

The Power Behind the Lionheart



Helen Rayson-Hill

Chapter 1. Rejuvenation

“The eagle shall rejoice in her third nesting.”

The prophesy of Merlin foretold England’s future: my third son, Richard, would be king.

I had doubted Merlin’s words from the day I had been given the scroll by Brynn, my mystical Welsh apothecary. But they had come true, as had Judith’s, the blind seer in Antioch during the Second Crusade. She predicted I would ‘marry the love of my life, that I would bear him many sons, but my life would be tumultuous, that I was destined to be a great queen’ It seemed unbelievable, but it happened. ‘A great queen?’ Only history will judge whether I fulfilled that role.

Richard was third in line after William, whom he never knew, and Hal, two years older, whose untimely death made Richard Henry’s heir. To rejoice, however, was a two-edged sword – a mother’s pride mixed with a widow’s sadness. But the immediate future was my priority. Preparations had to be made for Richard’s arrival in England to be crowned.

Archbishop Baldwin arranged meetings with England’s chancellor, justiciars, leading barons and the clerical hierarchy. These preparations were made before the arrival of Guillaume de Marechal, who was sent by Richard to free me from my restricted life.

He found me in command. I saw little point in sitting around awaiting an official decree. Until Richard set foot in his kingdom, governance had to continue.

Guillaume bowed his head, ‘Milady, you are to act as regent until Lord Richard arrives in England.’

‘Yes, thank you, Guillaume, I know. It was agreed between Lord Richard and me should King Henry die. Not that we expected it to happen when it did... Guillaume, do not look so perplexed. I am familiar with

England's legal and taxation systems – have been since early in the late king's reign – and I know most of his representatives. I have excellent advisors also.'

I smiled at the knight's intense face. He and his men had saved my life once. He was a good brave man.

'Milady, I am pleased to see you looking so well after your long ordeal.'

'Thank you. Yes, it has been hard.' I felt my resentment rising, 'Fifteen years, Guillaume, fifteen long years of being rendered powerless, hurt and frustrated beyond belief.'

'And yet, Milady, you have endured. Lord Richard is a lucky man to have such a mother.'

'Thank you, for your kind words. I am looking forward so much to my son's arrival. Now go and get some rest.'

'Thank you, Milady.'

The door shut with a gentle click as I picked up my quill. Regardless of Henry's treatment of me, his death had been a shock, and I grieved. Silly, really, I should be dancing a jig.

The first meeting with the panel of justiciars in London ignited my enthusiasm to rule, even if I had much to re-absorb. The treasury was healthy, even though there were pockets where taxes were in arrears and where land disputes were pending over old charters and inheritances.

I gathered an armful of documents at the end of my first meeting to examine more closely. In the library, where even God knew not to disturb me, I began. My first task was to write to the Welsh and Scottish kings. Skirmishes had taken place across their borders that had to be dealt with immediately. So far, the incursions were not serious enough to battle over, but they breached old treaties, verbal and written. Both rulers had to be reminded of their allegiances and pledges. If they thought they could flex their muscles before Richard's coronation, they could think again.

It had been a long but fulfilling day. The few scrolls left could wait till the morrow. I was about to return to my chamber and a well-deserved goblet of wine when a page braved my inner sanctum.

'Milady, I am sorry to interrupt, but you have a visitor: Ranulf de

Glanville.’

I frowned, then remembered he had been Sheriff of Yorkshire. He stepped over my threshold and acknowledged me with a bow of his head. I stood and extended my hand.

‘Ah, Ranulf, I am pleased to meet you at last. Please take a seat.’

‘Thank you, Milady, and it is an honour to meet you also.’

‘What brings you so far from York?’

‘Many reasons, Milady, but it has been brought to my attention that some sheriffs are abusing their powers, and I felt it was my duty to inform you.’

‘Thank you for your diligence. I am familiar with some of these fellows’ devious behaviour. I do not accept exploitation of any kind, nor will Lord Richard. We expect men in positions of authority to set an example, and to obey England’s rule of law.’

‘Indeed, Milady.’

‘But it is late in the day, so I suggest you address the justiciars on the morrow. We can then discuss how best to bring these recalcitrants to justice and to appoint honest replacements.’

I dismissed Ranulf and made my way towards my desired goblet of wine.

By the end of the week, four sheriffs had been replaced. There was just one pleading missive left from the Abbot of Evesham Abbey. He wrote that the community were housing and feeding horses belonging to the late king. He stressed it left them with little fodder for their own animals during winter. I told the panel I would deal with it and wondered, *What on earth were Henry’s horses doing at an abbey?*

I sent a page to our head groom to attend me. He arrived, almost falling over his feet, cap grasped in his fist as his eyes flitted around. It was obvious this was the first time he had been within the royal chambers.

‘My dear man, please do not look so worried. I need your advice. I received a letter from the Abbot of Evesham Abbey, who says he is stabling horses from the royal mews that are eating them out of house and home.’

‘I know nuffin’, Milady!’

The groom was shaking in his boots. I think he thought I was blaming him.

I reached for the flask of wine on the table next to me and poured. ‘Here, have some wine.’

He took a tentative sip that sent him into a coughing fit. He spluttered, ‘Sorry, Milady, not tasted this before,’ He took a breath. ‘The ‘orses in question are the late king’s relay mounts. They are dotted throughout the countryside ‘ere and there.’

‘Good heavens! How many horses are kept in this manner?’

‘Must be fifty or so, Milady. Many of the monasteries ‘ad complained privately. I am sorry but they were afraid of the late Lord King.’

‘Ah!’ I nodded, ‘I appreciate this information. I will take care of the problem. You may return to your duties.’

The groom blushed and bobbed his way out the door. He left me with the delicious odour of straw and horse, the latter reminding me too much of Henry.

I did not want to bother the justiciars regarding these animals, so I employed the clerks I had inherited to write to the abbeys on my behalf. I directed them to sell the horses if they were a burden. They could then profit from the years they had stabled them at no expense to Henry.

Richard wrote to inform me that it would take three months to finalise his duties in the Aquitaine and other domains before arriving in England. Most of the population had not seen him since he was a little boy, so I needed to spread the word of his homecoming. It was essential I visited the southern shires in preparation for his reign and to stamp my authority as regent. I would not be able to cover the north, so heralds were despatched carrying the same announcements.

Before I left London, I invited the nobility and leading prelates to the Palace of Westminster to formally acknowledge the succession. Accompanied by His Grace, Archbishop Baldwin of Canterbury, we received the oaths of allegiance to their king and me as his regent. I decreed “that every freeman in the whole realm must swear that he would bear fealty to Lord Richard, the Lord of England, in life and limb and earthly

honour as his liege lord, against all men and women, living or dead, and that they would be answerable to him to keep the peace and justice in all things.”

It was humbling to be honoured by those renewing their loyalty. I felt vindicated for the sacrifice I had made to protect not just Richard’s rights but Hal’s, Geoffrey’s and, to some extent, John’s, against their father’s tyranny. Nevertheless, I begged the gathering to remember the late king in their prayers. I emphasised England had been a wretched place when, as an eager young man with high expectations, he had ridden into London to be crowned king. I reminded them that the prosperity they now enjoyed was because of King Henry’s determination. I stressed how Lord Richard would, with the support of the good people in this Great Hall, continue to keep England united and prosperous. A voice beside me boomed, ‘*Vivat Regina!*’ It was taken up by the multitude. I left feeling optimistic.

I had not given my personal situation much thought since Henry’s death. The shock was followed by the elation of my freedom. I was no longer living in turmoil, trying to keep one step ahead of Henry’s often irrational behaviour. I felt I had found my way out of a maze. My failed marriage I regretted; its love was now impossible to reclaim.

My reflective mood was broken by Amaris. I had retired her as my senior attendant to become my companion.

She said, ‘Come, Eleanor, your maids are all aflutter over your wardrobe. Margaret says gowns you have not worn in years need to be thoroughly examined.’

My bedchamber was festooned in colour and exotic materials from Venice and beyond.

Margaret was frowning. ‘Milady, many of your gowns are unsuitable for you in your position as Dowager Queen.’

‘Margaret, I loathe that title. It makes me feel like Methuselah.’

Amaris raised an eyebrow. ‘Margaret is right. You must select those that are appropriate and dispose of the rest, and it makes not a jot how pathetic you look.’

‘Get rid of the lot. We can start again.’

Amaris smiled wickedly, ‘So, you are going to ride to meet your son, naked?’

‘Humph!’

‘You cannot just throw them all out, especially ones of sentimental value.’

I decided to keep the simpler gowns, ones without long trains and flowing sleeves. Those with low necklines were removed because I was past having my breasts pushed into plump mounds.

A legion of seamstresses helped by my efficient maids were employed to stitch and embroider, to regally attire me for my station as King Richard’s mother. I was relieved to escape towards Kent.

My royal progress throughout the southern shires was successful. I was well received by the barons I met. It was a joy to be able to walk among the town’s folk again. I was reunited with manor houses Henry had removed from me and I stayed at different abbeys. The good monks and nuns agreed to remember Henry as well as my deceased children in their prayers. I instructed Adam of Wilton, Henry’s old almoner, to distribute the usual offerings. My old seal was put to use; with pride, I could again sign myself as “Eleanor, by the Grace of God, Queen of England”.

I was pleasantly tired when I rode back into Westminster. Richard had arrived at Barfleur after securing the treasury in Normandy and was to embark for Portsmouth as soon as the weather was favourable.

Otto and Ricenza, two of Matilda, my late daughter’s children, remained in my care. I had been neglecting them, but they were going to have to stay in London and leave for Winchester in a few days’ time. Otto complained, but I reminded him, ‘Otto, you have been appointed the palace’s mouse catcher, and you need to get on with it.’

He pouted, ‘Grandmaman, you frightened my pet away ages ago.’

God knows where the creature went; outside, I hoped. The two children had eased my grief after their mother’s death. I was grateful Henry of Saxony and Henry Plantagenet had entrusted them to my care. They were such a delight. My darling Matilda would be proud of them.

Our long entourage left for Winchester to the sounds of jingling harnesses and a multitude of hooves. It was a joy not to be Henry's heavily guarded prisoner. I was mobbed by excited Londoners as I left Westminster. I dismounted much to the guards' horror (shades of yesteryear) and walked among the crowd. I included Tom when I was with my people, so they did not misunderstand my accent. He had become a useful member of my court after those horror days in Salisbury when he pulled me off the castle parapet. I had taught him to read and write with Frith and Agnes. Teaching the three urchins had saved my sanity when I was at my lowest ebb during my early days as Henry's prisoner.

Freedom was exhilarating. The people were excited to see I was alive and well. They welcomed me, some bold enough to ask where I had been. It was hard to describe those years, so I would smile as if not understanding. Nevertheless, Tom was more forthcoming, which brought lamenting and sympathy. Some thought I was now their ruler, not realising Richard was Henry's heir.

I told the people who gathered around, 'It gives me such pleasure to inform you that your new king is close by. He is God-fearing, brave and caring.' And I could not resist adding, 'Tall and handsome as well. I promise, King Richard will not desert you.'

Then I overheard, 'Thank God it is not that unworthy Prince John,' I was going to have to work on my youngest son. Would he listen, though? Maybe, maybe not!

The walls of Winchester were a welcome sight. I was eager to meet Godfrey, their newly appointed bishop. He was a relative of Henry's old squire, Sir Robert de Lucy. Dear Robert, would be returning with Richard. He and Sir Martin, Margaret's husband, were with Henry when he died. But the people had to get to know Richard again. Before I left London, I spoke to Archbishop Baldwin who agreed it was necessary for him to undertake a royal progress. The bishop also mentioned the thorny question of a marriage for Richard. I sighed and said I would make enquiries.

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