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The Queen's Man



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurJanuary AD 1193. England lies uneasy, a land without a king. Two months have passed since King Richard set sail for Acre. Two months and no word. Rumours abound that the king is dead. The Lionheart's mother, Eleanor of Aquitaine, prays for his safe return, holding the throne for one son while her other conspires to seize it. Who can she trust? As a murdered man lies dying on the road to Winchester, he thrusts a blood-stained letter into the hands of a young squire. Justin de Quincy, the bastard-born son of the Bishop of Chester, now holds the key to the fate of the land. In this time of uncertainty he must prove his worth and show himself to be the Queen's Man. ExtraitThe Bishop's PalaceChester, EnglandDecember 1192"Do you think the king is dead?"Aubrey de Quincy was caught off balance and

furious with himself for his negligence; he ought to have expected this. Throughout their meal, the sole topic had been King Richard's disappearance. All of England--and indeed, most of Christendom--talked of little else this Christmastide, for more than two months had passed since the Lionheart had sailed from Acre. By December, other crusaders had begun to reach English ports. But none had word of the king. Had the query been posed by one of his other guests, Aubrey would have taken it for natural curiosity. Coming from Hugh de Nonant, it was neither random nor innocent. Coventry's worldly bishop had few peers when it came to conversational ambushes, laying his verbal snares so deftly that his quarry rarely sensed danger until it was too late. Aubrey had no intention, though, of falling heedlessly into the other bishop's trap. Stalling for time, he signaled for more wine; he prided himself upon his hospitality, so much so that men said none in the Marches set a finer table than His Grace, the Bishop of Chester. The servers were bringing in the next course, a large peacock afloat in a sea of gravy, bones strutted and skin and feathers painstakingly refitted, a sight impressive enough to elicit admiring murmurs from the guests. Aubrey's cooks had labored for hours to create this culinary masterpiece. Now he gazed at it with indifferent eyes, for the shadow of treason had fallen across the hall. Was King Richard dead? Many men thought so, for certes. In alehouses and taverns, they argued whether his ship had been sunk in a gale or attacked by pirates. The credulous speculated about sea monsters. But as the weeks went by, more and more of the missing king's subjects suspected that he was dead, must be dead. And none willed it more passionately than the man Hugh de Nonant served. The Crusade had been a failure; not even so fine a soldier-king as Richard had been able to reclaim Jerusalem from the infidels. But to Aubrey, the Lionheart's greatest failure was that he'd not sired a son. He'd named his young nephew Arthur as his heir, but Arthur was a child, dwelling with his mother in Brittany. There was another royal rival, one much closer at hand, Richard's younger brother, John, Count of Mortain. No one doubted that John would seek to deny Arthur the crown. What none could be sure of, however, was what the queen mother would do. All knew that Queen Eleanor and John were estranged. Yet he was still her son. If it came to war, whom would she back: John or Arthur? Aubrey doubted that John would make a good king, for if the serpent as "more subtle than any beast of the field," so, too, was Queen Eleanor's youngest son, unfettered by scruples or conscience qualms. But he did not doubt that John would prevail over Arthur--one way or another. And so he'd concluded that if he were ever faced with that choice, he'd throw his lot in with John. But this was far more dangerous. The Bishop of Coventry's deceptively innocuous question confirmed Aubrey's worst fears. John was not willing to wait for word of Richard's death. John had never been one for waiting. But what if Richard was not dead? What if he returned to reclaim his crown? If Arthur was no match for John, neither was John a match for Richard. His wrath would be terrible to behold. And even if he eventually forgave John, there would be no forgiveness for the men who'd backed him. But Aubrey knew that if he balked at supporting John's coup and Richard was indeed dead, he'd be squandering his one chance to gain a king's favor. For John nursed a grudge to the grave, and he'd not be forgetting who stood with him. . . and who had not. "Well?" the Bishop of Coventry prodded, smiling amiably as if they were merely exchanging pleasantries. "What say you? Is he dead?" Aubrey's own smile was as bland as almond milk. "If I knew the answer to that question, my lord bishop, I'd be riding straightaway for London to inform the queen." "I fear the worst, alas," Hugh confided, though with no noticeable regret. "If evil has not befallen him, surely his whereabouts would be known by now." "I'm not ready to abandon all hope," Aubrey parried, "and for certes, the queen is not." "It is to be expected that a mother would cling to the last shreds of hope, no matter how meagre or paltry. But the rest of us do not have that luxury, for how long can England be without a king?" Hugh had a pleasant voice, mellow and intimate, ideal for sharing secrets, and his words reached Aubrey's ear alone. "How long dare we wait?" Aubrey was spared the need to reply by the sudden appearance of his steward on the dais. "My lord bishop, may I have a word with you?" "What is it, Martin? Is something amiss?" "It is Justin, my lord. He rode in a few moments ago, is insisting that he must see you at once." "Justin?" Aubrey was startled and not pleased. "Tell him I will see him after the meal is done and my guests have gone to their beds. Have the cooks see that he is fed." To Aubrey's surprise, the steward made no move to withdraw. "Well?" The man shifted uncomfortably. "It is just that. . . that the lad seems sorely distraught, my lord. In truth, I've never seen him like this. I do not think he's of a mind to wait." Aubrey kept his temper in check; he had contempt for men who were ruled by emotion and impulse. "I am not offering him a choice," he said coolly. "See to it." He was vexed by Justin's unexpected and ill-timed arrival, and vaguely uneasy, too, with that peculiar discomfort that only Justin could provoke. Nor was his mood improved to realize that Hugh de Nonant had overheard the entire exchange. "Who is Justin?" Aubrey gave a dismissive shrug. "No one you know, my lord. . . a foundling I took in some years back." He'd hoped that

Hugh would take the hint and let the matter drop. But the Bishop of Coventry had an eerie ability to scent out secrets. Like a pig rooting after acorns, Aubrey thought sourly, finding himself forced by the other's unseemly and persistent curiosity to explain that Justin's mother had died giving him birth. "The father was known but to God, and there were none to tend to the babe. It was my parish and so when his plight was brought to my attention, I agreed to do what I could. It is our duty, after all, to succor Christ's poor. As Scriptures say, 'Suffer the little children to come unto me.'" "Very commendable," Hugh said, with hearty approval that would not have been suspect had the speaker been anyone else. He was regarding Aubrey benevolently, and Aubrey could only marvel and how deceptive outer packaging could be. The two men were utterly unlike in appearance: Aubrey tall and slim and elegant, his fair hair closely cropped and shot through with silver, and Hugh rotund and ruddy and balding, looking for all the world like a good-natured, elderly monk. But Aubrey knew this grandfatherly mien camouflaged a shrewd, cynical intelligence, and Hugh's curiosity about Justin was neither idle nor benign. Ever on the alert for weaknesses, the good bishop. And Aubrey was suddenly very angry with Justin for attracting the notice of so dangerous a man as Hugh de Nonant. "It may be, though, that you've been too indulgent with the lad," Hugh remarked placidly. "It does seem rather presumptuous of him to demand an audience with you." Aubrey declined the bait. "I've never had reason to complain of his manners. . . until now. You may be sure that I'll take him to task for it." A loud fanfare of trumpets turned all heads toward the door, heralding the arrival of the meal's pice de resistance: a great, glazed boar's head on a gleaming silver platter. Men leaned forward in their seats to see, Aubrey's minstrels struck up a carol, and in the flurry of the moment, the bishop's foundling was forgotten. Aubrey began to relax, once more the gracious host, a role he played well. The respite gave him the chance, too, to consider his options. He must find a way to intimate--without actually saying so--that he was indeed sympathetic to John's cause, but not yet ready to commit himself, not until there was irrefutable proof of King Richard's death. It was the sharp-eyed Hugh who first noticed the commotion at the far end of the hall. In the doorway, the steward was remonstrating with a tall, dark youth. As Hugh watched, the younger man pulled free of the steward's restraining hold and stalked up the center aisle toward the dais. Hugh leaned over and touched his host's sleeve. "May I assume the angry young interloper is your foundling?" Oblivious to the intruder bearing down upon them, Aubrey had been conversing politely with the seatmate to his left, the venerable abbot of Chester's abbey of St Werburgh. At Hugh's amused warning, he stiffened in disbelief, then shoved his chair back. Striding down the steps of the dais, he confronted Justin as he reached the open hearth, trailed by the steward. "How dare you force your way into my hall! Are you drunk?" "We need to talk," Justin said tersely, and Aubrey stared at him incredulously, unable to believe that Justin could be defying him like this. He was acutely aware of all the curious eyes upon them. The steward was hovering several feet away, looking utterly miserable--as well he ought. Martin had always been friendly with Justin, too friendly, it now seemed. "I told you that you must wait, Justin!" "I have been waiting--for twenty years!" Aubrey hesitated no longer. As bad as this was, it was about to get worse. Justin was a smoldering torch; God only knew what damage would be done ... *Revue de presse* Energetic and adroitly plotted... Justin is so beguiling, and the action so lively and unpredictable, that readers will cheer Justin's return in further adventures' --*Publisher's Weekly* Masterfully told... Penman's authentic period details, larger-than-life characters, and fast-paced plot add up to great reading for both mystery fans and history buffs.' --*Booklist*