

LIONHEART

BEN KANE



ORION

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For Joe Schmidt, rugby coach extraordinaire, with deepest respect.

Despite the disappointment of Japan, you and your legacy will long be remembered by Irish rugby fans. I wish you every happiness and success for the future, and if I have the good fortune to meet you one day, the drinks are on me!

(P.S. A more suitable book title to dedicate to you, I cannot think of.)

LIST OF CHARACTERS

List of characters

(Those marked * are recorded in history.)

Ferdia Ó Catháin/Rufus, an Irish noble from north Leinster.

At Striguil:

Robert FitzAldelm, 'Fists and Boots', knight.

Richard de Clare, Earl of Pembroke (deceased).*

Aoife, his widow.*

Isabelle, their daughter.*

Gilbert, their son and heir.*

Rhys, orphan Welsh boy.

Hugo, Walter, Reginald and Bogo, squires.

Big Mary, washerwoman.

FitzWarin, knight, and friend of Robert FitzAldelm.

Gilbert de Lysle, messenger for Duke Richard.

Guy FitzAldelm, knight, and brother to Robert FitzAldelm.

House of Anjou and its associates:

Henry II, king of England and Anjou.*

Alienor (Eleanor) of Aquitaine, his wife.*

Henry, the Young King, oldest surviving son of Henry II.*

Richard, Duke of Aquitaine and second son of Henry II.*

Geoffrey, Count of Brittany and third son of Henry II.*

John, 'Lackland', youngest son of Henry II.*

Matilda*, one of Henry's daughters, married to Heinrich der Löwe*,
former Duke of Saxony and Bavaria.

Alienor, Juvette, maidservants to Matilda.

Beatrice, maidservant to Queen Alienor.

Geoffrey, bastard son to Henry II, and his chancellor.*
Geoffrey de Brûlon, knight.*
Maurice de Craon, knight.*
Hawise of Gloucester, bride of Prince John.*

Richard's household:

André de Chauvigny, knight and cousin to Duke Richard.*
John de Beaumont, knight.
John de Mandeville, Louis, 'Weasel' John, squires.
Philip, squire and friend to Rufus.
Owain ap Gruffydd, Welsh knight.
Richard de Drune, English man-at-arms.

The Young King's household:

William Marshal, knight.*
d'Yquebeuf, knight.*
Thomas de Coulonces, knight.*
Baldwin de Béthune, knight.*
Simon de Marisco, knight.*
Heloise of Kendal, ward of William Marshal.*
Joscelin, squire to William Marshal.
Jean d'Earley, squire to William Marshal.*

Other characters:

Philippe Capet*, king of France, and son of King Louis* (deceased).
Bertran de Born, troubadour.*
Count Vulgrin Taillefer of Angoulême.*
Matilda, his daughter.*
William and Adémar Taillefer, Vulgrin's brothers.*
Count Aimar of Limoges, their half-brother.*
Philippe, Count of Flanders.*
William des Barres, one of Philippe's knights.*
Count Raymond of Toulouse.*
Count Hugh of Burgundy.*
Peter Seillan, close advisor to Count Raymond.*

PROLOGUE

History remembers the great. The kings and emperors, the popes. Ordinary men such as you and I go nameless to our graves. No archbishops celebrate our funerals, no magnificent tombs preserve our final resting places. Yet some of us were there, when the fates of kingdoms hung in the balance, when battles that seemed lost were turned on their heads. Ever forgotten by the monkish scribes and the historians, we helped the mighty on their paths to glory and eternal renown.

White-haired and bent-backed I may be now, but in my day I wielded a sword with the best of men. All Christendom knows of Richard, king of England, Duke of Normandy, Count of Brittany and Anjou – the Lionheart. Precious few have heard of his knight Rufus, and even fewer of Ferdia Ó Catháin. This troubles me not. I did not serve Richard for wealth or fame. Loyalty made me his man, and his man I am still, although he has been dead these thirty years, God rest his soul.

My eyesight dims, my muscles weaken. Wearing mail and riding a destrier was once a delight; now I am grateful to shuffle to the bench outside the door and warm my bones in the sun. Death will come for me, if not this winter, then the next. I will be ready, but I pray the monks have time enough to record my tale, such as it is, before my last breath leaves me.

Three score years and ten is a greater span than better men have had. My life has been rich. I have known true love's exquisite joy, where many have not. I was there, heart swelling, to hold my new-born sons, and my daughter. I had brothers-in-arms who were closer to me than my real brothers ever were. Sorrow entered my life more than once, and tragedy too; these are but trials sent by the Divine to test us. All a man can do is shoulder his load once more, and carry on.

They say that God moves in mysterious ways, and it is certainly true

of my path. From a little-known part of Ireland I came to England, where I fell into the service of the greatest warrior of the age – Richard Coeur de Lion. Together we besieged castles, and fought dozens of battles. I bled, I killed for Richard. I am not proud to say I murdered for him too. I confessed those sins, but in my heart, I am unrepentant. God forgive me, I would kill those men again if I had the strength.

I shall continue, else we shall be debating my soul as the sun sets. I was there when Richard met his father Henry for the last time; I stood in Westminster Abbey when he was crowned. I came close to dying in Cyprus, saving his queen. At Arsuf, we fought side by side and defeated Saladin; not long after, we marched almost to the gates of Jerusalem. When Richard was betrayed on his journey back from the Holy Land, the king and I shared a dungeon. I helped him reclaim what was his from his dog of a brother, John. He too is as dead as Richard, and by God's grace roasting in Hell.

But I have raced on, and almost told the tale's ending before its start. It may have struck you as odd, reader, to learn of an Irishman serving the English king. The saints be thanked that my father died without knowing. Did I ever regret it? Now and again perhaps, but once given, an oath is sacred, and the bond of comradeship that is forged in war is unbreakable. Perhaps I make no sense. Forgive an old man's wandering.

Let us go back half a century, and start the tale anew . . .

PART ONE: 1179



CHAPTER I

Ten years had passed since the treacherous former king of Leinster, Diarmait MacMurchada, had invited the English into Ireland. Their conquest was by no means complete, but the grey foreigners, as we called them, had the upper hand. The proof of this lay not just with the strip of territory they held along the east coast, but the fealty offered to the English monarch Henry by many of the Irish provincial kings. Four years prior, a hammer blow to our hopes had been struck when King Ruairidh of Connacht had also pledged his allegiance.

My father was a minor nobleman in northern Leinster, and after Diarmait made an alliance with the English, he had offered his loyalty to Ruairidh. Furious with what he regarded as Ruairidh's betrayal, Father took the inconceivable step of joining with the king of Ulster, long our enemy but still unconquered by the invaders. His choice was an ill-considered one. When the enemy came ravaging, Ulster did not answer our call. We fought bravely, but our lands were soon overrun.

Taken hostage for the good behaviour of my family, I was sent to Dublin. From there I travelled in a sturdy cog east and south over the sea, to the cloud-ridden Welsh coast, the length of which was dotted with castles. Cover a land in such strongholds, I thought grimly, and the locals, with nowhere to go, will be forced into a final stand as my own family had been. Again I saw the English knights' charge in my mind, an unstoppable wave that had shattered our light-armed warriors.

Our voyage came to an end in sight of England, at the stronghold they call Striguil. Home to the de Clare family, it sits on a bluff overlooking the River Wye, and was the largest castle I had ever seen. A mighty rectangular tower, it was surrounded by a palisade that snaked across the summit of the hill. Beyond that, on every side but that which gave onto the Wye, I would discover, lay a defensive ditch. I did not let

it show, but I was impressed. If this was the ancestral home of an earl, King Henry's donjon must be remarkable indeed. The English weren't just expert at fighting, I thought, they were master builders too. My fears that Ireland's chieftains and kings would never drive the invaders into the sea returned. I quelled them, for it seemed that if I gave in to *that* despair, my own situation would become altogether worse. Dream of defeating the English in my own land, and the miseries heaped upon me could somehow be borne.

Nineteen years old, taller than most, mop-haired and raw-boned, full of the arrogance of youth, I spoke little French that day, and not a word of English. Since being handed into captivity by my stony-faced father, I had endured a difficult time. Taking his parting words to heart – 'Give in only if you must. Do only what you have to.' – I had refused to obey any commands. On the first day, I called the brutish knight into whose charge I had been given a flea-infested dog, adding that his mother worked in the back alleys of Dublin. I had not considered the consequences. Some of the crew were Irish, and, intimidated by the knight, translated what I had said.

My insults that first day earned me a hiding, and my mulish carrying-on thereafter earned no respect, just more beatings and short rations. I look back now, and wonder at my bull-headed behaviour and more, my short-sightedness. By the end of the voyage I was old friends with the knight's boots and fists. Forever burning with rage and humiliation, I would have tipped him into the brine, or worse if I had laid hands to a weapon. And yet despite my youthful bravado, I had wits to know that such an act would have seen me follow him to the ocean floor, and so I buried my hatred for what I hoped was another day.

'Rufus.'

Still unused to the name my captor had given me – unable, or more likely, I thought darkly, unwilling to try mastering my own of Ferdia – I paid no heed. My eyes were fixed on the figures standing on the wooden jetty below the castle. It seemed that word of our arrival had landed before us. I had no idea who might greet us off the ship, but it would not be Richard de Clare, the Earl of Pembroke, one of the chief nobles who had invaded Ireland. He was dead, praise God. Even when he was living, the earl would not have deigned to watch the arrival of a captive such as I. Nor would his wife, the countess Aoife, in residence here since his passing. Reputed to be a great beauty, I had

nightly conjured pleasant fantasies about her to take my mind from the thinness of my blanket, and the hardness of the deck.

‘Rufus, you dog!’ Boots and Fists – my nickname for Robert FitzAldelm, the block-headed knight in charge of our party – sounded angry.

He caught my attention at last. I recognised ‘Rufus’; I knew what *chien* meant. I am as high born as you, I thought with contempt. My ribs were still hurting from his last attack, and yet stubborn to the last, I kept my gaze locked on the close-to jetty, and my mind on Aoife. Daughter of Diarmait MacMurchada, the king of Leinster, widow of Richard de Clare, she would be the mistress of my fate.

‘Rufus!’

I did not hear.

A ball of agony exploded in my head; my vision blurred. The force of the blow sent me reeling sideways, into one of the crew. He shoved me away with an oath, and weak-kneed, I fell to the deck. Fists and Boots laid into me with his usual energy, careful as always not to kick me in the face. Sly as a fox he was, mindful that those above him would not sanction the punishments he had been doling out since we had sailed from Dublin.

‘Areste!’ The voice was reedy, but full of command. A girl’s voice.

I knew that French word as well: it meant ‘stop’.

My heart hammered. No more kicks landed.

The girl spoke again, an angry question. I did not understand.

Boots and Fists moved further away as he answered. His tone was respectful yet sullen. I could not make out the words.

Light-headed still, I opened my eyes, taking in the sideways view. A line of iron nail heads. Gaps in the planking. Below, scummy water, several fingers’ depth of which occupied the space under the deck. The whiff of piss – despite the captain’s rules, some men did not like urinating over the side – and rotten food. Boots and shoes moved about; the former worn by the men-at-arms, the latter by the callous-handed crew. A coil of rope. The bottoms of barrels that held water, mead and salted pork.

Boots and Fists had not come back. Deciding that it might be safe to get up, I eased into a sitting position. Darts of pain came from my belly and back, from my arms and legs. I tried to feel grateful that the only part of me he had missed – apart from my head – was my groin. I cast a glance at Boots and Fists, who was talking yet to the girl on

the jetty. We had come in alongside it now, and men with thick ropes were making the ship fast. Standing, gripping the vessel's side to steady myself, I was astonished to see she was a mere child. Clad in a mulberry gown and over it, a dark green cloak edged with silver braid, she was perhaps six years of age. Long tresses of red hair, a lighter shade than my own, framed an oval, serious face.

Her grey-eyed gaze fell on me. For some reason, I suspected she was Richard and Aoife's daughter. What she was doing here alone was beyond me. I dipped my head, a show of respect I did not feel, and met her stare once more.

'Are you hurt?' she asked.

I gaped. The girl had addressed me not in French, but my own tongue.

'Mother says that it is impolite to let your mouth hang open. If nothing else, flies will go in.'

I closed my jaw, feeling foolish, and managed, 'My apologies. I did not expect to hear Irish here.'

'Mother insists that we learn it. "You may be half-Norman," she says, "but you are also half-Irish."'

My gut had been right. I pulled a smile. 'Your mother sounds like a wise woman. To answer your question, I do not think he broke any bones.' I wanted to glare at Boots and Fists, who I sensed was doing his best to understand, but thought it wiser not to. 'My thanks for intervening.'

A little nod.

She was a small child, but there was a gravity to her. It was no surprise, I decided, given her breeding.

'What is your name?'

'Ferdia Ó Catháin.'

To my surprise, she pronounced my family name correctly, the 'c' hard, the 't' silent, and the rest of the word like 'hoyn'. Her mother was proud of her Irish roots, I thought with a flash of pleasure.

Boots and Fists growled something in French. I understood only 'Rufus'.

'He says they call you Rufus.' The girl cocked her head. 'I can see why.'

I raised a hand to my head, amused despite my pain. 'Mother used to say that the fairies dangled me by the heels in a pot of madder to give

me such red hair. They must have done it for a shorter time with you.'

The girl's serious manner vanished, and she laughed. 'I shall also call you Rufus!' She must have seen something in my face; her expression changed. 'Unless you had rather I did not?'

Once more Boots and Fists interrupted. Despite my lack of French, it was clear that he wanted me off the ship. The men-at-arms were already on the jetty, taking the shields and leather-wrapped bundles of weapons passed to them by the crew.

Ignoring the discomfort it caused, I swung a leg over the side and eased myself onto the dock. Boots and Fists followed. He pointed to the path that led through a scattering of houses to the base of the palisade, and again spoke in French.

Curse it, I thought. I shall have to learn their tongue, or my life will be impossible. 'He wants me to go up?' I asked the girl.

'Yes.' Her previous air of command had waned; it was as if she knew that her power was limited. She could stop my beating, but not my destiny as a captive.

I resisted the first dig in the back that Boots and Fists gave me. 'What is your name?'

'Isabelle!' The voice – a woman's – came from somewhere behind the palisade. It was shrill, and unhappy. 'Is-a-belle!'

An impish smile. 'Isabelle. Isabelle de Clare.'

My instinct had been right. I dipped my head a second time, more willingly, for the girl's heart was in the right place. Lowering my voice so the Irishmen among the crew could not hear, I said, 'I owe you my thanks, for stopping that amadán from kicking me to a pulp.'

She giggled. 'Careful what you call FitzAldelm. He might speak some Irish.'

'He does not understand a word.' Confident that I would soon be dining in the great hall, I half turned. 'Do you, amadán?'

Boots and Fists – FitzAldelm – scowled, and gave me a shove.

'See?' I said, my cockiness growing.

'Isabelle!' The voice had risen to a harridan's screech.

'That is my nurse. I had best go,' she said, rolling her eyes. Picking up her skirts so they did not trail in the mud, she sped up the path ahead of us. 'Farewell, Rufus!'

'Farewell, my lady,' I cried.

It was the first time I had not resented someone addressing me so.

My pleasure was brief.

Boots and Fists gave me an almighty dunt in the behind. I nearly fell on my face. Picking myself up, my ears full of curses, I began to climb. Passing through the gate that led into the castle, Isabelle did not see.

I almost called after her, but full sure that my ill-treatment would soon be a thing of the past, I held my peace. If Aoife was a just woman, I decided, Fists and Boots might even be punished for what he had done.

Reaching the gate, which had already been closed, I looked up at the top of the palisade. Three men's height it must have been, close enough to see the sentry leering at me, but sufficient distance upward to realise that taking the place by storm would be a lackwit's errand.

'Ouvre la porte!' demanded Boots and Fists angrily.

Open the door, I thought. Remember those words.

Impatient, Boots and Fists stepped past me and rapped on the timbers with his fist. Sturdily built, it was still the weak spot in this part of the defences, and yet in the event of an attack, the garrison would empty pots of heated sand on the attackers' heads while arrows rained down from the rampart.

The door creaked open, revealing a soldier in a gambeson and hauberk. Plainly a soldier several rungs down the ladder of command, he endured Boots and Fists' haranguing without complaint. A question was asked. I heard the name 'Eva', the French for Aoife. Giving me a curious glance, the soldier replied with a shake of his head.

I had no time to dwell on the significance of this, for Boots and Fists shoved me in the back, indicating I should enter.

I had been inside a bailey – the word given by the English to the space inside a castle's defences – but never one so large. An irregular rectangle, open at the centre to the skies, it was bordered on one side by the two-storey stone keep with its attached kitchen and storage houses. The other sides, formed by the palisade, had at their base slope-roofed buildings I took to be barracks, stables and the like. The place was crowded, but scarcely a person paid me any heed.

A smith in a leather apron bent over a horse's foot, hammer poised to drive another nail into the shoe he had been fashioning. At the beast's head, a youth in a ragged tunic and torn hose gripped the bridle, at the same time picking his nose with his free hand. From the back of a cart, a heavysset man heaved down bulging sacks of vegetables to a second.

Out of an empty stable came a rat catcher, pushing his one-wheeled pole. He was followed by several scrawny cats, attention fixed on the half dozen rodents hanging from it by their tails. A group of men-at-arms lounged by the timber-built well, passing a costrel of wine to and fro, and eyeing the young maidservant who was pulling a bucket up from the depths.

The air was rich with smells; horse manure, wood smoke and baking bread. The last made my belly rumble, and I thought with longing of hot-from-the-oven wheaten loaf, slathered in butter and honey. Tortured, for my recent diet had been a world apart from that, I shoved the image away.

‘Ceste direction.’ Boots and Fists pointed over my shoulder at a door in the basement of the keep.

I caught a tone of urgency in his voice; the hefty push that followed confirmed it.

A woman’s voice carried from above, its tone both annoyed and reprimanding. My eyes rose to the staircase that led from ground level to the highly ornamented doorway in the keep’s wall. A diminutive shape – Isabelle, recognisable by her green cloak – had reached the top, where an amply figured woman stood. By her wagging finger and continuous carping, she was Isabelle’s nurse.

I longed for Isabelle to turn and see me, and raise a friendly hand. Again I almost called out, but Boots and Fists pre-empted me with a stinging cuff that saw me bite my lip. Sure that something was wrong now, I searched the bailey for someone of high rank, the steward, or one of the knights, but could see no one. I dragged my feet, but it made no difference. Soon we had reached the ominous-looking door, and after he had opened it with a heavy iron key, I was forced into the dark, damp space beyond.

I peered about, eyes adjusting to the gloom. Timber pillars thicker than a man stood a dozen paces apart, supporting the floor of what was probably the great hall above. Doors lined the walls on either side. I judged them to be a mixture of granaries, storerooms and prison cells, and my suspicion about the last was borne out when Fists and Boots prodded me towards a doorway that gaped like the mouth of a tomb. I stopped dead. I was no king’s offspring like Aoife, but nor was I a felon. I deserved better quarters than this.

Mouth opening to protest, I turned towards Fists and Boots.

He had been waiting for his chance. Up flew his right fist, circled as I discovered later with a heavy loop of iron, to take me under the chin. I never felt myself hit the floor.