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Opening extract from

William the Conqueror

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PROLOGUE
THE BAYEUX TAPESTRY

"Sister Cecilia! Your hands are idle. How may Bishop Odo's tapestry be ready in time if you sit gazing out of the window? The great cathedral at Bayeux is to be dedicated in July, as well you know. Already it is April, and much remains to be done."

Sister Cecilia stifled a small sigh. She knew there was justice in the Mother Superior's rebuke. Cecilia was the youngest of the nuns to be allowed to work on the great embroidery that told the tale of William's victory and Harold's defeat, and she felt the honour keenly. But through the round-arched windows of the long chamber she could glimpse the

orchard, watch the rosy-breasted bull finches swinging in the fruit trees, gobbling the fat buds. She could hear the shrill cries of the little boy who was paid a penny a day to drive them away. And that morning, for the first time this year, she had heard the cuckoo's call, as haunting as an echo in the depths of the burgeoning wood.

The bursting blossom and the rising sap summoned her, stirred her blood. But she had dedicated her life to God, and one of the vows she had taken was the vow of obedience. She must put aside the springtime pleasures of her early childhood – gathering honey-scented cowslips in the dew-drenched pastures; discovering a thrushes' nest, each egg a miniature blue sky. She must bow her head over her sewing, as the other nuns did. She must ply her needle, tug the coloured wool through the strong linen until her fingers ached.

And she knew her work was very fine. She hoped it was not a sin of pride to think that. She was aware that she had been chosen for the task in preference to other, more experienced nuns, because under her nimble fingers the animals and plants that decorated

the borders of the great embroidery flickered into life. She had no part in the grand design – that had been entrusted to an artist, a man of course, not a humble nun. But Cecilia and the other seamstresses were allowed a little freedom with the details, and she loved to create dogs, horses, deer, weasels, birds with fantastical plumage, even magical creatures like gryphons and dragons, to writhe and strut and squabble round the edges of the main story.

And what a story it was! Cecilia had been entrusted with the lion's share of the work on one of the most important scenes. This scene was the turning point of the terrible Battle of Hastings. The invading Norman troops were losing heart. A rumour flew through the ranks that Duke William had been killed. Heedless of danger, the Duke had removed his helmet to reveal his face, and then he galloped in front of his men, brandishing his lance, shouting "Look at me, I am alive, and by God's help I shall win."

And win he did. Cecilia's heart swelled with admiration. She had been only six years old at the time of the battle, but she remembered how people talked of it, the tales of courage in the face of such horror, the

descriptions of mangled corpses of men and horses lying in pools of blood. She remembered muttered conversations round her parents' fireside, her father cursing Duke William as a usurper who had stolen King Harold's crown. But even then, Cecilia did not share her father's indignation. To her, William was the rightful King of England, a hero who deserved high office.

The nuns had been told to expect a visit from Queen Mathilda any day now. The Queen had taken a lively interest in the embroidery right from the start, had already visited several times, and had even undertaken a little stitching herself. She would certainly want to inspect the important scene entrusted to Cecilia's care.

Cecilia gave herself a shake, and vowed to work harder. She had finished the russet loops of William's chainmail, finished the dull gold curves of his high-pommelled saddle, but she hesitated before starting on the face of the King himself. It was a daunting task. How could she, a girl of seventeen, record for all time the features of the Conqueror? For all time – these were the words the artist had impressed upon

them. "This tapestry," he had declared, "is no mere decoration. A thousand years hence, men and women will marvel at the tale it has to tell of the greatest events in the history of our land."

A thousand years! Cecilia could not imagine it. Would not the world have ended by then? Already, the earth seemed ancient to her, weary beneath its spring dressing of lively green. But the artist was a clever man, he knew what he was about. Cecilia and the other nuns were helping him to shape history, to think about what had happened in a certain way. And that way was to the glory of King William, and to the detriment of the defeated Harold, struck down by an arrow in his eye.

A murmur rippled through the chamber like the wind in long grass. "The Queen is here!" Every nun bent still lower over her work. Cecilia sensed, rather than saw, the tiny figure, no bigger than a child but straight-backed and dignified, followed by her ladies-in-waiting. Mathilda had been married to William for 27 years and had borne him nine children, but her steady step and regal bearing belied the weight of her years.

The royal group moved from one section of the tapestry to another, full of comments and exclamations, criticism as well as praise. When the Queen halted next to the frame on which Cecilia's section was stretched, Cecilia bowed in homage, as she had been trained to do. As she rose, she shot a daring glance at the visitors. Their coloured gowns looked so delicious, after the plain vestments of the nuns! Mathilda herself wore a robe of mossy green, the wide sleeves trimmed with rose-pink, silk ribbon. Her ladies-in-waiting were decked in blues and greens and purples, gorgeous as a cockerel's plumage in sunlight.

"I remember you," said the Queen, placing her small hand lightly on Cecilia's shoulder. "On my last visit, you were working on a greyhound chasing a hare; I well remember the way the hare bounded away from the hound, leaping almost out of the frame. Am I right, Sister?"

"Yes, indeed, your Majesty," replied Cecilia, her fair Saxon skin flushing pink with pleasure at being remembered by so great a personage.

"Tell me your name, girl."

"I am Sister Cecilia, your Majesty."

"Cecilia! An excellent choice of name, for it is the name of my daughter, who dedicated her life to God when she was only seven years old. My Cecilia is a wise and pious woman, girl. May you live to follow her example."

Cecilia murmured an "Amen," and made the sign of the cross. Gratified, Mathilda turned her attention to the work in hand. "Ah! The thick of the battle! This is Bishop Odo, with his wand of office. And this, if I mistake not, is my own husband. But as yet, he has no head."

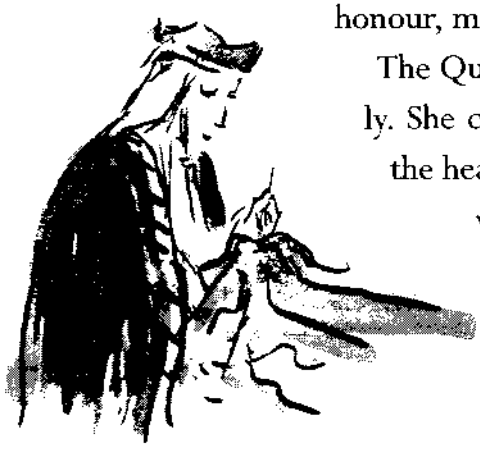
"Not yet, your majesty. He raises his helmet to rally the troops, and ..."

"Excuse me, Sister. I need to take your place a while."

The Queen lowered herself onto the work bench. She snapped her fingers, and her attendants brought cushions to raise her up – she really was as tiny as a child of nine. She selected a needle and threaded it.

"You will not take it amiss, Cecilia, if I complete the King's face? After all, who knows it better than I?"

Cecilia lowered her head. "It would be a great



honour, madame."

The Queen worked quickly. She completed not only the head, but the hands as well, one raising the visor, the other brandishing a club. Her William was heavy-browed, strong-jawed, imposing. The work done, she rose with a sigh.

"He had three horses shot from under him that day," she said, as if to herself, "Yet still he led his troops to victory. My husband is a proper man!"

Cecilia and the waiting-women murmured assent. As the Queen turned to go, she clasped the girl's hands in her own. Cecilia could feel her hard-edged rings pressing into her flesh.

"You will never forget me," declared Mathilda, "And your little fingers have helped to make sure that the world will never forget my husband. This tapestry will proclaim the glory of William I, Duke of Normandy and Conqueror of England, for all time!"

For all time! Those words again. Cecilia sank to her knees, and kissed the Queen's hands. "Amen to that, your Majesty," she whispered, with an overflowing heart.