



THE MESSAGE

“**T**HE KING IS coming! The King is coming!”
An urgent clatter of horse hoofs on cobblestones rose above the bustle of the weekly market in the crowded town square. The throng of sellers and bargain-seekers hurried to part and make way, gathering into whispering knots among the market stalls as the breathless horseman reined in his frothing mount by the public fountain and shouted his message.

Then, as quickly as he had come, he spurred his horse and galloped away, affording no explanation.

Murmurs became excited conversations. Suspicion was replaced by wonderment.

“The King? Here?”

“We are so far from his castle. Why would he come here?”

A fair-haired, well-muscled young man loitering on the periphery of the market had also heard the message. Having finished his morning’s work in the smithy, Henry had walked into the town center to buy bread and cheese. He felt equally puzzled by the announcement. The small town, Purdyton, lay on the outermost borders of the kingdom as far as he knew, and certainly could not be of much interest to the King. The unassuming cluster of buildings and houses had slumbered in its hill-rimmed bowl undisturbed for centuries. Its surrounding lands belonged to the fief of

the High Lord of Purdyton, and even he did not come to the town in person, nor had he ever revealed his name to his subjects, preferring to be known only as “High Lord,” though his castle, with its crenellated walls and towers, hunched on its hill like a dark beast, brooding over the town and its inhabitants. Henry supposed the High Lord owed allegiance to the King, but the townsfolk and peasants were beholden primarily to the High Lord and they paid their annual hearth tax of money and lord’s share of the harvest to him in return for his protection and the privilege of farming the land.

Henry had become the town’s blacksmith only in the previous year, after his father, to whom he had apprenticed, died unexpectedly from an injury—poorly managed by the High Lord’s surgeon, some said. In all his twenty-five years Henry had not seen such excitement about the King, and though the King’s emblem was prominently displayed inside the town inn—the Rose and Crowne—identifying Purdyton as belonging to his kingdom, the King was seldom spoken of. So after Henry bought his supplies, with a burgeoning curiosity he ducked into the two-story, half-timbered inn that fronted the square to seek out the innkeeper, James. Although he had never stayed overnight at the inn, Henry considered James a friend. James’s ready smile nestled in a white beard and mustache, and the twinkle in his eyes when he smiled had a way of pulling one into his confidence. As the innkeeper James knew the business of every traveler who came through and therefore served as an invaluable source of information to those whom he trusted, Henry among them.

Henry entered and strode up to the small window where all travelers were to report upon entry to the inn. “James, have you received word that some of the King’s entourage will stay with you?”

Seated behind the window at a small table lit by a rushlight, James appeared to be tallying figures on a piece of parchment. He raised his head to acknowledge Henry, the wrinkles around his eyes relaxing as he recognized his friend.

“I have not,” Henry said. Tapping his quill on the table, he mused, “Hmm... Though it is told that the King travels throughout his realm

from time to time, the announcement is as much a surprise to me as to you, but perhaps he intends only to visit the High Lord.”

“That would make sense,” Henry said, nodding, “but why would the messenger announce it to the town as well?”

James’s eyes narrowed, his brow becoming wrinkled as if he were about to share confidential information. “You know, there are some in this town who do not believe the King is real and care little about him since they have never seen him. Perhaps he wishes his subjects to see him with their own eyes. The mayor has called a meeting at dusk in the alehouse next door to discuss how the town should welcome the King. Have you not heard?”

Henry had not heard, but he would certainly attend, if for no other reason than to seek answers to the many questions that had begun to gnaw at him. He had never seen the King either, but he always had assumed he was real. Throughout Henry’s childhood his parents had certainly spoken as if the King were real. They had described him as majestic and benevolent, one who would be well worth meeting, though perhaps with some trepidation. So, yes, Henry would welcome a chance to see this King.

After returning to the smithy, he pondered the meaning of the messenger’s visit while finishing his day’s work making nails for one of the carpenters. At the end of his workday, he hung his worn leather apron on a hook and placed his tools neatly back on the smithy bench as usual. He then stepped out into the rutted lane amid the sound of thunder and the hiss of rain to seek out his friend William, the tanner, to accompany him to the Thirsty Hound next to the inn. Henry soon recognized William by his shorter stature, dark hair, and closely cropped beard as he stood waiting for him at the edge of the square near where the cobblestones began. William was leaning against the stone wall of a merchant’s townhouse, taking shelter under its eaves while scraping mud from the bottom and sides of his shoes with his knife. Henry announced his arrival with a clap on the shoulder, William responding with a friendly arm tugging Henry to his side.

The alehouse was usually the busiest place in the square each evening, as townsfolk gathered to drink away the drudgery of their days and soak

up tidbits of gossip that floated through the fetid air, heavy with the aroma of sweat and alcohol. By the time Henry and William had reached the cobblestones that surrounded the fountain and identified the alehouse by its painted wooden plaque sporting an overly joyful, obviously inebriated hound holding a sloshing mug in one paw, the hubbub of excited and drunken townsfolk had already spilled out of the tavern into the evening shadows, echoing off the cobblestones and stone buildings fronting the square.

Stepping carefully over the bodies of two blissfully unconscious drunks on the doorstep, oblivious to the raindrops pelting their cheeks, Henry and William entered a room filled to overflowing, warmed to excess by closely packed, exuberant, ale-swilling men and women, energetically haranguing one another with questions and ideas. In front of everyone stood the mayor, straining to make sense of the commotion of suggestions. The oblong tables flanked by benches that usually sat in the center of the common room had all been piled against one wall for the meeting, all the revelers standing, rosy-cheeked, garrulously bumping into one another or jockeying for space at the front near the mayor.

“We should send someone to tell the High Lord first, shouldn’t we?” one said.

“Surely he was told before we were,” another added.

The insistent banging of a mug on the counter turned heads toward the mayor, who climbed with a grunt onto the counter to be more easily seen, his arms raised to gather the attention of all and bring calm to the meeting.

“We must have a feast and present the King with a gift from his subjects,” he announced in a loud voice above the diminishing din of damp revelers.

“I will donate a sheep,” a farmer said.

“And I will provide ale,” the alehouse owner said, clearly ecstatic at the huge profit this meeting was bringing to his pockets.

“Henry!” the mayor called. “You must craft a fine gift—a sword perhaps.”

“Yes, I will give it some thought.” Henry offered his reply as he forced his way through the press of sticky, sweaty bodies, carefully dodging careless spills of ale onto the wood-plank floor from tipsy mug-wielding

townsfolk, still somewhat in disbelief himself that the King was really coming. “But how will we know when he is coming?” Henry asked.

“The High Lord will surely know,” the mayor answered. “We will ask him to send us a messenger when the King is near. And, William, since you own a horse, I appoint you to be the one to ride to the High Lord’s castle to learn more.”

Eventually the mayor, having restored sufficient order to hear individual suggestions and having given instructions to the eager townsfolk, called an end to the meeting. The atmosphere was the most joyous Henry had ever experienced as the crowd stumbled out into the square, back-slapping and singing, each parting in a drunken daze to return home. Having themselves been carried through the door like flotsam, William and Henry parted, Henry bidding William good night, returning soberly to his smithy, still intrigued by the horseman’s announcement and the unrestrained reaction of the townsfolk. He looked back in the direction of the High Lord’s castle. What did the High Lord already know and what was he keeping from his subjects? The sky held no moon, nor were there stars; the blackness of the night rendered the castle invisible, but strangely Henry could feel its presence, as if it were pressing into the space above the town on tensed haunches—probing the alleyways with cat eyes, listening with bat ears.

Why had the message seemed so urgent that the messenger had to depart in such haste? Was the King already near? Henry thought about the meeting just dismissed. He could indeed fashion a fine sword, he thought, but surely the King would have a far better one, and there might not be enough time anyway. What else? He had made a mace for the High Lord recently. Or perhaps spurs. It was good to have extra spurs, and they were easier to make, but could he truly make anything worthy of a king? He would have to leave the decision until the morrow.



The next day, after completing a set of knives for one of the merchants’ wives, Henry was drawn back to the square. He always tried to spend some time

there at the end of each day because it was the one place where he could find out the news of the day. In addition to what he could learn from James, he could often find in the alehouse travelers who were staying at the inn and who were also eager to share news of other parts of the kingdom over a mug of ale. On this day, however, booths were noisily being erected around the square by the same hung-over citizens who had thronged the alehouse the night before. Someone had already tacked written signs proclaiming the King's coming at various sites around the square. Colorful banners were flying from the inn. It seemed as though a carnival atmosphere had seized the town. A local peasant even practiced juggling in the square. Henry sought out his friend William again for conversation over a mug at the alehouse, knowing that William had probably been to see the High Lord that day and returned with useful information.

"Have we had any message from the High Lord?" Henry asked after greeting his friend at their usual meeting place at the corner of the square.

"Shh," whispered William. "Walk with me."

Raising an eyebrow, Henry followed William out of the square down a narrow, muddy lane, overhung by crowded houses, skirting slippery trash heaps full of putrid, rotting food buzzing with flies, attempting not to breathe the foul air too deeply.

"I was not admitted to see the High Lord, but his chamberlain told me they knew nothing of the King's visit and we should not expect one," William said once they were out of earshot. "He added that they would certainly be on the watch for his entourage. He seemed somewhat caught off guard and upset by the news."

"Why?" Henry said. *How could he not know? He is the lord of the fief!* It made no sense. "Then who was the rider?" Henry continued. "His horse bore the emblem of the King. And why would our lord be upset by a visit from the King? It would be a distinct honor, would it not?"

"I do not know what to think," William answered, shrugging. Pausing to look around for eavesdroppers, he added, "I believe we should still prepare. Remember the stories passed down in our families of the King's coming? They said he would come with little warning and we should always be prepared because he would reward those who were prepared for him."

Henry did recall from his childhood the stories of the King coming to be with his people. He had not fully understood what this meant, though his parents seemed to be looking forward to such an event with great hope. Likewise he was not sure what it meant to be prepared, nor had he any idea what a reward for those prepared was all about, but it had sounded good enough.

The following day two armored riders from the castle arrived in the square. After posting notices at the alehouse, on the pillory and stocks, on some of the booths, and at the inn, they returned to the castle. The message, written on parchment, read:

Proclamation

*A rumor has been spread
about a visit from the King.
There is no truth to this rumor.
If the King is to come,
you will hear of it first from me.
There is no cause to plan
a feast of welcome.
Return to your normal work.*

High Lord of Purdyton

Having read the announcement, Henry was troubled. He found William again later that afternoon in the town square among the gaily festooned booths and gossiping groups of townsfolk. "Come and see this," he said to William, tugging him to one of parchments announcing the King's coming. A large 'X' in smeared mud defaced the parchment, obscuring the hand-drawn King's emblem and the words.

"Who would do this?" William asked.

"Remember what you told me yesterday? The High Lord's soldiers were here in the square earlier today. Have you talked to the mayor yet?"

William nodded. "I told him of my experience, and he did not believe me, but now he will. I think he will call off the celebration."

"What about the gift you were going to make for the King?" Henry asked.

William paused as if to consider the implications of the High Lord's proclamation and the vandalized announcement. "I am disturbed by the reaction of the chamberlain and the attempt to cross out this sign. It seems that he and the High Lord do not want the King to come, as if it were an unwelcome intrusion. But what he is responding to is not a rumor. There was definitely a messenger and he came from the King. Why would the King send a messenger if he did not intend to come? The question in my mind is, when?"

William jumped back against the wall of a house to dodge the splash of a chamber pot being emptied above him into the street. "An additional question I have is why the High Lord would want us to ignore what we have seen with our own eyes and heard with our own ears. I think I will still make my gift."

The High Lord's proclamation was the news of the day in the Thirsty Hound as Henry and William took a smaller square table in the corner, each sitting on an empty barrel that served as a stool, eavesdropping over their mugs of ale. They found nothing new to be learned, except there now seemed to be a division among the townsfolk—those who still believed the King would come and those who believed the High Lord's announcement. After parting company with William, Henry pondered the events of the past two days as he returned to the smithy. Why would the High Lord not know of the King's coming? He would undoubtedly be required to host the King. Was it possible that he did know but did not want his subjects to know? Henry could not dismiss William's answer. A messenger would not come without a reason. Henry decided he would still make his gift as well.

The next day, as William had predicted the night before, the booths came down and the banners disappeared. The atmosphere in the town changed overnight from one of celebration to one of gloom. Henry sat with William in a nearly empty alehouse that evening, listening to an

alcohol-tinged drone of disappointment and dissatisfaction from the few regulars who still came.

“I told you the King would never come here,” the miller said to his companions.

“Who are we to the King, anyway?” the apothecary asked.

“Who would play such a mean trick on us?” the carter said.

And that was that. After a week had passed and no more news of the King came, Henry heard no more talk of the King, as if he were a figment of one’s imagination and the whole event involving the message a cruel joke.



Some days later Henry heard someone enter his smithy while he was working. “Can you make a key?” asked a deep male voice.

“Of course,” Henry answered. He did not bother to look up, giving his fire another puff from the bellows, then continuing to hammer the blade of an axe. “There are some examples on the wall,” he said, motioning behind him.

“No, I would like you to make one like this.”

Henry glanced up to see the man—a stranger, cloaked and hooded so that his face could not be seen—pulling from beneath his cloak a small piece of parchment displaying a drawing with dimensions. There was nothing special about it, Henry thought after looking at it.

“I can have it ready tomorrow,” he replied, focusing again on the axe blade.

“Excellent,” the man said. “Bring it to me at the inn.”

“Certainly,” Henry answered as he looked up. “And who are—”

But the stranger was gone. Henry rushed out into the lane. The man had vanished.

The next day Henry finished the key as requested and strolled to the inn, whistling an old folk tune, wishing he had taken more time to engage the stranger in conversation to learn his identity and the purpose of the key, though in fact it was none of his business. As he stood beneath the

weathered sign, its faded long-stem red rose resting within an equally faded golden circlet, his hand on the door ready to enter, he paused. How could he find the stranger if he did not know his name? Nor could he even describe his face, for he had not seen it.

Henry entered and, as best he could, described the man and his mission to James, who nodded even as his kindly face assumed a puzzled expression.

“He departed this morning,” James replied. “But he told me to give this to you.” The innkeeper lifted a wooden box from the floor and set it on the rough-hewn ledge of the window where Henry stood. “He said that you would have the key for it.”

Henry was equally baffled why the stranger would not stay to receive the key, as well as why he would leave a box for him without explaining its purpose. He picked the box up, thanked James, then took a seat on a bench in the foyer of the inn. Examining the box, he turned it over from one side to the other. It was about a foot long and half that wide but made of an unusual wood that Henry did not recognize, its sides fitted with remarkable precision. Strips of iron crossed the rounded top and continued around underneath. He saw no apparent keyhole, but where the keyhole should have been he discovered a metal medallion adorned with a bird of some kind. Henry had seen this sort of hidden keyhole before; he had even made this kind of device for boxes. He pushed laterally with his thumb and the medallion snapped to the side, revealing the keyhole. Henry fitted the key into the lock and turned it. A click sounded, and the lid lifted easily.

Inside lay a parchment scroll with a wax seal bearing the image of the same bird as on the medallion. *Who would send something like this to me? And why?* After breaking the seal and taking care in unrolling the scroll, he gazed at what appeared to be a map. His eyes scanned the details, noting roads, rivers, villages, orchards, and pastures. He looked around the edges of the map for the town of Purdyton, assuming it would be on the boundary somewhere, but, surprisingly, almost nothing was labeled, and the few written names were in a tongue strange to him. At the bottom were the words *Regnum Altissimi*. In the center was a castle,

labeled *Castrum Regis*. All the roads and rivers seemed to fan out from it. Henry found no castle of Purdyton either.

Henry showed it to William later that day. “What does it mean?” he asked William. “And why would it come to me?”

“I do not know,” William said, pursing his lips. “Come to think of it, I never imagined our kingdom having a name. I know we have a king and he has a kingdom, and our lord is the High Lord of Purdyton. I don’t know if that map is our kingdom or not. Purdyton is not on it.”

“Then what does it represent? And who was the stranger who gave it to me?”

Like Henry, William had no answer.

“I will keep it and ask the traveler if he comes through again,” Henry concluded.

Henry sat alone by the forge after leaving William, unable to banish from his mind the strange events of the past few days. He was puzzled still by the inscrutable map, the mysterious stranger, and the news of the King’s visit. Were they somehow connected? He could make no sense of it. But he had decided what to make for the King: he would fashion a fine steel battle-axe that bore his emblem on the blade. William had confided that he would craft a covering for a shield made by a carpenter friend that would display the King’s emblem in different colors of leather. And they would present their gifts to him together—if he ever came.