

HENRY PLANTAGENET  
AND  
THOMAS A BECKET

from H E Marshall *Our Island Story*

Henry II., as you know, got his name Plantagenet from his father, Geoffrey of Anjou, who used to wear a piece of *planta genista* in his helmet. He was the first of several kings ruling England who were all Plantagenets.

Henry II. was only twenty-one years old when he began to reign, and, like his grandfather, Henry Beauclerc, he reigned thirty-five years. Like him, too, he did much to draw the English and Norman people together.

The misrule and confusion of the reign of Stephen had been so great, that Henry had to work very hard to bring his kingdom into order again. He not only worked hard himself, but he made other people work too. It is said of him that he never sat down, but was on his feet all day long.

The first thing Henry did was to send away all the foreign soldiers who had come to England to help Stephen and Matilda in their wars. Next he made the barons pull down their castles in which they used to do such dreadful deeds of cruelty. He told them they must live in ordinary houses and not in fortresses which could be turned into fearful prisons and places of torture.

The barons were very angry; but like his grandfather, Henry Beauclerc, Henry II. was stern, and forced people to obey him.

These are only a few of the things which he did, for the reign of Henry II. was a great one. To help and advise him in his work, Henry chose a man called Thomas à Becket.

Thomas à Becket's father was called Gilbert, and his mother Rohesia. Gilbert was a London merchant, and when he was young he had made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, as was common in those days.

At that time Jerusalem was in the hands of people called Saracens. They were pagans and hated the Christians and they treated very badly those who came to visit the sepulchre of Christ.

While Gilbert was on his pilgrimage, a rich Saracen seized and put him in prison, saying he should not come out until he had paid a great sum of money.

This Saracen had a beautiful daughter. Rohesia, for that was her name, had seen the handsome young Englishman before her father put him in prison, and she felt sorry for him. She used to come to the little window of his cell to speak to him, and to bring him things to eat and drink.

Night after night she came, and they whispered to each other through the bars of the little prison window. There was no one to hear, and only the stars and the moon to keep watch. All day long Gilbert used to wait impatiently until night came, when Rohesia would creep quietly to the window, and he would hear her whisper, "Gilbert, Gilbert," and she would slip her little hand through the bars and touch his.

Rohesia could speak no English, but Gilbert could speak her language, and he taught her to say his name. She learned to say London too, and knew that that was where he lived.

Gilbert and Rohesia grew to love each other very much, and all the day seemed long and dreary until night came and they could whisper to each other through the prison bars. But one night Rohesia came breathless and pale. "Gilbert," she whispered, "Gilbert, my father is asleep, and I have stolen the keys. I will unlock the door. You are free."

Gilbert hardly believed the good news until he heard the key turn in the lock. Then the door swung open and he knew that he was indeed free. He took Rohesia in his arms and kissed her, promising that he would never forget her. "As soon as I get back to England, I shall send for you," he said. "You must come to me, and we shall be married and never part any more."

Then Gilbert went away and Rohesia was left all alone. She felt very sad after he had gone, but she comforted herself always by remembering that he was going to send for her, and that then they should be together and happy ever after.

Gilbert arrived safely in England, but he forgot all about the beautiful Saracen maiden and his promise to her. He had so many things to do when he got back to London that the time for him went very quickly. But for Rohesia the time passed slowly, slowly. Day after day went by. In the morning she said, "To-day he will send." In the evening she wept, and said, "He has not sent."

At last she could bear the waiting no longer, so she set out to try to find Gilbert. She knew only two words of English, but she was not afraid. She travelled all through the land until she reached the seashore. There she said, "London, London," to every one whom she met until at last she found a ship that was going there. She had not much money, but she gave the captain some of her jewels, and he was kind to her and landed her safely in London.

London in those days was much smaller than it is now, but Rohesia had never seen so many houses and people before, and she was bewildered and frightened. Every one turned to stare at the lovely lady dressed in such strange and beautiful clothes, who kept calling "Gilbert, Gilbert," as she passed from street to street.

Gilbert was sitting in his house when suddenly he heard his name. He knew the voice, yet he could hardly believe his ears. Could it indeed be Rohesia? In a flash he remembered everything; the dark little prison; the lovely Saracen girl; his love for, his promise to her. He ran to the door and opened it quickly. The next minute Rohesia was sobbing in his arms. Her long journey was ended. She had found Gilbert.

As Gilbert held Rohesia in his arms, he found all his old love for her had come back. So they were married and were happy. They had a little son whom they called Thomas. He grew up to be that Thomas à Becket, who was King Henry's great chancellor and friend. I must tell that some people say that this story of Gilbert and Rohesia is only a fairy tale. Perhaps it is.

King Henry was very fond of Thomas à Becket. They used to work very seriously, but when work was done they would play together like two boys.

The chancellor took care of the King's great seal, looked after the royal chapel, and had many other duties. He was a very important person, lived in splendid style, and dressed magnificently. In fact, his house and servants were richer and grander than those of the King. Many of the nobles sent their sons to serve in the chancellor's house, and the proudest were glad to wait on him and to try to please him.

Every day a great number of people dined with the chancellor. Sometimes the King would come in

from riding, in the middle of dinner, jump over the table with a merry jest, and sit down among the guests.

Many stories are told of the fun the King and the chancellor used to have together. One day, while out riding, Thomas and King Henry met an old beggar, shivering and in rags.

“It would be a good action to give that poor man a coat,” said the King.

“It would indeed,” replied the chancellor.

“Then give him yours,” and the King laughingly seized the cloak which Thomas was wearing.

It was a beautiful new cloak of silk and fur, and Thomas did not wish to lose it. So he held it tight, while the King tugged hard to pull it off. Neither would let go until, between struggling and laughing, they both nearly fell off their horses.

The courtiers watched and laughed too, but at last the King succeeded in getting the cloak and flung it to the beggar. Thomas was not very pleased, but he had to make the best of it and go shivering for the rest of his ride. The poor beggar went away greatly delighted with the King's joke.

Once Henry sent Thomas with a message to the King of France. Thomas took so many soldiers and servants in glittering dress, so many horses and carriages with him, that the people came out of their houses to stare at him wherever he passed.

“Who is it?” every one asked.

“The Chancellor of England,” was the reply.

“Only the chancellor,” cried the astonished people. “What must the King be, if the chancellor is so grand?”

Henry worked hard, and with the help of his chancellor improved many things in England. He found that the Church and the clergy, like everything else, had grown very unruly and disorderly. He determined to put them in order, and Thomas à Becket he thought would be the best man to help him. Thomas had been brought up as a priest, and King Henry resolved to make him Archbishop of Canterbury and head of all the clergy in England.

But Thomas was gay and worldly. He loved fine clothes and rich food.

“I do not want to be Archbishop of Canterbury,” he said to the King.

“You must be,” said the King.

“Then we shall quarrel,” said Thomas.

“Why?” said the King.

“Because if you make head of the Church I shall work for the Church and not for you. We shall no longer be friends, but enemies,” replied Thomas.

But King Henry did not believe Thomas when he talked like this and, in spite of all he could say, he made him Archbishop of Canterbury.

As soon as he became archbishop, Thomas changed his way of living. He gave up his fine house and fine clothes and his great number of servants. He began to wear coarse, rough clothes, lived in a little narrow cell, ate very plain food and drank only water.

It is difficult to understand why he did this. Perhaps he thought that the Primate of all England, as the Archbishop of Canterbury is called, ought to be a very holy man, and he knew no other way of becoming holy, for in those days if a man fasted and went barefoot and wore coarse clothing it was thought that he must be a saint.

Thomas now wrote to the king and told him that he must find another chancellor, as he could not be archbishop and chancellor too. This was a great surprise and grief to the King. In those days it was nothing unusual for one man to be archbishop as well as chancellor. Henry had expected Thomas still to be chancellor and still to help him. He had merely made him primate so that he should help him more.

But that was only the beginning of the troubles.

The Bishop of Rome, whom we call the Pope, said that he was the head of the whole Christian Church, and that no one could be made a bishop in England without his consent. Henry said that he, the King, was the head of the English church, and he would make what bishops he chose. Thomas, instead of siding with the King, sided with the Pope, so they quarrelled, as Thomas had warned Henry that they would.

In those days some of the clergy had grown very wicked. Instead of leading good lives, and being an example to others, they led bad lives. Priests and clergy who did wicked things were not judged by the same courts as other people. They were judged by a bishop's court. Now a bishop's court had no power to order any very severe punishment. If a priest killed a man, the worst that could happen to him would be that he would be beaten—not very hard—and have only bread and water to live on for a few days. Many wicked people became priests simply that they might be able to do as much wrong as they liked, without being punished for it.

Henry wished to put an end to this, so he said that all people who did wrong must be tried by the same judges, whether they were priests or not. But Thomas à Becket would not agree. Clergymen had always been judged by a bishop's court, he said, and by a bishop's court they should continue to be judged.

So the King and the primate quarrelled worse than ever, till the quarrel grew so fierce, and the King so angry, that Thomas fled over the sea to escape from him.

After a time Henry forgave Thomas and he came back to England, but almost at once he again began to quarrel with the King. This time Henry lost all patience and, in a burst of anger, he exclaimed, "Are there none of the idle people who eat my bread that will free me from this quarrelsome priest?"

Henry was angry, and did not really mean what he said. But four knights heard, and thinking to please their king they took ship (for Henry was in Normandy at this time), crossed the sea to England, and rode to Canterbury. Arrived there they went to the archbishop's house. They found him almost alone. With angry words they told him that he must either promise not to quarrel with Henry or he must leave England.

"I shall do what I think is right," replied Thomas. "If the King tells me to do things which I think

are wrong, I will not obey him. I am the servant of God. God is higher than the King; I shall obey Him.”

This answer enraged the knights, and more angry words were spoken. Then they went away, telling Thomas to beware, for they would come again.

“You will find me here,” replied Thomas proudly. “Never again will I forsake my people.”

All the archbishop's friends, and the monks and priests who lived with him, were very much afraid. They felt sure that these angry knights meant to do something dreadful. They begged Thomas to leave his house and take refuge in the cathedral, but he would not. “I said they would find me here,” he replied to all entreaties.

The day passed. The time for evening service came. Then only did Thomas consent to leave his house and go into the cathedral, for, said he, “It is my duty to lead the service.” The priests tried to hurry him, they tried to drag him along quickly, but Thomas would not hasten. He walked slowly and solemnly, having the great cross carried before him as usual. He feared no man.

When at last he was safe within the cathedral, the priests wished to lock and bar the doors. But Thomas forbade them. “This is not a fortress but the House of God, into which every one is free to enter. I forbid you to bar the doors,” he said.

The priests were in despair. They loved their archbishop, they knew that he was in danger, but he would not try to save himself.

Even as he spoke there was a great noise without. The door burst open, and the four knights, dressed in complete armour and carrying drawn swords in their hands, rushed into the cathedral. The frightened people fled in all directions. The archbishop was left almost alone. Only three remained with him—his cross-bearer and two other faithful friends.

In the dim twilight which filled the cathedral it would have been easy for Thomas to escape. But he would not go. “I told them that they should find me here,” he said again to the monks who tried to drag him away.

Even as it was, the knights could not find him. In the gathering darkness they clanked and clanged through the great church, seeking him.

“Where is the traitor?” called one of them.

No one answered. Only the word “traitor” echoed again through the silence.

“Where is the archbishop?” he called again.

“I am here,” answered the voice of Thomas à Becket out of the darkness. “I am here; no traitor, but a servant of God. What do you want?”

They stood before him, four armed knights against one unarmed priest. Yet he was not afraid.

“Will you be at peace with the King?” asked the knights.

“What I have done I shall continue to do,” replied Thomas.

“Then die.”

The knights seized him and tried to drag him out of the cathedral, for they feared to kill him in a holy place.

But Thomas would not go. He held tightly to a pillar. His cross-bearer, still holding the cross, threw one arm round the archbishop, trying to protect him.

The knight who had first spoken struck at Thomas. The cross-bearer received the blow upon his arm, which dropped to his side broken. The next stroke fell on Thomas à Becket's defenceless head.

In a few minutes all was over.

“In the name of Christ, and for the defence of the Church, I die willingly,” said Thomas, and spoke no more.

Then the knights, fearful of what they had done, fled, leaving the dead archbishop alone in the dark, silent cathedral.

When Henry heard of what had happened to Thomas à Becket, he was very sorry; but strangely enough he had no power to punish the four knights; their sin was a sin against the Church, and they could only be tried by a bishop's court. The bishop's court punished them by sending them on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. So Thomas à Becket, in quarrelling with the King, had protected his own murderers. But perhaps their punishment was very real, for they were forsaken and shunned by all their friends. No one would speak to them, nor eat with them, and at last they died in misery and loneliness.

All England was filled with horror at the dreadful deed. The people had loved Thomas when he was alive, now that he was dead they called him a saint. From far and near they came as pilgrims to his grave, over which a splendid shrine, glittering with gold and gems, was placed.

Nearly four years later the King himself came as a pilgrim to show his sorrow and repentance. He rode on horseback to Canterbury but, as soon as he came within sight of the cathedral, he got off his horse and walked barefoot, wearing only a shirt, and carrying a lighted candle in his hand, until he reached the shrine.

For a whole day and night, having nothing to eat or drink, he knelt in prayer before the grave. For a still greater punishment, he made the monks beat his bare back with knotted cords.

All this show of sorrow could not bring back the great archbishop, who had been murdered in consequence of a few words spoken in anger. But it pleased the Pope, who was very angry because Thomas à Becket had been killed. He blamed Henry, and would scarcely believe that he had not told the four knights to do the wicked deed. In those days the Pope was very powerful indeed. Even kings stood in awe of him, and Henry was glad to make peace with him by any means in his power.