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978-0-521-09400-9 - Life in the Middle Ages, III and IV: Men and Manners
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Excerpt

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PART III
MEN AND MANNERS

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From the Chronicle of Gervase, a monk of Canterbury, R.S. vol. I, p. 258. A Church Council held in Westminster Abbey (A.D. 1176) brought to a head the inveterate rivalry for precedence between the sees of Canterbury and York.

I. ARCHIEPISCOPAL MANNERS

IN the month of March, about Mid-Lent, the king came to London with his son Henry and the Lord Uguccone, Legate of the Pope, who purposed to call together the clergy of England and hold a Council. When therefore the Papal Legate had taken his seat on a raised throne in the midst, and Richard Archbishop of Canterbury, by right of his primacy, had sat down on his right, then Roger Archbishop of York, puffed up with his own innate arrogance to reject the left-hand throne that was destined for him, strove irreverently to sit down between the Legate and his Grace of Canterbury, thrusting with the more uncomely quarters of his body so that he sat down upon the lap of his own Primate. Yet scarce had he struck my lord of Canterbury with that elbow of his wherewith he had been accustomed to fight, when he was ignominiously seized by certain bishops, clerics, and laymen, and torn from the Archbishop's lap, and cast upon the floor. But, when staves and fists were now wielded on both sides, the Archbishop of Canterbury sprang up and returned good for evil, snatching away from this disastrous conflict his own rival and the inveterate enemy of his see. At length the contumacious Archbishop of York, rising from the pavement with his cape torn ignominiously by the struggle, fell down at the king's feet and belched forth lying¹ calumnies against the Archbishop of Canterbury.

¹ *Mendosam* should probably be *mendacem*.

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LIFE IN THE MIDDLE AGES

Peter of Blois, descended from a noble Breton family, distinguished himself greatly at the Universities of Paris and Bologna, and was invited by Henry II to England, where he became successively Archdeacon of Bath and of London, and died in 1200. He earned a world-wide reputation by his Letters, the popularity of which called forth spurious imitations. The following extract is from his fourteenth letter, "to the Royal Chaplains of Henry II." He relates how his recent illness has opened his eyes to the miseries of court life, where "these martyrs of the world, through many tribulations, enter into the kingdom of hell." He therefore exhorts his friends to retire likewise from a place not only so perilous to the soul, but so comfortless to the body. Bad enough are the racket and disorder, the weariness of constant travel from manor to manor; but, to any man of delicate perceptions, the meals are worst of all.

2. A ROYAL INFERNO

FOR all who fight in the camp of ambition have been taken prisoners by Nahash the Ammonite, and have lost their right eyes [1 Sam. xi, 2]; for they are keen-sighted to acquire worldly things, but pay no heed to the loss of this passing life and to the imminent torments of everlasting death. . . . They are wise (saith the Prophet) to do evils, but to do good they have no knowledge. . . . This I marvel most, how any man can suffer the miseries of court life who hath long been used to the warfare of learning and the camp of university discipline. For (to return to the courtiers) they know neither order nor reason nor measure in their meals, or in their ridings abroad, or in their nightly watchings. Court chaplains and knights are served with bread hastily made, without leaven, from the dregs of the ale-tub—leaden bread, bread of tares, bread unbaken. The wine is turned sour or mouldy; thick, greasy, stale, flat, and smacking of pitch [from the cask]. I have sometimes seen even great lords served with wine so muddy that a man must needs close his eyes and clench his teeth, wry-mouthed and shuddering, and filtering the stuff rather than drinking. The ale which men drink in that place is horrid to the taste and abominable to the sight. There also, (such is the concourse of people), sick and whole beasts are sold at random, with fishes even four days old; yet shall not all this corruption and stench abate one penny of the price; for the servants reckon not whether an unhappy guest fall sick or die, so that their lords'

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tables be served with a multitude of dishes; we who sit at meat must needs fill our bellies with carrion, and become graves (as it were) for sundry corpses. Many more would die of such corrupt stuff, but that the ravenous clamour of our maw, and the Scyllaeon whirlpool of that dark abyss, with the help of laborious exercise, consumeth all at last. Yet even so, if the court dwell longer than usual in any town, some courtiers are ever left behind to die. I cannot endure (to say nothing of others) the vexations of the royal stewards—fawning flatterers, wicked backbiters, unprincipled extortioners: wearisome with their importunities for gifts, ungrateful for benefits received, malignant to all such as are loth to give again and again. I have known many who have dealt liberal largesse to such stewards; yet, when with much labour they had sought their lodging after a long day's journey, while their supper was yet half-cooked, or again while they sat at meat—nay, even while they slept on their bed, these stewards would come swelling with pride and contumely, cut the horses' halters, cast forth the baggage recklessly and perchance not without grievous loss, and expel the guests with so little ceremony that these, (for all their wealth and their provision of travelling bed-gear) had not where to lay their heads that night. This again addeth to the courtiers' misery, that if the king have promised to stay anywhere, and especially if the herald have publicly proclaimed this as the royal will, then be sure that he will set out at daybreak, mocking all men's expectation by his sudden change of purpose. Whereby it cometh frequently to pass that such courtiers as have let themselves be bled, or have taken some purgative, must yet follow their prince forthwith without regard to their own bodies, and, setting their life on the hazard of a die, hasten blindfold to ruin for dread of losing that which they have not, nor never shall have. Then may ye see men rush forth like madmen, sumpter-mules jostling sumpter-mules and chariots clashing against chariots in frantic confusion, a very Pandemonium made visible. Or again, if the Prince have proclaimed his purpose of setting out for a certain place with the morrow's dawn, then will he surely change his purpose; doubt not but that he will lie abed till mid-day. Here wait the sumpters

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standing under their loads, the chariots idly silent, the outriders asleep, the royal merchants in anxious expectation, and all murmuring together: men flock round the court prostitutes and vintners, (a kind of courtiers who often know the palace secrets), to get tidings of the king's journey. For the king's train swarms with play-actors and washerwomen, dicers and flatterers, taverners, waferers,¹ buffoons, barbers, tumblers, and all birds of that feather. Oftentimes have I seen how, when the king slept and all things were in quiet silence, there leapt down a word from the royal quarters, not almighty indeed, yet all-awakening,² and naming that city or town for which the court must now set out. After the long weariness of delay and suspense, we solaced ourselves with the expectation of sleeping there, where (as we hoped) lodging and food would abundantly be found: for so great was the press, so confused and tumultuous the wandering crowds of horse and foot, that the abyss seemed to have been opened, and hell to vomit forth his legions. Yet, when our outriders had now well-nigh or fully gone the whole day's journey, then again would the king change his purpose and lodge elsewhere, having perchance a single house and victuals enough for himself alone, whereof no other might share: yea, and I verily believe (if I may dare so to speak) that he hath found in our anguish a keener zest to his own pleasures. We therefore, wandering for three or four miles through unknown forests, and oftentimes in the black darkness, esteemed ourselves fortunate if perchance we fell upon some vile and sordid hovel. Oftentimes the courtiers would fight bitterly and obstinately for mere huts, and contend with drawn swords for a lair which had been unworthy of contention among swine. How we and our beasts fared meanwhile on such a night may well be imagined: I myself was so divided from my train that it was scarce possible to collect the scattered remnants within three days. Almighty God on high, Thou Who art King of kings and Lord of lords, and terrible with the kings of earth, Who takest away the spirit of princes, Who givest health to kings,

Makers of wafers (Fr. *gaufres*), or thin sweet cakes. It appears that they enjoyed no very good reputation; see *Piers Plowman*, A, vi, 120.

² This is parodied from *Wisdom* xviii, 14.

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in Whose hand is the king's heart and Who turnest it whither-soever Thou wilt, turn now and convert the king's heart from this his pestilent custom, that he may know himself to be but a man, and may learn by use to show the grace of royal liberality and the kindness of human compassion to those men who are drawn after him not by ambition but by necessity!

Ralph Higden, a monk of Chester, died in 1364. His *Polychronicon* is not only a digest of such chronicles as the author could get hold of, but also a popular encyclopaedia: it has no original merit, but is most valuable as showing a learned man's outlook on the world during Chaucer's boyhood. The book was translated in 1367 by John Trevisa, chaplain to Lord Berkeley; and is printed in the Rolls Series.

3. FAIR ROSAMUND

(R.S. vol. VIII, p. 53.)

BUT when King Henry had visited meekly Thomas the martyr's tomb, William the king of Scotland and the two earls of Chester and of Lincoln were taken at Alnwick. This mischief endured two years, and was unnethe ceased, and he accounted the ceasing thereof to his own strength, and not to God's mercy, and he that had imprisoned his wife Eleanor the queen, and was privily a spouse-breaker, liveth now openly in spouse-breach, and is not ashamed to misuse the wench Rosamund. To this fair wench the king made at Woodstock a chamber of wonder craft, wonderly y-made by Daedalus' work, lest the queen should find and take Rosamond: but the wench died soon, and is buried in the chapter-house at Godstowe beside Oxenford with such a writing on her tomb:

Hic jacet in tumba rosa mundi, non rosa munda.
Non redolet, sed olet, quae redolere solet,

that is, Here lieth in tomb the rose of the world, nought a clean rose; it smelleth nought sweet, but it stinketh, that was wont to smell full sweet. This wench had a little coffer, scarcely of two feet long, made by a wonder craft, that is yet y-seen there. Therein it seemeth that giants fight, beasts

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startle, fowls flee, and fishes move without men's hand-moving. . . .

(viii, 99.) In the year of our Lord God 1192, St Hugh, bishop of Lincoln, making visitations by religious places in his diocese, came to the monastery of Godstowe nigh to Oxenford. Which, entering into the church to make his prayers, saw a tomb in the midst of the choir before the high altar covered with cloths of silk, and lamps and tapers burning about it. And the bishop inquired anon what person was buried there; people present answered, saying that [it was] Rosamond, friend to king Henry II, for whom the king had done many great benefits to their church. Then the bishop commanded that she should be buried out of the church with other people, saying that she was an harlot, lest the religion of Christ decrease, that ill-disposed women may take example by her to avoid the sin of adultery and of lechery.

4. A PLAIN-SPOKEN PATRIARCH

(*Ib.* p. 69.)

THAT time [A.D. 1185] came Heraclius, patriarch of Jerusalem, into England to king Henry, and prayed him help against the Saracens in the name of all the Christian men of the eastern lands, and proffered him the keys of the holy city and of our Lord's grave, with the king's banner, and letters of Lucius the pope (that counselled and charged him that he should take that journey, and had mind of the oath that he had made); but the king put over his answer before he came to London; and, by the presence of the patriarch and of Baldwin the archbishop, many took the cross to the Holy Land. But Henry answered and said that he might not forsake and leave his lands without ward and keeping, neither set them to be prey to be robbed of Frenchmen; but he would give largely of his to men that would thither go. "King," quoth the patriarch, "it is nought that thou dost; we seek and ask a prince, and not money; nigh every land of the world sendeth us money, but no land sendeth us a prince; therefore

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we ask a man that needeth money, and not money that needeth a man"; and so the patriarch goeth his way, and his hope is lost; and the king followeth him anon to the sea, for he would with fair words, as he could well, please the patriarch that was grieved. But the patriarch spake to the king and said, "Hitherto thou hast reigned gloriously, but hereafter He will forsake thee That thou hast forsaken. Think and have mind what our Lord hath given thee, and what thou hast given Him again; how thou wert false to the king of France, and slewest St Thomas, and now thou forsakest the defence and protection of Christian men." The king was wroth with these words; the patriarch saw that, and proffered him his head and his neck, and said, "Do by me right as thou didst by Thomas, for me is as lief be slain of thee in England as of Saracens in Syria, for thou art worse than any Saracen." "Though all my men," quoth the king, "were one body and spake with one mouth, they durst not speak to me such words!" "No wonder," quoth the patriarch, "for they love thine, and not thee. This people followeth prey, and not a man." Then the king said, "I may not go out of my lands, for mine own sons would arise against me when I was absent." "No wonder," quoth the patriarch, "for of the devil they come, and to the devil they shall" . . . Also that year [1188] fell strife between the kings of England and of France, and all the money was wasted that was gathered in tithes for the journey in going to Jerusalem; for at the city of Le Mans the king of France and Richard earl of Poitou came against the king of England, and king Henry set the suburbs afire, for a device that his enemies should have no succour therein; but the strength of the wind drove the flame of the fire into the town, and burnt up all the city, and compelled king Henry to go out of the city; and the king in his going from the city spake such words and said: "For that Thou, God, hast taken from me this day the city that I most loved in this world, I shall requite Thee. For after this time I shall take from Thee the thing that should most please Thee in me, that is mine heart."

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Roger de Hoveden, R.S. vol. III, p. 35; laws published by Richard I for those who sailed on his crusade. Similar and more elaborate legislation for crusaders may be found in A. Schultz, *Höfisches Leben*, etc. Band II, S. 220 ff.

5. SHIPMAN'S LAW

MEANWHILE [A.D. 1190] King Richard went into Gascony, and laid siege to the castle of William de Chisi and took it, and hanged William himself, the lord of that castle, for that he had robbed pilgrims to Compostella and others that passed over his domains. Then the king went to Chinon in Anjou, where he appointed Gerard bishop of Auch, and Bernard bishop of Bayonne, and Robert de Sablun, and Richard de Camville, and William de Forz of Oleron as leaders and constables over his whole fleet which was to sail for Silves;¹ unto whom he gave a charter in this form following: "Richard by the grace of God king of England, Duke of Normandy and Aquitaine, and Count of Anjou, to all his men who are about to go to Jerusalem by sea, greeting. Know that we, by the common counsel of honourable men, have made these rules of justice here following. Whosoever shall kill a man on board ship, let him be bound to the corpse and cast into the sea; but if he kill him on land, let him be bound to the corpse and buried alive. Whosoever hath been convicted by lawful witnesses of drawing his knife to strike another, or of striking him even to the shedding of blood, let him lose his hand: but if he have struck him with the palm, and shed no blood, let him be thrice dipped in the sea. If any cast upon his fellow either contumely or reviling or God's curse, then, so often as he have reviled him, so many ounces of silver let him pay. If any robber be convicted of theft, let him be shorn like a champion, and boiling pitch be poured over his head, and let the feathers of a feather-bed be shaken over his head that all men may know him; and at the first spot where the ships shall come to land, let him be cast forth. Given at Chinon, under

¹ Near Cape St Vincent, where they were to land on their way to Palestine. The tale of their doings at Lisbon (Hoveden, p. 45) suggests that Richard's laws were scarcely more strictly kept than those of other medieval sovereigns. Schultz (*l.c.*) gives other evidence to the same effect.

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our own hand." Moreover the king enjoined in another brief under his own hand, that all his men who were to go by sea should obey the words and precepts of these aforesaid justiciars of his fleet.

The account of the journey itself, though too long for insertion here, is extremely interesting. It may be found in Riley's translation of Hoveden (Bohn, 1853, vol. II, pp. 143 ff.). I subjoin as an illustration of the above ship-laws, some extracts from T. D. Wunderer's account of his voyage on a great Hanse Ship from Riga to Tramünd in 1590 (Fichard, *Frankfurtisches Archiv*, Band II, S. 245). Though the date is late, the main features of the ordinances there described had doubtless been handed down from very early times.

6. LIFE ON A HANSE SHIP

AFTER we had driven half a day under full sail [from Riga], then the Skipper, Bernhard Schultz of Lübeck, called us together according to custom and made the usual speech to us, who were forty-seven all told, to the following purport: "Seeing that we are now at the mercy of God and the elements, each shall henceforth be held equal to his fellows, without respect of persons. And because, on this voyage, we are in jeopardy of sudden tempests, pirates, monsters of the deep and other perils, therefore we cannot navigate the ship without strict government. Wherefore I do hereby most earnestly warn and instantly beseech every man, all and singular, that we hear first of all a reading of God's word from the Scriptures, both text and notes; and then that we approach God steadfastly with prayer and hymn that He may vouchsafe us fair winds and a prosperous journey. After which we will set about to ordain and establish a government by the most prudent according to the customary sea-laws; which office (as sea-law hath it) no man may refuse to undertake, but must rather be ready to exercise it strictly and without respect of persons, even as each desireth that God may deal with him at his last end and at that dreadful day, truly and without flinching, and with all diligence that may be." Then followed the preaching and prayers; after which the