

# GOD'S EQUAL



ALAIN ABSIRE

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EQUAL

Translated by Jon Rothschild

A HELEN AND KURT WOLFF BOOK  
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To Guy

# BOOK ONE

A HELLISH DARKNESS

BYGONE DAYS OF GLORY AND GREATNESS

THE DAY OF THE HUNT

LIES AND DISSEMBLING BEFORE THE MAGNIFICENT

MASTER SAVINIEN'S WRATH

WANDERING IN THE BLACK FOREST

SMILES AND LOOKS TOO GENIAL

THE BATTLE OF TWO STARS



In those days of the millennium many wonders appeared in memorial to the Christ. Unaccustomed disturbances troubled the order of the world, as if turmoil in the heavens was no longer testimony to the glory of God but a warning to men that misfortune was about to fall upon them.

So it was that on the third day after the calends of July, in the one thousand and twenty-seventh year after the birth of Our Lord, it became my lot to witness a most startling phenomenon, one that seemed to herald the terrible adventure that I endeavor here to recount.

I was still a mere adolescent. Barely out of childhood, my studies at an end, I had just arrived in Falaise, where I was to learn the arts of war. Everything at the court of Robert the Devil seemed wondrous and magnificent to me, and I waited impatiently to set out at my duke's side to confront some enemy. As an aspiring vassal of Normandy, I yearned

only to be dubbed a knight and to return in glory to the castle of my father, lord of Bernay.

On that day, as had already become my custom, I retired after vespers to the library in the square tower. Alerted by the strange dimming of the daylight, I halted on the spiral staircase and looked out through a loophole. What I saw terrified me. The sky was covered with ash. The sun had turned the color of sapphire, its upper part swallowed by a first-quarter moon. Bloodred reflections, quick as sparks, glinted on the black waters of the Ante River and the lakes at the foot of the castle. The normally tranquil landscape was swathed in a thick haze. Fog masked the forest like a sinister veil, the trunks, branches, and leaves of the trees blending in a disturbing, indistinct gloom. The terrified churls had downed their tools and stopped work. They stood motionless in the fields and looked at one another, deathly pale. In the past, they knew, a like marvel had heralded the demise of Pope Benedict, John's predecessor, and foul crimes against law and justice had subsequently been committed throughout the world, in ecclesiastical and earthly domains alike. This spectacle could only mean new misfortune. Never had I seen its like, neither at my father's castle nor at the monastery of Fécamp, whence I had come.

Striving to put aside the fear that gripped my heart, I lingered behind the thick castle walls and watched the earth sink into the blackness of death. I tried to believe that such a phenomenon could have some natural cause, and called to mind the particulars of my astronomy lessons and the movements of the planets, whose paths, as Ascelin had told us, cross as they move. I pictured the heavy wooden sphere he had used to represent the world. I recalled the established order in which the constellations rose and set, and remembered how Ascelin would gaze up at shining stars and have



us measure their angles of incidence on the various regions of the earth. I remembered, too, the excellent device from which he hung the animal figures representing the stars in what the Latins called the "vital" circle. I calculated the positions, altitudes, revolutions, and distances of each planet. But my efforts, alas, were in vain: despite the breadth of his learning, never had Ascelin shown us the moon covering the sun.

I waited, fear dwelling within me.

Perhaps the Almighty had plunged the earth into the darkness of hell in the daytime in order to punish men for their transgressions, just as, at the close of the world's first era, He had sent the flood to destroy the disobedient. Was it possible that the light would never return, that life would vanish in this darkness? Who, then, would be the new Noah?

After an interminable time, the dark quarter-moon slowly began to drift aside and a semicircle of blazing light, extremely thin, at last burst out from the top of the sun. Though blinded, I continued to gaze upon the marvel. At first the sky remained black. Then the forest emerged from the baleful mist that had enveloped it. The bloodred reflections faded from the lake waters, a long transparent shaft of gold touched the grass and soil of the fields, a church bell sounded, and many churls, forgetting that it was not yet compline, fell to their knees to pray.

No longer believing that this had been an omen, a warning, I too began to praise the holy name of Christ Our Lord, who, having taken the source of life from us, had now miraculously restored it.

It took me several days to put the strange marvel out of my mind, and even when prayer had removed the sudden

darkness from my memory, there remained within me a fear impossible to obliterate. From that day on, I was less happy at Falaise; the splendors of the Norman court, so different from my father's residence of wood, ceased to fill me with wonder. The lessons of Master Savinien, who was teaching me the handling of the sword, and of Master Helgaud, who taught the art of falconry, no longer sufficed to occupy my mind. I ceased to roam the countryside on horseback, and even the time I spent in the library each night began to seem overlong. I was restless, and again felt the craving I had known during my years of study, when, confined within the high walls of the monastery in Fécamp, I yearned to set out on some noble adventure, to serve my duke, sword drawn. I now dreamed day and night of gallop and turmoil, of attack and harsh battle, of vanquished enemies. I saw Robert, alas, only in the evening, at supper. He had ignored me completely for the three weeks I had lived in his castle. My enforced inactivity grieved me. My heart thirsted for assault and conquest, yet I remained unchallenged. I had no inkling of the events I would soon experience, the events I am recording now.

I watched the duke after vespers every night as he took his supper by candlelight, surrounded by relatives, vassals, friends of noble lineage, and the people of his household. Though he sat far from me, in the middle of the long trestle table at the center of the great hall, I did not take my eyes off him. His hair, cut straight across the forehead, and his dark beard, trimmed in the fashion of Burgundy and Aquitaine, lent great nobility to his face, which was surprisingly serious. His golden chair, his coronet inlaid with precious stones, and his long white linen tunic could have been those of a king. Five kitchen servants waited on him; two minstrels and as many musicians performed for him, dancing, leading

trained animals, or singing to the glory of his exploits. Often he would turn to Arlette, his consort, who sat beside him. It seemed to me that his gaze came alive and was charged with fire whenever he looked at her.

Each night I marveled at his great wealth and handsome bearing. My boredom was forgotten as I admired the quality of the bread, the abundance of meat, and the liberal flow of wine, which, in his generosity, he offered to all those present, not only his own men but also the poor who had taken shelter in his castle. How many times did I see him cut slices of venison or pork and hold them out to mendicants with his own bejeweled hand! He was said to be harsh to the point of brutality, arrogant, enamored of gambling, hunting, and women, but his exploits had won great power and renown for his house and for the duchy of Normandy. A great lord of war, at the very beginning of his reign he had besieged his archenemy, the count of Bellême, in the latter's impregnable fortress of Domfort. Once reduced to famine, the count was vanquished and overwhelmed, forced to plead for mercy, a donkey's saddle strapped to his back, while his army and vassals watched. And Robert had won his battle against the Breton invaders, compelling their duke to pay homage. Never had he been seen to retreat on the field of battle, and many were the minstrels who roamed from castle to castle singing of his feats. Even today I can recall one of their songs, which I heard in my father's castle in bygone days.

*Robert set out  
with such great fury  
that no knight of Neustria  
was able to follow him.  
Alone, the duke charged the enemy tribe,  
a thousand Breton standards*

*and fifty lances facing him.  
Count Arnoul in alarm  
shouted to Robert to stay his steed.  
But straight at the foe  
the Devil did ride,  
and so fiercely did he smite them  
that ten lances were splintered  
in a single crash.  
Robert felt no fear  
when he found himself alone,  
but brandished the noble sword  
of Rollo the Norman,  
and cut and thrust  
with sweeping strokes,  
and slashed mail, and cracked shields  
and split iron helmets.  
The Bretons fought back in frenzy,  
tearing off the duke's helmet  
and cutting his forehead.  
Long did the battle rage,  
and many heard its thunder.  
When the knights of Neustria  
finally joined the Devil,  
he was fighting still, scorning his wound,  
and at his feet  
more than a hundred lay pierced and slain.*

But that summer, alas, his days of glory and greatness seemed over. By day there was no sign of Robert the Magnificent. He lived only for prayer and for Arlette, who had won his heart a year before, when he gazed upon her for the first time from atop the ramparts of Falaise as she, suffused with beauty by the sun, washed her linen in the clear waters

of the Ante. He had ceased to dispense his justice, and he allowed poachers to empty his forests of game. Never once did I encounter him in his towers. Never once did I see him set out at a gallop across his lands, his fields and woods. Each dawn found him shut up in his chapel, where he gave thanks to God and devoutly prostrated himself before the statues of the most venerated saints. In the castle court it was said that he sometimes drew blood as he flagellated himself in tribute to the five wounds of Christ Our Savior. Some murmured that this was penance, that it was his way of seeking forgiveness for the imprisonment of his brother Richard, in whose stead he held the throne of Normandy. Master Savinien, whom I assailed with questions, at last told me that the duke had suffered from melancholy, since winter's end, and was spending too much time with Arlette and the child born of their love, William. But when Robert appeared in the evening, proud and magnificent, the living embodiment of divine beauty, my doubts faded and once again I felt certain that I would soon embark on some adventure at his side.

He ate and drank little. Erect in his golden chair, he served the poor in silence. Still, from time to time he would joke with those around him, even burst into great laughter. But the clouds that darkened his countenance swiftly returned. Arlette, seated on a coffer to his left, never spoke, never dared raise her eyes to him. I watched her too. Despite her common birth, her face was noble. A long veil, adorned with a silver fringe, covered and held her hair high on her forehead. Clasped below her slender neck with a valuable jewel, the hair parted slightly as it fell across her tunic embroidered with gold braid. Though she seemed a child beside the duke, her proud and respectful bearing gave her the look of a princess of old.

On the evening of the third Sunday after my arrival in

Falaise, Robert entered the great hall alone, without Arlette. During supper he turned toward the door several times, clearly hoping that she would appear. As I looked upon his sorrowful face that day, I realized to my misfortune that the lady had taken his heart hostage, that she had robbed him of his peace of mind since winter, and that she alone was the cause of his melancholy.

The days passed with dreary sameness. One night, the vision of darkness spreading over the earth returned to me. Jolted from sleep by my fear that diabolical forces had gained ascendance over divine power, I left the oversized bed in which, for the first time in my life, I now slept alone like a person of high birth. I went to the window and looked up at the black sky. As I gazed at the moon, it darkened to a vermillion hue, then paled again, then finally faded away, though there was no cloud to cover it. I watched intently for the first glimmer of dawn, but when it came, it failed to ease my troubled mind. When I left my room between lauds and prime to go to pray, I dreaded the coming sundown, the inevitable return of night decreed by God in His ordering of this world.

After four days' absence, Arlette reappeared at supper in the great hall, but her return changed nothing in the duke's demeanor. In the impatience of my young years (intensified by my desire to depart from Falaise and its gloom), anger at Robert's failure to lead me in a far-off adventure gnawed at my mind. As the days wore on, I became convinced that the Magnificent would never grant me the chance to prove my valor.

A fourth Sunday passed, and yet another, and the summer began to wane. Since I had no desire to make friends, outside

of my lessons in weapons I spoke to no one and remained alone. During the day I listened for the bells that tolled the hours of prayer; after supper, as the sun set, I watched the candles melt on the coffer beside my bed, their wax flowing as slowly as the time that refused to pass. Torn between anger and lamentation, I came to miss the life I had lived as a child in my father's castle, and even the two years spent at the abbey school in Fécamp.

At last, on the morning of the fifth Monday after my arrival in Falaise, it was announced that the Magnificent would lead a great hunt in the forest and that he was summoning the men of his domain—barons, knights, and future vassals, the sons of his lords—to join him in pursuit of stag and wild boar. My heart swelled with joy at the news. I called to mind the celebrated hunt at the court of Richard II, which had lasted six weeks. I immediately sought out Gervin, commander of the archers, and requested that he instruct me in the handling of the bow, which I had not yet used on horseback at the gallop.

The castle, so tranquil since my arrival, was now astir. The most stalwart of hunting horses were brought to the central courtyard. Then the dogs were gathered in the second enclosure: more than a hundred pointers, beagles, and bloodhounds, whose barking and fighting caused a constant din. Twenty guards prepared pikes and other weapons and equipment. Fur-lined quivers were filled with long arrows with finely sharpened heads, and the largest bows I had ever seen in my life were set out in rows against the enclosure wall, shielded from sun and rain, in numbers more than sufficient to win a battle.

I slept little during the night before the Wednesday the duke had chosen for the hunt. Long after my exhausted candle had flickered out, I imagined myself standing before a dazzled

Robert and slaying, with a single dagger thrust, an enormous beast. I awoke at dawn to watch the final preparations from my window. In the courtyard below, grooms worked by torchlight, placing bits and bridles on a hundred and fifty blindfolded horses. One would be the duke's, and that one I would have to follow. The grooms draped cloth covers of golden yellow, brown, dark blue, or bright red over the broad croup of each mount. The longer I watched, the lighter the sky became, and the greater was my haste to set out. I dressed before prime, swiftly putting on my tunic and chausses and slipping my dagger into my belt. Highly excited, I waited for the chapel bell to call us to prayer.

A marvelous spectacle greeted us in the courtyard below as we emerged from the chapel, where the monk Granger had said mass. A hundred banners fluttered in the breeze; the bright red colors of Normandy shone on the pennants below the iron points of the lances carried by the equerries. Two gold leopards writhed on the duke's oriflamme: they, at the head of the hunt, were the insignia I would have to keep constantly in view. The bedecked horses, perfectly lined up at the enclosure wall, each tended by a shield bearer, awaited their riders. The dogs, leashed in groups of ten according to breed and size and restrained behind a wooden fence, barked loudly, trembling with impatience. The call of the horns, sharp and strident, rose in the sky. The duke came forward under the eyes of all the people of his household, who were gathered on the tops of the towers and along the castle walkways. He was greeted by a cheer as he descended the stone stairway. Bareheaded, wearing high boots, and, despite the morning chill, dressed only in a fur-trimmed tunic stitched with gold and silver thread, he walked to the most beautiful of the horses. His equerry held out his hands, fingers interlaced, so the duke could mount the tawny beast. The duke



righted himself in the saddle, slung his quiver over his shoulder, took his bow and whip, and raised his hand to salute the house of Normandy. A second cheer, even louder than the first, rose from the castle's very foundations. How deeply fixed in my old man's memory is the joy, the exultation, that swept through me at that moment! How different that regal spectacle seemed from my father's modest departures for the hunt! Then Robert the Magnificent blew his horn, and all of us—barons, counts, vassals, ladies of the court, and huntsmen—moved forward to join him.

We crossed the fields at a gallop, accompanied by the barking of the dogs and the call of the horns. My horse, with its broad hindquarters and short legs, seemed heavy and sluggish; even before we reached the forest, I had to use my whip and stirrups to keep up with the duke and his red-and-gold banner. It was a cool and beautiful day. The white light of late summer dazzled me, and I found it hard to see the colors of Normandy as I looked toward the sun still low on the horizon. I did not know that this was the first sign of the failing vision that causes me so much grief today. Crossing the belt of fallow land that separated the forest from the broad fields of grain—rye, oats, and wheat—we entered the forest's edge and thundered down a narrow road through thickets of willows and hazel trees. I whipped my horse in my effort to keep up with the group just behind the duke, but the thorny branch of a shrub cut me under the ear. Onfroy de Coutances seized my tunic, pulled me back, and passed ahead of me. I nearly fell, and had to rein in my mount as it bounded forward. Now hemmed in by a throng of knights intent on pressing ahead through a passage that could accommodate no more than two at a time, I was driven to the rear of the