

WILLIAM'S ANGEL

Chapter One *William Longbeard*

As soon as he had arrived in England and taken possession of his throne again, having been held prisoner for two years by the Emperor of Germany, King Richard the Lionheart occupied himself solely with the project of taking his revenge. It was Philippe, King of France, whose calumnies, intrigues and fraudulent machinations had not only prolonged that captivity but also troubled, by all possible means, the peace of England, that he resolved to punish first.

He therefore departed for Normandy, took away the command of that province from his brother John, and did not take long to find himself, with considerable forces, in the presence of his enemy, the king, who was advancing at the head of his troops. It was in the Saintonge, near Niort, that that encounter took place. During the night, the two armies camped facing one another, only separated by a small river, and at daybreak the following day, each prepared its arms for combat.

The cavalry were already mounting up and the infantrymen were searching for places to ford the river, when suddenly, to the great surprise of the men-at-arms, a religious hymn was heard rising up between the two camps, and a numerous procession of bishops, priests and monks of different orders were seen arriving.

They stopped on the river bank and, after erecting an altar of turf, on which they placed the Holy Sacrament, they all knelt down and began chanting psalms. After those public prayers, the bishops of Troyes and Niort gave their blessing to the soldiers, and the former went to the tent of the King of France, while the latter to the King of England, in order to beg them to defer a combat that would desolate the region and cause the death of so many brave men. They aided those supplications by proposing several arrangements that might terminate the war.

Richard welcomed these supplications and consented to make a few concessions, but Philippe remained firm and inflexible.

"I shall not quit the sword," he said, "until I have received the oath of vassalage from King Richard for the provinces of Normandy, Guyenne and Poitou, which belong to me."

He spoke thus because he believed that he had attracted the Danes to his party, by means of promises of gold, who had sworn not to commit their own troops to the encounter. But when, as they were about to come to get to grips, he saw that hope disappointed, and the Champenois putting helmets on their heads in order to march to battle, his rudeness and inflexibility were changed to fear. He had the Bishop of Niort recalled and sent him to Richard to tell him that he declared that prince acquitted of all vassalage and that he wanted to sign a peace treaty.

When the prelate and his retinue met the English monarch, the latter, with his helmet on his head and his sword in his hand, had just crossed the little river that separated the two camps, and without paying any heed to the bishop, who advanced to speak to him, he turned to his archers and gave them the order to unleash the first arrows. The prelate ran to the altar, seized the Holy Sacrament and came back to place himself in front of the king, whose passage he barred.

"In the name of the blood of Christ, shed for us on the cross," he cried, "in the name of the salvation of our soul, go no further and take pity on our tears and our anguish. The King of France declares that he had renounced any pretention to the vassalage of your provinces, and he will retire this very day to the territory of his realm."

Richard directed a bellicose gaze at his army, and full of confidence and pride, he spurred his horse to urge it forward, forgetting in his warrior ardor that the bishop was before him. The old prelate, knocked

over by the charger, fell heavily to the ground, and the holy pyx that he was holding slipped from his hands and went to break against the trunk of a tree. At the sight of the sacred host lying in the mud of the river, and in the presence of the unconscious old man, Richard wanted to advance nevertheless, but the bishop got up, his face bloodied and his garments soiled with blood, and cried: "Peace, Sire, peace, in the name of Christ!"

"Peace! Peace!" repeated all the priests and monks.

A flash of rage shone in the king's hawk-like eye.

"Forward!" he cried. "Forward, men-at-arms!"

"Forward!" replied the army.

"In order to advance, then, you will trample under the feet of your horses an old man and the body of the living God!" said the bishop, pointing at the host.

"Forward!"

But this time, to that cry of the king another clamor responded, for everyone recoiled before such a great profanation. The bishop, the priests and the monks took advantage of that hesitation to repeat: "Peace, Sire! Peace, Sire!"

The king darted a gaze of indignation and scorn at his soldiers.

"Since the men-at-arms think like the priests, since they're afraid of denting their breastplates and spoiling their helmets, so be it, peace. Let King Philippe come to find me and let the conditions of the treaty be regulated immediately."

A few moments later the King of France arrived, only followed by a few men-at-arms. He gave them a sign to stop at the entrance to the camp. Then, after dismounting, he went straight to Richard's tent, and before the latter had had time to advance to meet him he said, with a grace and courtesy full of charm: "Richard, I have come to you alone, not as a king but as a brother, as befits a Christian prince who renounces any intention of war and no longer has any but one desire, that of meriting your amity."

The anger and resentment of the King of England could not resist those gilded words; they sufficed for him to forget King Philippe's treason; too honest to doubt the honesty of another, passed his arm under the arm of the King of France, and it was thus that they emerged from the tent and showed themselves to the two armies.

At that sight, cries of joy rose up from all sides, and the Bishop of Niort intoned the *Te Deum*, which the priests repeated in chorus. The two kings knelt down; everyone followed their example, and all the men who had been previously disposed to fight one another united their voices in the same prayer.

Soon, the two camps only formed one. As the majority of the knights that served under each of the princes already knew one another, they came together in order to celebrate the peace with feasting, and the next day, at dawn, as a chronicler of the times says, each of them "departed for his domains, and no longer thought about anything but hunting and the pleasures of a peaceful life."

The King of England and the King of France, with their retinues and a small number of lords, whom they summoned to accompany them, went to Niort in order to finish agreeing the terms there of the ten-year truce that they had resolved, and to make up a few hunting parties, for Philippe was justly reputed to be one of the greatest experts in venery of the day, and Richard, jealous of that renown, wanted to prove to him that he possessed a knowledge no less great of the noble science of Saint Hubert. Thus, they ran after red deer, forced wild boar and put to death more than one bear and wolf, to the great satisfaction of the King of England, to whom the wily King of France left all the honors of the hunt, more desirous of obtaining advantageous conditions of peace than directing the dogs and giving the first thrust of the dagger to the beast.

It resulted from those clever concessions that Richard took his brother of France in great amity, an amity from which he profited in consummate diplomacy to file the claws of the lion somewhat. Moreover, they never quit one another, dining at the same table, lying in the same bed and not giving any truce to joyful speech.

One morning, Richard was sounding the horn in the courtyard of the Episcopal Palace, where the two kings were lodged, greatly amused by the feigned difficulty with which Philippe imitated his

fanfares, when a man of tall stature who wore a long beard, contrary to the fashion of the time, entered the royal abode, went straight to the English monarch and knelt before him.

“Sire,” he said, “I have come to request peace and protection for the poor people of London.”

“And since when have my people in London lacked peace and protection?” demanded Richard, whose discontentment was visible.

“Since you are no longer there, Sire, to protect them against the prevarications of the aldermen charged with collecting and distributing the taxes. They exempt from any contribution those in the best condition to pay and overwhelm the artisan who only lives on the work of his hands, and they have just decided, in order to put the cap on their pillage, that every townsman should pay the same sum regardless of the difference in fortunes. In sum, they always act in such a way that the heaviest charge falls upon the poor folk. That is why, Sire, I have quit my wife and mother and have come to lay at your feet the complaints of our faithful friends and subjects, sure that you will have compassion for them.”

“Yes, by the salvation of my soul, it will be as you say, worthy man. I do not want my people to suffer and be pressured by pillagers who are thinking of filling their own coffers rather than mine. But who are you, to have undertaken such a long journey without fear of the perils to which such a courageous enterprise might have exposed you?”

“My name is William, called Longbeard.¹ I’m a Saxon. I owe to my labor a petty fortune that I acquired in commerce by the sweat of my brow, and, having retired from business, I utilize my time in studying the laws of England and defending, when necessary, the rights of poor people.”

“Well, William, you are a loyal and courageous subject. Depart again for London, and you will scarcely have returned than you will see that I have not forgotten the complaints that you have just laid at my feet. Go, and may God go with you.”

“Here is a parchment, Sire, in which are set out all the grievances that the townsmen have against the aldermen.”

“I swear by my holy patron that there will be good and prompt justice in this matter.”

“May Heaven bless you Sire, as the entire city of London will bless you when I inform it of your loyal and paternal words.”

“And to prove those words, you will be able to show my good city of London this gift of our munificence, which I grant you as a reward for your noble and courageous enterprise.”

So saying, the king detached from his neck a rich gold chain engraved with his armories, and threw it over William’s shoulders. William, moved to tears, immediately returned to the sea port, where the vessel that had brought him from England was waiting for him.

¹ This character is based on William FitzOsbert, who led a popular uprising by the citizens of London in the spring of 1196, an account of which is contained in *Historia rerum anglicum* by William of Newburgh. Allegedly, he did visit Normandy in order to inform the King that he was not rebelling against him, but the details of their encounter given here are imaginary.