

La Trinité, Caen

Spring 1080

Twelve-year-old Princess Adele stabbed her bronze needle through the linen stretched on the frame in front of her and imagined piercing the black heart belonging to Sister Euphemia. Friday afternoons in the convent school of La Trinité were dedicated to sewing and embroidery. All the resident students, most of the postulants, and many novices gathered in the dayroom to work on altar cloths and other religious items. A majority of the nuns spent the afternoons in the chapter house, the room attached to the church, handling convent business.

Adele loathed all needlework, and she detested Sister Euphemia who taught it. Sister Euphemia had no respect for Adele's position in life and in this convent. After all, Adele's mother and father had founded La Trinité. Adele deserved to be treated with deference and not the constant disdain spilling from Sister Euphemia's mouth.

Later, Adele and the other students would file into the chapel to make their weekly confession and then do penance. Going to confession was the best part of the afternoon. Some weeks Adele wished she had more to confess. During her stays at La Trinité she found daily life regulated and unremarkable. Days flowed one into another, lessons broken up by religious services or perhaps religious services interrupted by lessons.

Adele learned and accepted the routine and rules of the school and convent as a necessary burden of being a royal princess. The good sisters, except for Sister Euphemia, were preparing her for a future as a royal wife.

Adele enjoyed most lessons at La Trinité. She had mastered the lute and also played the psaltery. She prided herself on her knowledge of history. She studied Latin and wrote her name

with a scholarly hand. She knew her numbers and could calculate better than many of her brothers, and she resented the fact that girls were not taught to fight. The only instruction Adele hated was needlework. Friday afternoons stretched out interminably as she sat in front of the embroidery frame while Sister Euphemia supervised.

Sister Euphemia delighted in censuring Adele. When the students gathered to sew, the nun began her litany of Adele's faults. She started with Adele's uneven stitches and ended with, "You are almost beyond the age of betrothal, Adele. Who would ever choose to wed a woman with so few womanly skills, even if your father is a king? Count Crispin preferred God to you."

Could it be Sister Euphemia had Saxon blood and resented the fact that Adele was now a Princess of England? Or was she just a shriveled-up, bitter, old nun whose family stuck her at La Trinité because no man would accept her, and they did not want her?

Adele jabbed the needle through the fabric and into her finger. She brought the finger to her mouth to suck the blood away. If Sister Euphemia found blood stains on Adele's project, she would shake her head and preach about Christ's shedding his blood so princesses did not have to.

Adele felt relief when her nemesis began to demonstrate a more complicated stitch to one of the other girls. She smiled and resumed sewing. She now had two more sins to confess—pride and anger. Perhaps it was a benefit to have this sewing time before confession; at least it provided her with several sins to confess.

"Why are you smiling, Adele? Do you find your failure to improve amusing?"

The sour voice of Sister Euphemia captured Adele's attention. She braced herself to hear more disparaging comments.

“Sister Euphemia, the Princess Adele is to come with me.” Sister Cecilia stood in the doorway. Sister Cecilia was a sister twice over. She was Adele's older sister who had been dedicated to God fourteen years ago. Four years ago, Cecilia took her final vows here as a nun.

Euphemia plastered a smile on her face as she leaned over and murmured in Adele's ear, “Undoubtedly you are being ordered to the chapter house for discipline. You will get the punishment you deserve for being such a willful, prideful female.”

Sister Cecilia said, “Princess Adele needs to hurry. Our father, the King of England, is here for a brief visit.”

Adele wanted to dash out of the dayroom with its bleak stone walls and floors radiating cold even on this warm spring day. As they sewed, Adele and her fellow students often wiggled their toes to warm their feet. The uncovered window openings which let in sunlight, making candles unnecessary, prevented the room from warming up despite the three fireboxes burning wood in the corners of the room. Even shutters, closed on inclement days, did little to keep out the wintery chill.

However, any less than a lady-like departure would result in future reprimands from Sister Euphemia. With back straight and head high, Adele copied a style of walking she'd often watched her mother use and glided across the room. Once out of the dayroom, Adele turned right, heading toward the Abbess' parlor between the dayroom and the chapter house.

“Adele, Papa is in the visitor's room at the convent entrance, not the parlor. He cannot remain long. He is on his way to establish a truce with our brother, Robert.”

The visitor's room was diagonally across the cloister, the large grassy quadrangle enclosed by a covered walkway and the sturdy stone convent buildings. Three years ago, when she was just a child, Adele would have sprinted across the grass to reach her father, even if it meant

hopping over two low walls. Now she was older and more restrained. Her pace around the quadrangle might be quick, but she was not actually running. She would prove she was ready for marriage, ready to leave La Trinité.

When she reached the visitor's room, Adele flung open the heavy wooden door. There, in a simple space with wool tapestries covering the stone walls and furnished only with a rough wooden table and two chairs, stood her Papa, William, King of England and Duke of Normandy. He opened his arms to embrace her as she rushed toward him. They held each other tight before sitting at the table.

“Papa, it has been so long since I saw you. Your rare visits are always welcome, but you are especially welcome today. You are saving me and my tapestry from spending painful time together. There are ladies who enjoy needlework, but I would rather read than prick my finger with a needle. Let others make pictures with threads; I prefer to deal in words.”

William grinned. “Your mother and your uncle Odo have commissioned a great project from a convent outside Canterbury. The tapestry is to illustrate the events of how I took my rightful place as King of England. Perhaps if you improve your skills, you could add a few stitches to the project.”

Adele gasped as she brought her hands to her chest, covering her heart. “Papa, you are not sending me to a convent in England to become a nun, are you? I am to be married, am I not?”

William smiled as he took one of her hands and gave it a gentle squeeze. “Shall I see if you are prepared to wed a husband worthy to be the son-in-law of the King of England?”

William released her hand, picked up the scroll resting on the table and unrolled it revealing a map. He asked, “What can you tell me about this map?”

“Here, Papa, is Normandy where you are Monsieur Le Duc. And over here,” her finger crossed the blue, representing water, “here is L'Angleterre, the land Harold Godwinson tried to steal from you. Here,” her fingers moved back across the stretch of water which separated her father's territories, “here south of Normandy is Anjou.” Adele scrunched up her nose and turned down the corners of her mouth as she spoke.

“Why the face, Poppet?” her father asked.

“These Angevins and their allies, the Capetians, are always trying to take our lands away from us. They are terribly greedy. They cause trouble within our family. And I am too old for such a nickname.”

William chuckled. Then he pointed to another area on the map, a large region east of Normandy. “What is this territory?”

“Ah,” Adele said. “That is the territory of Blois and Chartres.”

Her father said, “And, God willing, it will be your future home.”

Adele listened as her father described a proposed marriage to a man named Etienne-Henri.

“You will make him a good wife. He and his lands will be an asset to our family. And his family wants our help in resisting the growing power of the Capetians.”

Her father changed the subject when he said, “I spoke briefly to the Abbess about you. Your mother will be pleased with the reports I received about your studies.”

Adele was thankful he ignored the comments from nuns such as Sister Euphemia. Her critics claimed Adele was too headstrong and opinionated and needed to be less outspoken. She once heard her father chuckle when Mother Superior recounted a long list of Adele's failings. He had said, “She is just like her mother.”

After her father concluded his brief visit and resumed his royal progress, Adele went out into the herb garden of La Trinité where she found her older sister Cecilia. Eager to share her news, Adele knew not to interrupt until Cecilia had finished. Cecilia treated all work, even gathering herbs, as prayer.

Adele tried not to pace while she waited.

She had always known she was a fortunate child. Her parents, William and Matilda, loved each other and had ten children. Yet only two, Adele and her younger brother Henry, were born after her father became King of England. She was proud of how this distinguished her from her older siblings. As a small child, she had accompanied her mother on travels from manor to manor, territory to territory in Normandy and in England. Matilda often acted as regent for her husband. The territories he ruled were vast, and he could not be everywhere at once. Matilda acted for him in solving problems and making decisions when he was elsewhere. Adele watched and learned from her mother how to be a good wife and partner in a marriage and how to resolve problems with vassals.

Eventually, Adele had come here to Caen to the Convent of La Trinité—a convent her parents endowed. Not sent as her sister Cecilia to be dedicated as a nun, Adele came to be educated. She read Latin better than her older brother, William, who often lost his temper if she demonstrated her skill. However, William, known as William Rufus because of his red hair, often lost his temper, especially if he had been drinking.

On the occasions when Adele left La Trinité and joined the family, Cecilia always remained at the convent. While with her parents, Adele shared lessons with her younger brother, Henry. Henry's Latin was more fluent than hers, their knowledge of history was about equal, but she surpassed him in music and poetry. She enjoyed those lessons much more than she enjoyed

her embroidery instruction. In their free time, she and Henry played chess, a game in which they were evenly matched.

Even at the age of twelve, almost thirteen, as the daughter of a king, Adele knew she had two possible futures—a marriage to Christ or a marriage to someone for the good of the family. From her earliest childhood she had been promised to Crispin, the Count of Amiens, who would inherit his father's lands which stretched to the north of Paris. Two years ago, however, Crispin took monastic, not wedding, vows. Therefore, her father and mother began a new search for her husband. Based on what her father said today, the search had reached a satisfactory conclusion. The marriage was agreed to in principle. Only the negotiations over dowry remained.

Finally, Adele could wait no longer. "Did you spend time with Papa as I did?"

"Yes, Adele, I saw Papa. He told me he had arranged a marriage for you." Cecilia put a handful of herbs in her basket and then stood. "Come over to the bench under the apple tree and tell me about your visit with him."

"Oh, Cecilia." Adele spoke once they were settled. "I am to be married and have a home of my own and rule over my own territories. Are you not sad that you married God rather than a handsome noble?"

Cecilia laughed as she took her sister's hands in hers. "Not all nobles are handsome, and La Trinité is my life. I have been here since I was seven. Maman and Papa gave me to God before Papa took his men over to England to take his rightful place as king. Unlike you, I never left to travel with Maman and Papa. This is my home. The sisters here are my family."

"But did you not dream of a life outside La Trinité, a husband, children, and a marriage?"

Cecilia shook her head. “Adele, not all marriages are happy. Not all husbands are kind and loving. Even Papa can be frightening. You have seen Papa lose his temper and have heard what happens to those who oppose him.”

Adele interrupted. “But Papa is the king. People should obey him.”

“Think, Adele, how Papa talks about our brother Robert. It is not Robert's fault he is not as tall as Papa, and he is short like Maman. Papa calls him Robert Curthose or short legs. It is not a term of affection. He means to be hurtful.”

“Robert is always arguing with Papa, challenging him. He gathered forces against Papa and attacked Normandy on behalf of the Capetians. He even fought against Papa in battle, almost killing him. No wonder Papa is not kind to Robert.”

“Which came first, Adele, Robert's rebellion or Papa's unkindness?” Cecilia's voice was quiet. “But you asked about my thoughts on marriage. Papa may treat Maman with respect, perhaps because she argues back. Remember last month Maman had to kneel before Papa and beg his forgiveness. Papa discovered she sent money to Robert who used it for his rebellion. Papa forgave her, just barely. Few husbands would tolerate such a wife. Most treat their horses better than they treat their wives. Think of what it would be like to be married to our brother Robert or William Rufus.”

Adele shuddered as she remembered bruises each of those brothers had given her.

Cecilia continued. “I am content at La Trinité. Wives must obey their husbands. They promise that in their marriage vows. I expect one day that I will be the abbess of La Trinité, accountable only to God. Trust me, Adele; I much prefer my fate to yours.”

Adele was about to argue that Papa would not bind her in marriage to anyone who was cruel when Cecilia spoke again.

“Should you not be at confession, Adele?”

Confession? Adele had forgotten about going to confession. If she hurried, she could join the others. If her penance was small, she might have time to share her news with the other students.

Soon she would no longer be Adele of Normandy; she would be Adele of Blois. And Adele of Blois would not tolerate a nun like Sister Euphemia. Adele of Blois would demand to be treated as the princess she was.

Chartres

Spring 1082

An impatient fifteen-year-old, Adele wanted to gallop toward her destiny in Chartres and not maintain the deliberate pace set by her mother and their entourage, consisting of retainers on horseback, servants in wagons, and donkeys laden with household items and her dowry. While Adele understood the need to give alms and to display herself regally to her future subjects, she could not wait to meet her bridegroom and get married. Yet any desire she might have to speed up their progress was quenched by her formidable mother, Matilda of Flanders. During their tedious journey from Caen, Adele had considerable time to contemplate the nature of marriage.

The marriage of Adele's parents was filled with turbulent passion. Matilda, daughter of a wealthy and powerful noble never forgot she was the descendent of Charlemagne and the granddaughter of a king. Her pride demanded and expected royal treatment. Adele's father, ever conscious of his birth outside of marriage and his mother's humble status, bristled with any perceived slight. He devoted his life to seeking to eliminate the sobriquet Duke William the Bastard. After a tumultuous courtship, William and Matilda settled into a marriage working as partners. Her father had always been faithful to her mother; he had no bastard offspring.

However, when her parents disagreed, their arguments were loud and public.

Was this the type of marriage Adele could expect? Eager to face her prospective husband and become a married woman, she knew little of his character. What if some of her sister's warnings came to pass? What if Etienne-Henri was cruel? What if he flaunted mistresses in her presence? What if he was ugly or diseased? Questions tumbled through Adele's mind. If the

cavalcade moved faster, she could have her answers sooner. Adele's musings were interrupted by the sound of her mother's voice.

"Can you see the towers? They belong to the Cathedral of Chartres where you will be wed tomorrow, Adele."

Adele could just make out the spires piercing the sky and the outlines of a castle—the two looked to be connected by an assortment of buildings comprising the town. A cloud of dust separated her retinue and Chartres.

"Look, Maman," Adele said. "I think the welcoming party approaches. Shall we gallop to reach them?" She urged her palfrey to go faster.

Matilda gave her daughter a stern look and held out a restraining hand. "It is only right they come to greet us, Adele. I am the Queen of England, and someday you will be the countess of this territory. Be patient. You must make a serious, sedate impression on your future subjects and not appear to be an impetuous child."

Her mother's criticism was tempered by the smile in her eyes. Adele had always realized her mother would be the best example she could emulate as a wife. Papa might be King of England, but Maman was his partner, and he allowed her to rule her own territories. She did so fairly but firmly. Papa often left Maman in control when he traveled through England and Normandy. Adele's mother cautioned her not all marriages were such partnerships. Adele believed she could convince her husband of her abilities, and he would share his power with her.