

The Abbey at Waltham

“You should not have come,” Harold Godwinson repeated himself again. “Better that you had stayed in London as I had wished.”

He spoke kindly but in truth he felt exasperated. In part he had submitted to his own selfishness in coming to Waltham Abbey, in escaping to some degree the endless activity of the court.

Cannot a king indulge himself every once in awhile?

“You cannot ask that of me which you refuse to bestow upon yourself,” Ealdgyth of Mercia replied, “you should not have come either, your illness were better treated in London.” Unconsciously her hand stroked her distended abdomen. Harold followed the movement with his eyes.

Another son mayhap?

It did not particularly matter to him. He had spent some twenty years with Ealdgyth Swannesha and she had given him six children. At the age of forty-four another child was of no great matter but he would care for it all the same, very much aware that the child’s birth cemented a marriage that had at first been prompted by purely political considerations. The baby would create a bond between him and Ealdgyth of Mercia too, and that was something that he had come to desire.

“I have good reason to be at Waltham,” he told her.

“You forget yourself, we have been married only eight months and as renowned a man as you are for your part I do not know your whole family history.” She refused to back down or allow him to use her condition as a reason for their separation. Ealdgyth was astute enough to know the prompting behind her marriage, but that did not stop her from determining to make their relationship work on a more personal level.

Her beauty was much admired and she had experience of the world that came with being the daughter of an earl. This was also her second marriage to a king. She lacked neither the strength nor the craft to use her gifts and being the Queen consort of England was not such an intolerable position to hold.

She too had children from her previous relationship to Gruffydd ap Llywelyn, King of Wales, but they were catered for and it was in gaining the rightful recognition for the child she now carried that she devoted all her energy to. If it were indeed a boy, as the midwives claimed, then she would see him become a king and Harold’s agreement on this, in preference over his other children, was necessary.

“Why is Waltham Abbey so important to you? Why would you prefer to convalesce here rather than in the palace at Westminster? Why would you, the king, wish to be without me, your queen?”

Harold sighed, but good-naturedly.

“Ealdgyth, it is not you that I wish to be parted from, but for these many months I have dedicated myself to securing the kingdom, preparing to frustrate Guillaume of Normandy, doing all that is demanded of a king. When my illness fell upon me I saw a chance to retire for a few days from all the demands made upon me.”

“And is not a wife’s place at her husband’s side, ever more so when he is ill?”

“At any other time I would say yes but you have your own condition to consider, the child is not long from being born,” Harold insisted. It was not just a convenient excuse, he actually did care that she survived this pregnancy. The rooms that she now occupied at the abbey were sparse in comparison to those at Westminster Palace but they had been luxuriously appointed at his command. Her comfort was important to him and her chamber reflected his concern.

“And what better place to be than here, at this abbey that you love so much, with its father in attendance.”

Again he sighed, trapped by her reasoning.

“Half-foot doesn’t pester me as much.”

“You should not call him by that name,” Ealdgyth chided, “it is not Christian.”

“It is his name,” Harold protested, beginning to wonder if he could say anything right by her.

“It is not his given name.”

“Mayhap, but he prefers it all the same. If a man as learned as he can go by such a name so lightly why should anyone else care?”

“He was born lame, a thing to be pitied and not made light of,” she insisted. Involuntarily her mind conjured up the image of the child she now carried being born with a similar condition. It made her shudder.

“He would not thank thee for that,” Harold assured her. “He cannot carry a spear like many of my companions but he is stronger with the word than any of them are with the sword. If he wishes me to call him Half-foot then I will know him by that name, and honour his ability rather than pity his lameness.”

“I think that he holds a greater claim over your affection than I? You were ready to enjoy his company over mine here at the abbey.”

Harold smiled, realising that Ealdgyth was unaware of how uncomfortable Half-foot found such places as Waltham Abbey. He was a curious man in that for all his education his sympathy, if not his actual beliefs, seemed to lay more with the pagan past than the Christian present.

“Half-foot is a loyal servant to me, and I judge him by his own worth to be a companion of my hearth. I find his ability to read, write and speak Latin and French invaluable to my court, and though I left the court behind me in London I think it wise to keep so useful a courtier close at hand. Without his skills my brothers can do little mischief in my absence.”

“So you bring Half-foot and Osfrid, your gesipas, to Waltham because you have need of them in this place you love, but not so your queen?” Ealdgyth had identified some of those whom Harold depended upon so dearly and she was determined to get herself counted in their number.

“You would know why Waltham Abbey is dear to me?” A new direction for this conversation suddenly presented itself to Harold’s mind and he decided to explore it.

“I would know why it is so dear to you as to drag you from the court in your infirmity. I would know why you would travel some twenty miles to pray here when King Edward’s fine abbey stands but within a few steps of your home?”

He came and sat beside her on the bed, facing her so that he could look into her fair face as he spoke. He even took up her hand in his, a genuine gesture of affection on his part.

She was thirty two years old, a mother of several children, and twice a queen. When he looked into her eyes he saw not just her obvious beauty but a woman of experience and character. He valued these qualities because he knew that they would make her strong at court and a king needed a strong queen; the life of King Edward had proven that. Also, this strength of hers meant that their relationship could be more than just one of political expediency; they could be happy together if they were willing to accept each other as people as well aethelings.

“Have you heard the story of Theign Tovi the Proud?” His voice adopted a more conciliatory tone.

“He who dreamt of finding a black flint crucifix on top of the hill?” The queen responded likewise, knowing that she had made some progress in developing their marriage and that choosing now to indulge him would only further it.

“The same, it is said that he followed his dream and found the Holy Rood out in the wilderness. He loaded the crucifix into a cart and set off to take it home to the village of Montacute but that the oxen would pull the cart in no other direction than to Waltham, some many days travel. Here he came and here it has remained, a holy relic, much venerated by the clergy and often visited by pilgrims.”

“Aye, the story of the Holy Rood is known well by one and all, but in Mercia that is all it is; a story.”

“In Mercia mayhap, but not here in Essex. Here they tell how Tovi had the church rebuilt to house the stone cross. When I was a boy my father, Eorl Godwin, brought us to Waltham Abbey. I had an infirmity then that came upon me without warning; my limbs would seize and I could not move. During my father’s visit, not long after such a seizure, I touched the

Holy Rood and my infirmity was lifted from me. I talked of this with none outside of my family but a clergyman here at the abbey. He told me that God visited a healing gift upon the worthy who touched the holy stone. Since that day I have not been visited by the weakness, until a few days ago at least. If being in Waltham cured me once then mayhap it could do so again? If I was worthy of God's touch then, am I not just as worthy now?"

Harold did not mention that there was a longing within him to find such a validation to his most recent actions at least. He had enemies at home as well as abroad who spoke of his opportunism, his scheming, his breaking of holy oaths at the court of the Norman duke. Also, at the behest of Guillaume of Normandy, he had been excommunicated by the pope. If God blessed him now by removing the malady that had descended upon him so recently then that would put Harold's mind at rest.

If God did favours me, despite the pope's interference, then what enemy could stand against the King of England?

For her part she liked him better this way. In this private room without even a servant present he was himself, charming, caring, thoughtful, a husband. Previously she had only ever seen the famed eorl and the warrior, the man of politics who conversed with kings and the captain who led his own king's armies into foreign lands. He had never seemed an attractive man to her in those guises but then they were both the children of nobility and their sense of duty shaped their characters as much as their lives. Like him she had a visage that she presented to the world. In private she was Ealdgyth of Mercia, sister to Edwin and Morcar, wife to Harold of Wessex. The same situation was true of Harold of course, only he seemed to lack the time to indulge his private self with any of his family these days.

"And that is why you have bestowed so much upon this abbey in preference to all others?" She asked, wanting more to prolong the conversation than to discover an obvious answer.

"I find God in this place," he said simply. "It seemed right to rebuild the abbey in stone when I had the means to do so, to protect the existence of the Holy Rood and give thanks for my own deliverance."

"Then if God is here for you in Waltham why shouldn't your unborn child visit it too?" She wondered again if she should tell him that the midwives believed that she was carrying twins.

"For your sake, my queen, I would wait until the child was born and your pregnancy not hazarded by such a journey." Harold looked at her stomach once again. He never referred to the child's sex, he already had sons from his previous marriage and although the clergy did not consider them born in wedlock the eoldermen would not question their legitimacy. In this instance it did not concern him whether it was a boy or a girl; he would welcome it into his family all the same. The child was not intended to be an heir to the throne; it was an expression of the genuine affection that existed between him and Ealdgyth. Although political

considerations had motivated their marriage it had proved to be not just for show after the formal church ceremony, they had grown to be fond of each other.

“I was an exile when my father betrothed me to Gruffydd ap Llwellyn, King of Wales; I hazarded many dangers then including your army,” she smiled. Ealdgyth spoke as if the risk to herself before the advance of the English army led by her now husband against her late husband had been but a game.

“’Tis a curious wyrd that brings us together Ealdgyth, but I would have offered you my protection then as I would wish you take it now.” He told her meaningfully. He reached out and took her hand in his again, enveloping the smaller fingers within his rougher grasp.

“You would not ask me to be less a Queen of England than I was a Queen of Wales,” she teased him. “The Welsh might have something to say about their one time queen who stalked the mountains in younger days when Harold of Wessex marched through the valleys, wilfully sitting in Westminster whilst her husband seeks healing in Waltham merely because she is with child.”

“And close to her time,” he smiled at her. “You forget to mention that important point and the cause of all my concern; you are close to your time.”

“I have some weeks left before the baby is due, My Lord, and I think that like you I welcome the quiet of the abbey over the bustle of the court.”

“May that peace continue, Guillaume remains bottled up in Normandy with the winds blowing contrary to his design. By the time this little one sees the world mayhap the Norman duke will be forced back home to sulk through winter in his castle,” Harold spoke with determination, revealing his hope for the immediate future.

“To return another day in the New Year,” Ealdgyth pointed out the obvious flaw in his thinking.

“Guillaume does not act with nought but a free hand, his enemies prescribe his freedom. Duke Conan of Brittany loathes Guillaume and continues a ceaseless war against him. He will use any failure on the duke’s part to weaken Norman power and things change in France, they have a new king and new kings always want to prove their strength.” He slipped once again into his role as the king.

“Like you have proven yours?” She sensed that this brief moment of intimacy was coming to an end; she knew of course that this was inevitable.

“I have kept the wolf from the door so far, My Lady, within a few weeks I will have shut him out for the whole of the year and then we will have nothing to fear,” he answered her confidently.