Had not*, my lord?—why, did you not *provoke* me?”

John affects sorrow. “It is a curse of kings to be attended by slaves that take their inclination for a bloody warrant to *break within the house of life!*—and on a *blinking* of authority”—a brief lapse—“to understand it as *law*—to *grow* the meaning of dangerous majesty, when perchance it frowns more upon *mood* than advisèd respect!”

Hubert pulls the king’s warrant from inside his coat. “Here in *your hand* is *seal* for what I did!”

King John realizes that the document will hardly appease the angry baronage. He sinks back upon the throne—and considers something worse: *Oh, when the last account ’twixt heaven and earth is to be made, then shall this hand and seal witness against us to damnation!*

*How oft the sight of means to do ill deeds makes deeds ill done!* He scowls at Hubert. “Hadst not *thou* been nearby—a fellow by the hand of *Nature* marked, quoted, as assigned to *do* a deed of shame—this murder had not come into my mind! But, taking note of *thy* abhorrèd aspect, finding thee fit for bloody *villainy*, apt, *liable* to be employed in danger, I faintly broke with thee of Arthur’s death—and *thou*, to be endeared to a *king*, made it no conscience to *destroy a prince!*”

“My lord—!”

“Hadst thou but *shook thy head*, or made a *pause* when I spake darkly what I purposed, or turned an eye of *doubt* upon my face, as bidding me tell my tale *in express words*, deep *shame* had struck me *silent*—made me *break off!*—and those *thy* fears might have wrought fears in *me!*”

“But thou didst *understand* me by my signs, and didst in returnèd signs *parley with sin!*—yea, without stop didst *let thy heart consent!*—and consequently thy rude hand *acted* the deed which both our tongues held too vile to *name!*”

“Out of my *sight*, and never see me more!”

“My nobles *leave* me!” he moans, “and my *state* is challenged, even at my gates, with ranks of foreign powers!”

He claps a hand over his heart. “Nay, in the body of *this* fleshly land—this *kingdom*, this confine of blood and breath—hostility and civil tumult strain between my conscience and my nephew’s death!”

De Burgh is relieved to hear it. “Arm you against your *other* enemies; I’ll make a peace between your soul and you: young Arthur is *alive!*”

“This hand of mine is yet an *innocent* hand, not painted with the crimson spots of blood!  
Within this bosom never entered yet the dreadful motion of a murderous *thought!*”

“And you have *slandered* Nature for *my form*, which howsoever rude exteriorly is yet the cover of a fairer mind than to be *butcher* of an *innocent child!*”

King John stares, amazed. “Doth Arthur *live*? *Oh, haste thee to the peers!*—throw this report on their incensèd rage, and make them tame in their obedience!

“Forgive the comment that my passion made upon thy features, for my rage was *blind*, and foul, imaginary eyes of blood presented thee more hideous than thou *art!*”

He sees a flash of further protest. “*Oh, answer not, but to my chambers bring the angry lords with all expedient haste!*”

“I conjure thee but *slowly!*—*run more fast!*”

Hubert runs.

## Chapter Seven Defiance

**I**n the darkness, a small door, weathered and rarely used, creaks open onto the slanting, western roof of the royal palace, and a slender form moves to the parapet. Arthur’s palms sweat as he leans forward to peer fearfully over the edge.

*The wall is high!—but yet will I leap down! Good ground, be pitiful and hurt me not!*

*There’s few or none do know me; if they did, this ship-boy’s semblance hath disguisèd me quite.* He climbs onto the cold stone ledge.

He sees no one far below, on the wide, dim expanse of moonlit turf. *I am afraid!—and yet I’ll venture it! If I get down and do not break my limbs, I’ll find a thousand shifts to get away!*

He remembers the glowing-hot iron. *As good to go and die as stay and die!* He draws in a full breath—and leaps down.

The boy falls too close to the castle; his back is broken on rocks in the ditch that channels away rainwater.

Unable to move, struggling to breathe, he cannot cry for help.

Slowly he blinks. *Oh me! My uncle’s spirit is in these stones!*

*Heaven take my soul, and England keep my bones....*

Pain and darkness enfold him.

Emerging cautiously past a side door, three noblemen step outside and hurry away from the windows’ light to a dark side of the castle.

His voice hushed, Salisbury tells the others, “Lords, I *will* meet him at Saint Edmundsbury!—it is our *safety*, and we must *embrace* this gentle offer of the perilous time!”

“Who brought that letter from the cardinal?” asks Pembroke.

“The *Count Melun*, a noble lord of France—whose private word to me of the dauphin’s love is much more general than these lines impart!” says Salisbury, sliding the letter back into a coat pocket.

“Tomorrow morning let us meet him, then,” says Lord Roger Bigot.

“Or rather, then set forward,” Salisbury amends, “for ’twill be two long days’ journey, lords, or ere we meet.” They are to join Louis’s invading forces northeast of London, in Suffolk.

The nobles are startled when a knight in armor hails them. “*Once more today, well met, distempered lords!*” says Sir Richard. “The king by me requests your presence straight!”

Lord Salisbury shakes his head defiantly. “The king hath *dispossessed* himself of us! We will not line his thin, *bestainèd* cloak with *our* pure honours, nor attend the foot that leaves a print of *blood* where’er it walks! Return and tell him so! *We know the worst!*”

“Whate’er you think, *good* words, I think, were best,” warns the knight sternly.



“Our *griefs*, and not our manners, reason now!” Salisbury tells him.

“But there is *little* reason in your grief,” replies Richard. “Therefore ’twere reason you had *manners* now.”

“Sir, sir, *impatience* hath its *privilege!*”

“’Tis true—to *hurt its master*, no man *else.*”

Salisbury has spotted something—a shape on the ground. “This is the prison,” he notes, peering up as he walks toward the wall. “What is he lies here?” He looks down—and cries out.

Pembroke hurries to his side—and gasps. “O, *Death!*—made proud with pure and *princely* beauty!” Staring at the small body, he moans. “The *earth* had not a hole to hide *this deed!*”

“*Murder himself*, as if hating what he hath done, doth lay it *in the open*, to urge on *Revenge!*” says Salisbury, furious.

Bigot concurs. “*Aye*, when he doomed this fairness, he found it too *precious* for a grave!”

Salisbury confronts the loyal knight. “Sir Richard, what think *you?*”

“Have you *beheld?*” he demands angrily, pointing to the boy. “Or must you have *read* or *heard* ere you could *think?*—or do you *almost* think?—though you *see what you do see!*”

“Could *thought*, without this object, *form* such *another?* This is the very top, the height, the *crest!*—or crest *unto* the crest of *Murder’s* coat of arms!

“This is the *bloodiest shame*, the wildest *savagery*, the *vilest stroke* that ever wall-eyed *wrath* or staring *rage* presented to the *tears* of soft *remorse!*”

“*All* murders past do stand *excusèd* in *this!*” mutters Pembroke. “And this, sole and so unmatched, shall give a holiness, a purity, to the yet-*unbegotten* sins of time, and prove deadly bloodshed but a *jest*, compared to *this* heinous spectacle!”

Richard has tears in his steel-gray eyes. “It is a *damnèd* and a *bloody* work!—the graceless action of a *heavy* hand, if that it be the work of any hand....”

“*If* that it be the work of any hand?” cries Salisbury. “*We* had a kind of light”—a glimmer—“of what would ensue! It is the shameful work of *Hubert’s* hand!—the *practise* and the *purpose* of the *king!*”

“From whose *obedience* I *forbid my soul*, kneeling before this ruin of sweet life!—and breathing to his breathless excellence the incense of a *vow*, a *holy* vow, never to taste the pleasures of the world, never to be infected with delight, nor conversant with ease and idleness, till I have set a *glory* to this hand by giving it the worship of *revenge!*”

“*Our* souls religiously *confirm* thy words!” says Pembroke.

And now De Burgh finally finds them; he comes rushing over the lawn with his message from the king. “Lords, I am hot with haste in seeking you!—Arthur doth *live!* The king hath sent for you!”

Growls Salisbury, “Oh, he is *cold* that blushes not at *death!*” He shoves the chamberlain away. “*Avaunt*, thou *hateful villain!*—get thee *gone!*”

“I am no villain!” cries Hubert.

Salisbury draws his sword. “Must I *rob* the *law?*”

Richard warns the younger, untested man. “Your sword is bright, sir. *Put it up* again.”

The earl moves forward. “Not till I sheathe it in a *murderer’s* skin!”

Cries Hubert, “Stand back, Lord Salisbury!—stand *back*, I say! By heaven, I think *my* sword’s as sharp as yours! I would not have you, lord, forget yourself, nor tempt the danger of my true defence—lest I, by marking of your *rage*, forget your *worth*—your greatness and nobility!”

“*Out, dunghill!*” shouts Bigot. “Darest thou *brave* a *nobleman?*”

“Not for my life,” protests Hubert, “but yet I dare *defend* my innocent life against even an *emperor!*”

Salisbury glares. “Thou art a *murderer!*”

Warns Hubert, a hand at the hilt of his sword, “Do not *prove* me so.

“As *yet* I am *none!* Whose tongue soe’er speaks is false—not *truly* speaks....” He faces the earl more boldly. “Who speaks not *truly* *lies!*”

“Cut him to pieces!” urges Pembroke.

Sir Richard steps between them. “*Keep the peace, I say!*”

Salisbury is enraged. “Stand *by*, or I shall gall you, Faulconbridge!”

Richard laughs, turning toward him fearlessly. “Thou wert better gall the *Devil*, Salisbury! If thou but *frown* on me, or stir thy foot, or teach thy hasty *spleen* to do me shame, *I’ll strike thee dead!*”

“*Put up thy sword betime*, or I’ll so maul you and your *toasting-iron* that you shall think the Devil is come from Hell!”

Bigot is irked by the interference. “What wilt thou *do*, renownèd *Faulconbridge!*—second a *villain* and a *murderer?*”

“Lord Bigot, I am *none!*” cries the chamberlain.

“*Who killed this prince?*” demands Bigot.

Hubert now sees the boy—goes over and falls to his knees beside the body. “’Tis not an *hour* since I left him *well!*” He sobs. “I *honoured* him!—I *loved* him!—and will weep my date of life out for his sweet life’s loss!”

Salisbury scoffs. “Trust not those cunning waters of *his* eyes, for *villainy* is not without such rheum—and he, long traded in it, makes it seem like rivers of *remorse* and *innocence!*” He turns to the other lords. “*Away with me*, all you whose souls abhor the uncleanly savours of a *slaughter-house!* For I am stifled with this smell of *sin!*”

“*Away toward ’Bury!*—to the *dauphin* there!” cries Bigot.

Pembroke sheathes his blade. “Tell the king he may *there* inquire us out!” he snarls at Richard as he stalks away with the other noblemen.

Thinks the knight, shaking his head, *Here’s a good world!* He looks down at the weeping chamberlain. “If thou didst this deed of death, beyond the infinite and boundless reach of *mercy* art thou *damnèd*, Hubert. *Know* you of this fair work?”

The gentleman takes a moment too long. “Do but *hear* me, sir,” he pleads.

“*Hah!* I’ll tell thee *what!*—thou’rt as *damnèd as foul!*—*nay, nothing* is so foul! Thou art *more deeply damnèd* than Prince *Lucifer!* There is not *yet* so *ugly* a fiend in Hell as *thou* shalt be, if thou didst kill this child!”

“Upon my soul—!”

“If thou didst but *consent* to this most cruel act, do but *despair!* If thou want’st a *rope*, the smallest thread that ever *spider* twisted from her womb will serve to *strangle thee!*—a *rush* will be a *beam* to hang *thee* on! Or, wouldst thou *drown thyself*, put but a little water in a *spoon* and it shall be as all the *ocean*, enough to stifle such a *villain!*”

He studies de Burgh. “I do suspect thee very *grievously!*”

Tenderly, Hubert reaches forward and closes Arthur’s eyes. “If I in act, consent, or sin of *thought* be guilty in the stealing of that sweet breath which was embounded in this beauteous clay, let Hell have pains enough to torture me.

“*I left him well!*” he sobs.

Richard believes it. “Go. Bear him in thine arms.”

Hubert nods, wiping away tears.

The knight watches, sorrowfully, his wryness vanquished. *I am dazed, methinks, and lose my way among the thorns and dangers of this world.*

Hubert arranges the limbs, then carefully lifts the broken body.

*How easily dost thou take all England up!* thinks Richard. *From forth this morsel of dead royalty, the life, the right and truth of all this realm is fled to heaven!*

*And England now is left to tug and scamble—and to pay by the tithe the unowèd interest of proud-swelling state!*

*Now doth doggèd War bristle his angry crest for the bare-picked bone of majesty!—and snarl in the gentle eyes of Peace!*

*Now powers away from home and discontents at home meet in one line!—and vast destruction waits, as doth a raven over a sick-fall'n beast, for the imminent decay of wrested pomp!*

*Now happy is he whose cloak and cincture can hold out this tempest!*

Richard tells the weeping chamberlain, “Bear away that child, and follow me with speed. I’ll to the king.

“A thousand businesses are briefly *at hand*, and heaven itself doth frown upon the land!”

King John, his face hard with barely suppressed anger, regards Cardinal Pandulph, who is standing beside him in the throne room this morning. “Thus have I yielded up into your hand the circle of my glory.”

Solemnly, the priest returns the crown of England. “Take again from this my hand, as beholding to the *Pope*, your sovereign greatness and authority.”

John takes back the crown, and replaces it upon his head. “Now keep your holy word!

“Go meet the French, and use all your power from His Holiness to *stop their marches*, before we are *in flames!* Our discontented counties do *revolt!*—our people quarrel against *obedience*, swearing allegiance and the love of soul to *stranger* blood!—to *foreign* royalty!

“This inundation of mistempered feeling rests to be qualified *only by you!* Then pause not!—for the present time’s so sick that immediate medicine must be ministered, or *overthrow incurable* ensues!”

The priest, unwilling to be hurried, tells the monarch, “It *was* my breath that blew this tempest up—upon *your stubborn usage* of the *Pope!*”

“But since you are a gentle *convertite*, my tongue shall hush again this storm of war, and make fair weather in your blustering land. On this, *Ascension Day*, *remember well* that upon your oath of *service to the Pope* go I, to make the French lay down their arms.”

With a curt bow, he leaves to meet with Louis, whose army, encouraged by Englishmen’s disaffection, has made surprisingly good progress since landing, moving northward, then coming west toward London.

John seats himself on the throne. *Is this Ascension Day? Did not the prophet say that before Ascension Day at noon my crown I should give off? Even so I have!*

*I did suppose it would be on constraint, but, heaven be thanked, it is but voluntary!* he thinks—with bitter sarcasm. He groans and, slowly smoothing his beard, ponders wearily and ruefully.

Sir Richard comes to him and bows. His dour report is of the French army’s swift success. “All Kent hath yielded!—nothing there holds out but Dover Castle; *London* hath received the dauphin and his powers *like a kind host!*”

The knight regards the brooding king. “Your nobles will not *hear* you, but are gone to offer service to your enemy!—and wild amazement hurries up and down the little number of your doubtful *friends.*”

John is surprised. “Would not my lords *return* to me again, after they heard young Arthur was *alive?*”

“They found him: *dead*, and cast unto the street—an empty casket where the jewel of life by some damnèd hand was robbed and ta’en away.”

“That villain *Hubert* told me he did *live!*” cries John, stunned.

“So, on my soul, he did, for aught *he* knew,” says Richard, wondering if John otherwise accomplished the boy’s death. “But wherefore do you droop?” he asks the sovereign. “Why look you sad? Be as great in *act* as you have been in thought!—let not the world see *fear* and sad *distrust* govern the motion of a *kingly* eye!

“Be as stirring as the time!—be *fire* to fire; *threaten* the threatener, and *outface* the brow of bragging *horror!*”

“So shall inferior eyes that borrow their behaviors from the great *grow* great by your example, and put on the dauntless spirit of *resolution!*”

“*Away*, and glister like *the god of war* when he intendeth to *complement the field!* Show *boldness* and aspiring *confidence!* What?—shall they seek the *lion* in his *den*, and *fright* him there?—and make him *tremble* there? Oh, *let it not be said!*”

“*Forward!*—run to *meet* displeasure *farther from thy doors*, and *grapple with it* ere it comes so nigh!”

But John sinks back against the throne. “The legate of the Pope hath been with me, and I have made a happy peace with him. And he hath promised to dismiss the powers led by the dauphin.”

“Oh *inglorious league!*” cries the knight. “Shall we, upon the *trampling of our land*, send *fair-play* orders, and make *compromises*, offer weak *parley* and base *truce* to *invasive arms?* Shall a *beardless boy*, a *silken cockerel!*”—stuffed-cloth rooster—“wantonly brave our fields, and flesh his spirit in a *warlike roil*, mocking the air with colours idly spread—and *find no check?*”

“Let us, my liege, *to arms!*”

“Perchance the cardinal cannot make your peace!—or if he *do*, let it at least be said they saw we had the *purpose* of defence!”

King John merely nods. “Have *thou* the ordering of this present time.”

“*Away*, then, with good *courage!*” cries Richard, already going. *Yet I know our party may well meet a prouder foe.*

Even as he rushes to rally the royal troops, he fears, now, that John has grievously sinned.

Several English noblemen have signed an agreement with the smug French prince. Louis tells Count Giles, in the dauphin’s huge tent at his army’s new encampment near St. Edmundsbury, “My Lord Melun, let this be copied out, and keep it safe for our remembrance.

“Return the precedent”—original document—“to these lords again; so that, having our fair terms *written down*, both they and we perusing o’er these notes may know wherefore we took the sacrament, and *keep* our faiths, firm and inviolable.”

“Upon *our* side it never shall be broken!” says Salisbury—flushing; not long ago they had sworn just such allegiance to John. “But, noble dauphin, albeit we swore a voluntary zeal and an unurgèd faith to your proceeding, yet believe me, prince, I am not *glad* for a time so sore that it should seek *bandaging* by contemnèd *revolt*, and *healing* the intemperate canker of *one* wound by making *many!*”

“Oh, it *grieves my soul* that I must draw this metal from my side to be a *widow-maker!* Ah, if only it were honourable *rescue in defence* that cries out upon the name of Salisbury! But such is the infection of the time that, for the health and physic of our *right*, we cannot but cope with the very hand of stern injustice and confusèd *wrong!*”

He faces the other Englishmen. “And is’t not a pity, O my aggrievèd friends, that we, the sons and children of this isle, were born to see so sad an hour as this, wherein we step after a *stranger’s* march across her gentle bosom, and fill up *her enemies’* ranks!—do grace the gentry of a land remote, and follow *unacquainted colours* here!

“What, *here?* O *nation*, if only thou couldst be *moved!*—if Neptune’s arms which clippeth thee about would bear thee from the knowledge of *thysself*, and grapple thee against a *pagan* shore, these two *Christian* armies might *combine* the blood of malice within a vein of *league*, and not expend it so *unneighbourly!*” His throat chokes with emotion; he turns away. “I must withdraw, and *weep* over the blot of this enforcèd cause!”

Louis, dressed in colorful silks, as he would be at home in the French court, feels disdain. *A noble temper dost thou show in this—and great affectation wrestling in thy bosom doth make an earthquake of nobility!*

He believes these English lords, behind the rhetoric of patriots, are like him—ambitious and calculating. *Oh, what a noble combat hast thou fought—between compulsion and a brave aspect!*

He proffers an embroidered pink kerchief. "Let me wipe off this honourable dew which silverly doth progress on thy cheeks!

"My heart hath melted at a *lady's* tears, being an *ordinary* inundation; but *this* effusion of such *manly* drops, this *shower*, blown up by *tempest of the soul*, startles mine eyes, and makes me more amazed than had I seen the vaulty top of *heaven* figured quite o'er with *burning meteors!*

"Lift up thy brow, renowned Salisbury, and with a great heart *heave away the storm!* Commend these waters to those *baby* eyes that never saw the giant *world* enraged," he says, patronizingly, "nor met with fortune other than *feasts*, full of warmed blood,"—heated with drink, "of *mirth*, of *gossiping*."

The dauphin, annoyed, renews his bribery. "Come, *come!*—for thou shalt thrust thy hand as deep into the purse of rich *prosperity* as Louis *himself!* So, nobles, shall you *all*, that knit your sinews to the strength of *mine!*"

They hear a herald's trumpet. "And even *there*, methinks, an *angel* spake!" laughs Louis. "Look, where the holy legate comes apace, to give us warrant from the land of *Heaven*, and on our actions set the name of *right* with *holy* breath."

Cardinal Pandulph comes to him and nods. The Italian wastes no time. "Hail, noble Prince of France. The next is this: King John hath *reconciled* himself to Rome! His spirit, that so stood out against the holy Church, the great metropolis and see of Rome, is *come in!*"

The priest motions imperiously. "Therefore thy threatening colours now wind up, and tame the savage spirit of wild war, so that, like a lion fostered up by hand, it may lie gently at the foot of *peace*, and be no further harmful than in show."

"Your Grace shall pardon me," says Louis haughtily, "I will *not* go back!

"I am too high-born to be *propertied!*—to be a *secondary* of control, a useful *serving-man*, or an *instrument* to any sovereign state throughout this *world!*

"*Your* breath first kindled the dead coals of *war* between this chastised kingdom and myself, and brought in matter that would *feed* this fire!—and now 'tis *far too huge* to be blown out by that same weak wind which enflamed it!

"You taught me how to know the *face* of 'right'—acquainted me with an interest in this *land*—yea, *thrust* this enterprise into my *heart!* And come ye *now* to tell me *John* hath made his peace with *Rome?* What is that peace to *me?*

"*I*, by the honour of my marriage-bed, can—after young Arthur—*claim this land for mine!* And now that it is *half conquered*, must I *back* because *John* hath made his peace with *Rome?*

"Am I Rome's *slave?* What *penny* hath *Rome* borne to underprop this action, what *men* provided, what *munition* sent? Is't not *I* that undergo this charge?

"Who else but *I,*"—he glances at the English lords—"and such as to my claim are liable, *sweat* in this business, and *maintain* this war!

"Have I not heard these islanders shout out '*Vive le roi!*' as I have banked ships at their towns?

"Have I not here the *best cards* for the game?—to *win* this easy match, played for a *crown!*

"And shall I now *give o'er* the yielded bet? No, *no!*—on my soul, it *never shall be said!*"

The cardinal warns the youth, "You look on but the *outside* of this work!"

"Outside or inside, I will not return till my attempt be glorified by so much as was promised to my ample *hope!*—before I drew this gallant head of *war*, and called these fiery spirits to outface in *conquest*, and to *win renown*, even in the jaws of danger and of death!"

He looks to the entrance as a sennet signals, loudly, the arrival of another visitor. "What lusty trumpet thus doth summon us?"

"According to the fair play of the world,"—customs of chivalry, "let me have audience!" demands Sir Richard, as he and his attendants enter the dauphin's tent—and approach the cardinal.

“I am sent to speak, my holy lord of Milan, from *the king!* I come to learn how you have *dealt for him.* Then, according to your answer, I will know the scope and warrant limited unto my tongue.”

Pandulph spreads his hands. “The dauphin is too wilfully *opposite,* and with my entreaties will not *temporize!* He flatly says he’ll not lay down his arms!”

Richard the warrior beams. “By all the blood that ever breathèd *fury,* the youth *says well!*

“Now hear our *English king!*—for thus his *royalty* doth speak by me: *he is preparèd!*

“And for good reason *should* he be! This *apish* and *unmannerly* approach, this harnessed *parade* and unadvisèd *revel,*”—he looks at Louis, “this beardless *sauciness* of *boyish* troops, the king doth *smile* at! And he is *well* prepared to *whip* this *dwarfish* warfare, these *pigmy* arms, from out the circle of his territories!”

He regards the French lords with contempt. “That hand which had the strength, *even at your door,* to *cudgel* you and make you *take the hatch*—to *dive* like buckets into concealèd *wells,* to *crouch* in the crap of your stable-planks, to *lie* like pawns locked up in chests and trunks, to hug with *swine,* to seek out sweet *safety* in vaults and prisons, and to thrill and shake even at the crying of your nation’s *crow,* thinking its voice an armèd *Englishman’s!*—shall *that victorious hand* that *in your chambers* gave you chastisement be feeble *here?*

“*No!*” he roars. “Know that the gallant monarch is *in arms,* and like an *eagle* soars o’er his aery towers, to *down* annoyance that comes near his nest!”

He glares at the English nobles. “And you *degenerates,* you *ingrate revolters!*—you bloody *heroes* ripping ope the womb of your dear Mother England, *blush for shame!*—for *your own ladies* and pale-visaged *maids* come tripping like *Amazons* after her drums!—change *thimbles* into armèd gauntlets, turn *needles* to *lances,* and their gentle hearts to *fierce and bloody inclination!*”

Louis interrupts, waving him away. “There *end* thy brave,”—affront, “and turn thy face in *peace!* We *grant* thou canst *outscold* us! Fare thee well; we hold our time too precious to be spent with such a *brabblor.*”

Cardinal Pandulph asks Louis, “Give *me* leave to speak.”

“No, *I* will speak!” insists Richard.

“We will attend to *neither!*” cries the dauphin. “Strike up the *drums!*—and let the tongue of *war* plead for our interest, and our being here!”

Richard laughs. “Indeed, being *beaten* your drums *will* cry out!—and so shall *you,* when beaten!

“Do but start an *echo* with the clamour of thy drum,” he warns, “and, even *at hand,* a drum is already bracèd that shall reverberate all as loud as *thine!*

“Sound but another, and *another* shall *rattle the welkin’s ear!*”—roil the sky—“and mock the deep-mouthed *thunder!*

“For *at hand*—not trusting to this halting *legate* here, whom he hath used rather for *sport* than need—is *warlike John!* And in his frown sits bare-ribbèd *Death!*—whose office this day is to *feast* upon *whole thousands* of the *French!*”

“*Strike up* our drums, says Louis, scornfully, “to *find this danger out!*”

Richard strides away. “And thou *shalt* find it, dauphin, do not *doubt!*”

## Chapter Eight Embattled

**T**he king’s forces furiously attack the dauphin’s French army and its allied English rebels. The fighting is desperate, spurring vigorous assaults and frantic retreats on both sides, as the intense battle wears on.

“How goes the day with us?” asks John, sitting, sullen, in a tent away from the combat. “Tell me, Hubert.”

“Badly, I fear,” the chamberlain reports; their contingent has already been compelled by the turmoil to move farther back. “How fares Your Majesty?”

The King of England’s face shows his anguish. “This *fever*, that hath troubled me so long, lies heavy on me. *Oh*, my *heart* is sick!”

A messenger comes to John. He bows, and speaks quickly: “My lord, your valiant kinsman Faulconbridge desires Your Majesty to leave the field, and send him word, by me, which way you go!”

“Tell him, toward Swinshead, to the abbey there,” says the king. He intends to leave the French behind by journeying northward; but the worst of his troubles, he knows, will go with him.

The young messenger’s face brightens: “Be of good comfort! For the great supply that was expected here by the dauphin was *wrecked* three nights ago on Goodwin Sands!” Ships bringing reinforcements foundered on those shoals after crossing from France. “This news was brought to Sir Richard but even now! The French fight *coldly*, and retire themselves!” he reports happily.

But King John, pale, wipes his forehead. “*Ay me!* This tyrant *fever* burns me up, and will not let me welcome this good news.

“Set on toward Swinshead,” he tells his servants. He rises unsteadily. “To my litter straight; *weakness* possesseth me, and I am *faint* . . .”

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Lord Salisbury, watching as invasion troops are driven back by the English, is astonished—and appalled. “I did not think the king so stored with *friends!*”

“*Up once again!*” urges Lord Pembroke. “Put *spirit* in the French! If they miscarry, we miscarry too!”

“That misbegotten devil *Faulconbridge*,” says Salisbury angrily, “in spite of *spite*, *alone* upholds the day!”

Pembroke nods. “They say King John, sorely *sick*, hath left the field.”

The lords see that a French nobleman, armored, but without a helmet, is being helped by two servants to stagger toward them. “Lead me to the revolts of England, here!” he tells the men.

*Revolts*. Salisbury looks at the others. “When we were more *fortunate*, we had *other* names.”

“It is the *Count Melun!*” Pembroke tells them, as their suborner approaches.

“Wounded unto death,” notes Salisbury quietly; blood streams from Melun’s forehead.

The count reaches them. “*Fly*, noble English!—you are *bought* and *sold!*”—betrayed. “*Untread* the rude way of *rebellion*, and welcome *home* again discarded *loyalty!* Seek out King John, and fall before his feet!—for if the French prince be lord of this loud day, he means to recompense the pains you take by *cutting off your heads!*”

“Thus hath he sworn, and I with him, and many more with me, upon the altar at Saint Edmundsbury—even on that altar where we swore to you dear amity and everlasting love!”

Salisbury gapes. “May this be *possible?* May this be *true?*”

Melun touches his face and shows a crimson left palm. “Have I not hideous Death within my view?—retaining but a quantity of life which bleeds away, even as a form of *wax* dissolveth from its figure ’gainst the *fire!*”

“What in *this* world should make me now deceive, since I must lose the *use* of all deceit?” He clutches at a gold cross in his right hand. “Why then should I be false, since it is true that I must die *here*, and live hence by *truth!*”

“I say again: if Louis do win the day, he is *forsworn* if e’er those eyes of yours behold another day break in the east! And even this night—whose black, contagious breath already smokes about the burning crest of the old, feeble and day-wearied sun—even *this ill night* your breathing shall expire, *betrayèd!*—paying for treachery the treacherous fine of *all your lives*, if Louis by your assistance win the day!”

The count is weakening, and his men ease him to the ground. “Commend me to one *Hubert*, with your king,” he groans. “The love of *him*—and this respect besides: for that my grandsire was an *Englishman*—awakes my conscience to confess all this.

“In view whereof, I pray you bear me hence from forth the noise and rumour of the field, where I may think the remnant of my thoughts in peace, and part this body and my soul with contemplation and *devout* desires.”

“We do *believe* thee!” says Salisbury. “And beshrew my soul but I do love the favour and form of this most-fair opportunity!—by the which we *will* untread the steps of damnèd flight, and like an abated and retirèd *flood*, leave our rankness’ irregular course, stoop low within those bounds we have lookèd o’er, and calmly run on in *obedience*, even to our *ocean*—to our great *King John*!”

He kneels beside Melun. “*My* arm shall give thee help to bear thee hence; for I do see the cruel pangs of death in thine eye.

“*Away*, my friends!

“*New* flight!—and *happy* newness that attends *old* right!”

In his tent, Louis exults by the light of many candles over the day’s success. “The sun of heaven methought was loath to *set*, but stayed and made the western welkin *blush*, when the English measured *backward* their own ground in faint retire!

“Oh, *bravely* came we off,” he tells the perfumed sycophants of his expedition, “when with a volley of our shot, needless after such bloody toll, we *bade them good-night*!—and cleanly wound up our tattering colours—last in the field, and almost *lords* of it!”

As the young courtiers laugh and clap, an officer is heard at the tent’s guarded opening. “Where is my prince, the dauphin?”

“*Here!*” cries Louis, elated by the applause. “What news?”

The captain of the guard bows. “The Count Melun is *slain*; the English lords by his persuasion are again *fallen back*; and your new *supplies*, which you have wished so long, are cast away and sunk on Goodwin Sands!”

“Oh, *foul, cruel* news! *Beshrew* thy very heart!” cries the dauphin. “I did not think to be so sad tonight as *this* hath made me!”

Still, he remembers a more pleasing report. “Who was he that said King John did *fly*, an hour or two before the stumbling night did part our weary powers?”

“Whoever spoke it, it is *true*, my lord,” the officer tells him.

Louis waves the captain away. “Well, keep good quarter and good care tonight.

“The day shall not be up so soon as *I*, to try the fair adventure of *tomorrow!*”

## Chapter Nine Remembrance, Restoration

A torch, flickering in the chilly Lincolnshire field not far from Swinshead Abbey, reveals the dark shape of a horseman leading his mount through sentries’ perimeter. “Who’s there?” demands Hubert de Burgh, already hurrying toward the sentinels. “*Speak, ho!*” He raises a pistol, already cocked. “Speak quickly, or I shoot!”

“A friend,” says the cloaked man, tying the reins to a fence rail. “What art thou?”

“Of the party of *England!*”—the king.

The stranger’s face is half hidden by a scarf, and shadowed beneath a hat’s wide brim. “Whither dost thou go?”

“What’s that to *thee*? Why may not I demand of *thine* affairs, as well as thou of mine?”

“*Hubert*, I think.”



“Thou hast a perfected thought,” nods the chamberlain, surprised. “I will upon all hazards well believe thou art my *friend*, that know’st my tongue so well!” He lowers the weapon. “Who art thou?”

“Who thou *wilt*,” says the knight dryly. “And if thou please, thou mayst befriend me so much as to think I come, in *one* way, from the *Plantagenets!*”—as a son of Richard Lion-Heart.

Says Hubert, now recognizing Sir Richard, “Unkind *remembrance*, thou and eyeless *night* have done me shame!” He returns the warm smile. “*Brave soldier*, pardon me that any accent breaking from *thy* tongue should ’scape the true acquaintance of mine ear!”

Newly arrived ahead of the king’s exhausted legions, which are still on their northward march, Richard craves word of his king. “Come, come—sans compliment, what *news* abroad?”

“Why, here walk I in the black brow of night *to find you!*”

“Briefly, then, what’s thy *news?*”

“Oh, my sweet sir, news *fitting* to the *night*—dark, fearful, comfortless, and *horrible!*”

“Show me the very *wound* of this ill news!—I am no woman; I’ll not swoon at it.”

“The king, I fear, is *poisoned* by a *monk!* I left him almost without a word, and broke out to acquaint *you* with this evil, that you might the better arm you to the sudden time than if you had at leisure known of this.”

“How did he take poison? Who did *taste* for him?”—sample his food, a customary royal precaution.

“The *monk!*—a *resolvèd* villain, I tell you, whose bowels suddenly burst out!”

The skeptic frowns; a priest a suicide? And Richard knows King John had felt ill long before departing from the field of battle. Perfidy is poisonous.

“The king yet *speaks*,” says Hubert hopefully, “and peradventure may *recover.*”

“Whom didst thou leave to attend his majesty?”

“Why, know you not?” asks Hubert, surprised. “*The lords* are *all come back,*”—returned to support the king, “and brought *Prince Henry*”—John’s young son—“in their company! *At his* request the king hath *pardoned* them, and they are all near his majesty!”

Richard is astonished—and furious. “*Withhold* thine *indignation*, mighty Heaven!” cries the knight to the starry sky, “and tempt *us* not beyond our power to bear it!”

His voice rasps with frustration and anguish: “I’ll tell thee, Hubert, *half my power,*”—army of troops—“passing through flats this night, were *taken by the tide!*—those Lincoln Washes have *devoured* them! *Myself*, well *mounted*, barely escaped!”

He remembers the horror: cold seawater, surging swiftly to rise across the marshy lowlands, overwhelmed foot-soldiers unable to run in the deep, thick muck. Those who made it through are now straggling along after him.

“Away before! Conduct me to the king!—I fear he will be dead ere I come!”

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“It is too late,” says Prince Henry sadly. “The life of all his blood is touchèd corruptingly. And his pure brain, which some suppose the soul’s frail dwelling-house, doth by the idle comments that it makes foretell the ending of mortality.”

The boy is standing, just before dawn, with Lords Salisbury and Bigot just outside the wide oak doors of the abbey. A lone torch illuminates their solemn faces.

Lord Pembroke emerges with news of the feverish king. “His highness yet doth speak, and holds belief that being brought into the open air would allay the *burning* quality of that fell poison which assaileth him!”

“Let him be brought into the orchard here,” orders the prince, a lad not yet twelve. Lord Bigot bows and goes inside. “Doth he still rage?”

“He is more patient than when you left him,” says Pembroke. “Just now he *sang.*”

“Oh, the futility of *sickness!*” moans the boy. “Fierce *extremes* in their continuance will not feel *themselves*; Death, having preyed upon the *outward* parts, leaves them invisible, and his

siege is now against the *mind*—the which he pricks and wounds with many legions of strange *fantasies* that, in their throng and press against the last redoubt, *confound* themselves!

“’Tis strange that *Death* should *sing*,” he murmurs. He remembers the common belief that a swan sings when it is dying. “*I am the cygnet*”—with an echo of *signet*—“to this pale, faint swan, who chants a doleful hymn to his own death, and from the organ-pipe of frailty sings his soul and body to their lasting rest.” The boy is well aware that the burden of kingship will soon fall upon him.

Lord Salisbury is impressed with the poise and perception shown by John’s son. “Be of good comfort, prince! For you are born to set a *form* upon what he hath left so inchoate, shapeless and rude!”—to unite England.

Lord Bigot returns with two strong attendants, who are carrying the pallid monarch on a chair.

Looking around weakly, King John draws a long breath. “*Aye*, marry, *now* my soul hath elbow-room!—it would not out at *windows*, nor at *doors*!

“There is so *hot a summer* in my bosom that all my bowels crumble to *dust*!” He groans. “I am a *scribbled form*, drawn with a pen upon a *parchment*—and against this *fire* do I shrivel up!”

Prince Henry goes to his father. “How fares Your Majesty?” he asks gently.

“Poisoned. *Ill fare!* Dead!—*forsook, cast off*, since none of you will bid the *winter* come to thrust its icy fingers in my maw, nor let my kingdom’s *rivers* take their course through my burning bosom, nor entreat the *north* to make its bleak winds kiss my parchèd lips, and comfort me with *cold*,” whines John. “I do not ask you much—I beg but ‘cold comfort!’—and you are so strict and so *ingrateful*, you *deny* me *that*!”

Henry takes his hand. “Oh, that there were some virtue in my *tears* that might relieve you!”

“The salt in them is *hot*,” mumbles John, pulling his hand away. “*Within* me is a *hell*!—and there the poison is as a *fiend* confined to tyrannize on *unreprievable, condemnèd blood*!”

Hurrying from the sentinels’ line, Sir Richard comes to join them. He kneels before the king, sweating. “Oh, I am scalded with my violent motion in speeding to see Your Majesty!”

John squints, then recognizes him. He sighs. “Oh, cousin, thou art come to set mine eyes”—close them after death. “The tackle of my heart is cracked and burned, and all the shrouds wherewith my life should *sail* have been *turnèd*, by *one thread*, one little... hair”—or *heir*.

He groans. “My heart hath one poor string to *stay* it by—which holds but till thy news be utterèd. And then all this thou seest is but *lump*, a model of *confounded* royalty.”

Richard nods and slowly rises. “The dauphin is repairing hitherward—where heaven knows how we shall *answer* him!—for in the night, as I upon advantage did remove, the best part of my power were in the Washes all unwarily devoured by the unexpected flood!”

Lord Salisbury bends to look closely at the king’s face. “You breathe these dead news in as dead an ear,” he tells Richard. “My liege, my lord!—a moment ago a *king*—now *thus*.”

Prince Henry—King Henry III—stares. “Even so must *I* run on; and even so, stop. What surety hath the world, what hope, what stay?—when this was now a *king*, and now is clay.”

He ponders his future—and that of all England.

The faithful knight regards, with pity, his late lord, the last son of King Henry II. “Art thou gone so?” Tears well into his eyes. “*I* do stay behind but to do the office for thee of *revenge*, and then my soul shall wait on thee to heaven, as it on earth hath been thy servant still.”

He looks up. The horizon’s glow promises a clear dawn.

Lion-hearted Richard faces the lords. “Now, *now* you stars that move in your *right* spheres, where be your *powers*? *Show* now your *mended faiths*!—and instantly *return* with me, again to push destruction and perpetual shame out of the weak door of our fainting land!

“Straight let us *seek*, or straight we shall be *sought*! The dauphin rages at our very heels!”

Salisbury’s eyebrows rise. “It seems you know not, then, so much as we. The *Cardinal Pandulph* is within, at rest, who half an hour since *came* from the dauphin—and brings from him

such offers of our peace as we with honour and respect may *take*—with purpose immediately to *leave off* this war!”

Richard scowls. “He will the *rather* do it when he sees ourselves *well sinewed* to our *defence!*” he says fiercely.

“Nay, it is in a manner *done* already,” Salisbury assures him, “for many wagons he hath dispatched to the seaside, and put his cause and quarrel to the disposing of the cardinal—with whom yourself, myself and other lords, if you think meet, this afternoon will consummate this business readily.”

Richard considers; the time for heroic combat has passed. “Let it be so.”

The knight looks kindly at young Henry. “And you, my noble prince, with other princes that may thus be spared, shall wait upon your father’s funeral.”

The boy nods. “At Worcester must his body be interrèd; for so he willed it.”

“Thither shall it, then,” says Sir Richard. “And happily may your sweet *self* put on the lineal state, and *glory* of the land!” He goes to Henry and kneels. “To whom with all submission, on my knee I do bequeath my faithful services and true subjection everlastingly!”

“And the like tender of our love *we* make,” says Salisbury, “to rest without a spot forever more!” He and the others kneel.

Henry smiles bravely, and wipes his eyes. “I have a kindly soul that would give you *thanks*, and knows not how to do it but with tears!”

Sir Richard stands and gazes at the sunrise. “Oh, let us pay the time but *needful* woe, since it hath been beforehand with our griefs”—already cost enough.

“This *England* never did—nor never *shall*—lie at the foot of a proud conqueror but when it first did help to *wound itself*.

“Now that these, her princes are come *home* again, let come the other *three corners of the world* in arms,” he proclaims, “and we shall *shock* them!

“Nought shall make us rue, if England to *itself* do rest but *true!*”