If all the Swords in England

a story of thomas becket

BARBARA WILLARD

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By

Barbara Willard

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Introduction

THIS HISTORICAL novel, *If All The Swords In England* by Barbara Willard, justly deserves to see the light of day again and to be enjoyed by a new generation of youthful keen historians. As in her book, *Augustine Came To Kent*, Miss Willard has chosen to tell the story of an Archbishop of Canterbury, this time Saint Thomas Becket. All children who have ever studied medieval English history can recite from memory the ominous words of the King, Henry II Plantagenet, as he sought to destroy the great churchman, "Will no one rid me of this turbulent priest?" (As a child, it was probably my first introduction to the usage of the word "turbulent").

The story of Thomas Becket's quarrel with his King and its tragic and far-reaching conclusion is the very stuff of history, drama and the imagination. In recent times it has inspired both a film, *Becket*, and a great (American-born) poet, T.S. Eliot, to write his religious drama, *Murder In The Cathedral*. Here, Miss Willard expertly weaves the killing of the Archbishop in his own cathedral by four Norman knights anxious to curry favour with their master, into a narrative spanning the years 1164-1170.

The action is seen through the eyes of two boys, twins, high born but orphaned, as they seek their fortunes in the world: one in the service of the King, the other in the service of his former chancellor and now Archbishop of Canterbury (the premier bishop in England), Thomas Becket. One brother, Simon, has a withered left hand, which has its own significance in the story. The other brother, Edmund, desperately tries, but fails, to avert the consequences of the King's furious appeal. The story takes place both in England and France, reminding one that in those days English kings ruled more of France than the French kings themselves. The descriptions of dress, custom, court and monastic life are realistic and vivid. Young readers today will discover that the status of "childhood" as a privileged time of growth and development did not exist in twelfth century Europe. Children then often had to fend for themselves, make decisions and be mature in ways that their modern counterparts could hardly imagine. But of course children love to imagine just this: how they, pre-

tending to be the heroes of such stories, would cope in those strange, far-off (and turbulent) days.

In Christian families, other questions will arise from reading this story. What comes first, loyalty to a human ruler, or loyalty to God? What part does conscience play in making important decisions? What qualities of courage and perseverance are needed when you have to stand, seemingly alone, against a hostile and powerful enemy? What is more important, preserving a friendship or standing up for the truth?

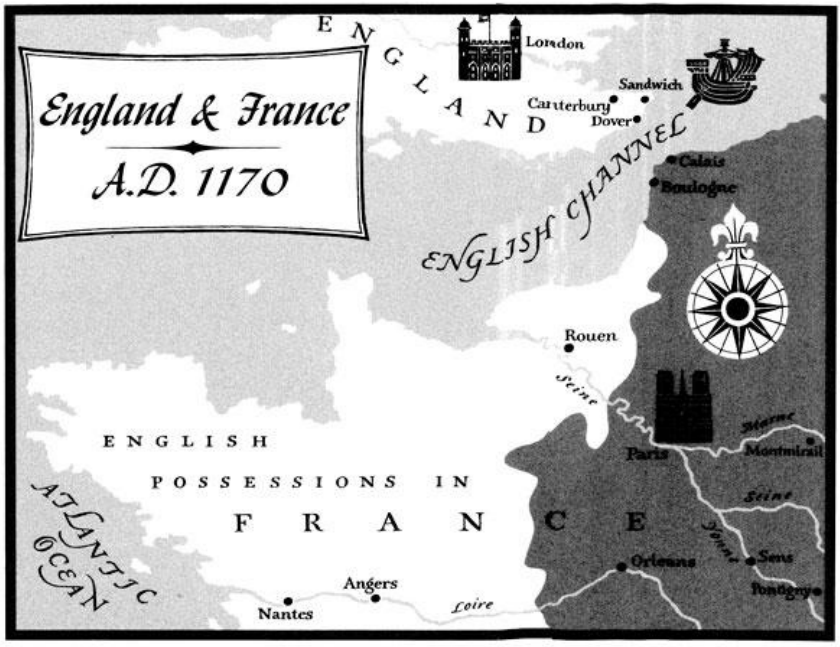
All the ingredients are there, in this absorbing tale: two men, both of great ability and powers of leadership, who once were the best of friends; the slow death of their friendship in a quarrel over their mutual claim to a particular juridical authority; the colourful backdrop of medieval Europe, which was still—unlike today, alas—an organic, living Christian world. Miss Willard shows a society in which God is very present in every aspect of life: in the observance of feast days and fasts, in the universal horror of sacrilege—as in the slaughter of a priest at his own altar; in the need to make amends when one has done wrong. King Henry's very public humiliation and penitence is itself a lesson in how human authority should mean "service" but often becomes "tyranny."

The clash between a King and his subject in this story is a fateful intimation of a later, even more famous clash, that between Henry VIII and another Thomas, Thomas More—later, like Becket, a saint. Becket's words in this story, "I will submit in all things—saving God's honour," are hardly different from the cheerful words of Thomas More on the scaffold: "I die the King's good servant—but God's first." Thomas Becket was murdered on 29 December 1170 in Canterbury Cathedral. Until the Reformation, which tragically divided Christendom, his shrine at Canterbury was one of the principal places of pilgrimage in Europe (other popular sites were Rome, Santiago de Compostela, Spain, and Walsingham, England). Thousands of people (immortalised in Chaucer's wonderful *Canterbury Tales*) came to Canterbury to pray. There they remembered the life of one man, who chose martyrdom rather than submit to what he regarded as the unlawful demands of a secular sovereignty. Today too, young Christian readers in the western world can learn

a valuable lesson from the historical events described in these pages: that they, in their own lives, must sometimes stand up and be counted in the service of Christ, Who is Lord of all history.

Francis Phillips
Aylesbury, England
April, 2000

“If all the swords in England were
pointed against my head,
your threats could not move me.”
Thomas Becket to his murderers


England & France
A.D. 1170
ENGLAND
London
Sandwich
Canterbury
Dover
Calais
Boulogne
ENGLISH CHANNEL
Rouen
Seine
ENGLISH
POSSESSIONS IN
FRANCE
Paris
Marne
Montmirail
Seine
Yonne
Sens
Orleans
Pontigny
Angers
Nantes
Loire
ATLANTIC OCEAN

1. A Place in the King's Household, 1164

"THE TALLER LAD will do very well," said the steward, "but I cannot offer the other a place."

This was entirely unexpected. For a second Oliver seemed to be completely at a loss. He had brought the two boys all the way from Wales to London to take service with the King. It was what their dead father would have wished, and Oliver, who had been his personal servant, had never doubted that both boys would be taken.

"They are twin-born," he said at last. "They have one mind. *The other*, as you call him, gives his brother no more than half an inch."

“All of three, if you ask,” replied the steward, good-humoredly. “Twins, eh? Well, if they’d been as like in body as you say they are in mind I would have taken a chance. The King enjoys a joke. There was a time when the Queen had twin sisters among her ladies, but—well, to be blunt—a lad with one useless hand is not likely to stand much chance as a page.”

At this, Edmund Audemer, the slightly taller, robuster boy, put his arm across his brother’s shoulders and said sharply, “Simon is twice as nimble as I am. There was none better serving at table in my grandfather’s hall. And he is clever—twice as clever as I am.”

“Now do not persuade me that you lack wit,” said the King’s steward, “or I shall not take you, either.”

Simon, who all this time had been standing beside Edmund in the silence of utter misery, now forced himself to speak up.

“My brother is only pleading for me, Master Steward. Truly I am nimble, also I am able to write and to calculate. No one will believe I can also pour wine at table and never spill a drop. But Edmund is strong and I am not. And no doubt the King needs strong men about him.”

The steward looked at Simon and smiled. “May Our Lady hear me, I would take you if I could. But this is a rough world, for all it is a royal one. I am bound to say No to you. But to your brother I say Yes, if he chooses.”

“I do not—” began Edmund hotly.

“He chooses,” Simon said, firm and steady.

“Indeed it is best that he should,” said Oliver, with a sigh. “God knows I would not force you two apart. But it is a place beside the King himself, Edmund—as your father always intended—as your mother always prayed. Riches you may have none, but you have your Norman blood to make you a place in the world.”

“They are Sir Richard Audemer’s sons, you say?” The King’s steward looked approving. “I saw him once when we rode in Anjou. He was a knight of high distinction.”

“But a poor man, alas,” said Oliver. “For no other reason than dire necessity would I leave these lads and find service elsewhere. I have cared for them as though they were my own for this past year. Their father and mother died cruelly, and now their grandfather, their good mother’s father who gave us shelter, is dead, too.

The family estates have fallen into disrepair and so we must all seek our fortunes as best we may."

For the first time since they had entered the great fortress-palace of the Tower of London, the two boys looked at one another. Although they were not in fact identical, they had, as Oliver claimed, one mind. So Edmund knew all the fear and loneliness that Simon experienced at the thought of parting; while Simon knew Edmund's angry wish to throw away this opportunity. And both knew that their father would have expected them to submit.

It was just a year since tragedy had broken the family. They had been riding into Wales to celebrate Christmas at the border castle of their mother's father. The small, confident cavalcade was making its way in bright, frosty weather—the parents, the ten-year-old twins, the little sister, the servants, the six or so men-at-arms. Nothing more impressive than a robber band had swept down upon them, and afterward somehow this had seemed to add disgrace to disaster. Both parents died, and with them the little sister the boys had so dearly prized.

Edmund had been riding with Oliver. In the confusion and terror they were swept away from Simon, who saw his father struck down. It was Simon who snatched at his father's hand as he died, who held it as the stir and terror of the skirmish swept over and on. The winter dark came down and still Simon lay with his hand clasping and clasped by the chill dead hand of his father. At last Oliver, limping from a sword thrust, came with Edmund and the surviving servants, half of them wounded and bleeding, searching and calling. He prised away the dead fingers and lifted up Simon, who could only sob and cry and lie across the man's shoulders with his eyes closed. . . . Though he had received no wound, Simon's left hand had been useless since that day. . . .

He looked away from Edmund now and glanced instead at this hand of his that must be the cause of their separation. But since it had been the last hand to clasp his father's he felt no bitterness, only sorrow.

"Oliver is sure to find me a place in London, Edmund," he said as hopefully as he could. "There will be all the saints' days and the festivals—then we shall meet and keep the holiday together."

"Certainly the sport in London these days should please any lad," agreed the steward. "Thank God, we are well over the trou-

bles of King Stephen's reign. Our sovereign lord King Henry keeps the realm in peace." He clapped Edmund on the shoulder in a friendly way. "Make your farewells, then, boy—they are all the harder for keeping. Look for me in the wardrobe court in ten minutes. We must get you fitted with a livery." He nodded to Oliver. "You have done the best for him, be sure of that. He'll do well. And he'll have a place worthy of his birth." He paused as he got to the door. "The smaller lad can write, you say? It is a pity the Archbishop of Canterbury has gone from England into France. He loves a scribe and would have taken him in for sure. When great men quarrel we all must suffer, one way or the other."

The mention of the Archbishop stirred Simon deeply. He knew of him from Oliver, whose sister had married for her second husband a distant relative of the Archbishop's. He knew that he had been born Thomas Becket, that he had been Chancellor of England and the King's closest friend. He knew that when, at the King's insistence and persuasion, Thomas Becket had been ordained and consecrated Archbishop of Canterbury, there had occurred the clash of wills, the quarrel that had led to exile. But it was his grandfather's chaplain who had said to Simon: *There is a greater man in England than the King, and his name is Thomas Becket. . . .* Suddenly Simon felt certain that it was better for him to seek out the Archbishop, wherever he might be, than to wear the King's livery, as Edmund was to do.

It was as though, out of the blue, a purpose was given to the parting with his brother, and a promise of consolation.

They came out under the great archway that was so thick it was more nearly a tunnel. Their footsteps echoed on the damp stone flags. A mist sneaked in off the river in winter, and though the short day was bright, the dampness had had no time to evaporate.

"If I had known the King and the court were at Marlborough I would have taken you there," said Oliver to Simon. "A different officer might have taken you both."

Simon said nothing. In the courtyard the servant, Hodge, waited with the horses. Edmund's gray had been led away. But there was Oliver's tall chestnut, and Simon's gentle bay mare; she knew all his tricks with the reins, which he wound round his left arm, above the elbow, relying on his right hand to do all the work. Hodge rode a skinny skewbald.