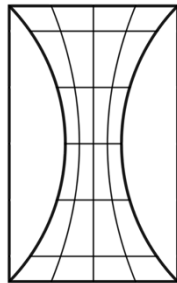


# THE WORLD THAT WAS

JAY PELCHEN



**THE WORLD THAT WAS**

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This book is a work of fiction woven around real history, real people and real science. Any references to historical events, people or places are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

*20 October 1123*

Baron Walter groaned in bed as Bishop Godfrey completed a third bloodletting. Godfrey had been tending to the Baron since their hunt the previous day – organised in the Bishop’s honour – had gone awry. Walter had proven to be a boorish host, keeping Godfrey awake throughout the night. The Baron spent his time locked away in his quarters bellowing in pain rather than entertaining his high-profile guest. Typical of an Isle-dweller to lack true European sophistication.

The Baron’s accident was yet another misfortune on Godfrey’s dreary tour around his newly acquired parishes. He had arrived from the European continent only months earlier, escorting the King’s second wife to her new home. Godfrey’s appointment as the Bishop of Bath and Wells was a reward for years of faithful service as Her Majesty’s chaplain.

Being on the wrong side of sixty, he was eager to receive the promotion. And the improved standard of living that came with it. But his welcome tour had revealed that, even for a bishop, life on the road was still an endless repetition of the same boring service in overcrowded chapels for unengaged congregations.

The Baron’s injury didn’t even make for an impressive story that Godfrey could recount to future guests. Rather than something gallant, like being gored by a cornered boar or falling from his horse at full gallop, Walter had managed to be stung by a humble bumble bee. All children were familiar with the sharp pain and hours of throbbing that followed a bee sting but for some unknown reason the Baron’s entire finger had swollen and turned a worrying shade of blue. The hunting expedition was cancelled before they had spotted a single animal.

Godfrey was a progressive man and had used his limited spare time to experiment with treatments beyond those accepted amongst his fellow clergy. His experiments had mixed success for his usually compliant patients but he’d learned several tricks while helping those in his care. For Walter, Godfrey created a pure environment before cleaning the wound. The Bishop tried to remove all of the Baron’s jewellery but he wouldn’t hear of cutting the gold ring from his stung finger. Godfrey was certain it was the source of his host’s pain but Walter was adamant so the Bishop was forced to consider alternative options.

Next he tried bloodletting. Godfrey reasoned that extraction of blood would reduce the volume of the swollen digit but was displeased when the finger remained enlarged despite several extractions. It appeared to be turning a deeper shade of blue too. Godfrey was unsure what more he could do but, unless something changed soon, would need to amputate the finger to prevent the corruption from spreading beyond the ring.

Walter glared at the Bishop as he applied a cork stopper to the latest vial of blood, despite the generous efforts to help. There was a knock at the door and Godfrey growled in annoyance. He’d been abundantly clear that he didn’t wish to be disturbed.

The door opened and Walter's old Castellan limped in, bowing to Godfrey before ushering a girl into the room. She had brilliant red curls and was unusually tall. Godfrey's annoyance rose when he noticed that the woman wore the rags of a peasant, strange to see within a keep but not entirely unexpected from the English rabble. As if the interruption weren't bad enough, Godfrey felt dirty just looking at her and he resented the woman for ruining the pure healing environment he'd worked so hard to create.

Godfrey was pleased when his assistant – a dour and businesslike priest – moved to quickly intercept the newcomers.

“What is the meaning of this? His Excellency explicitly asked for no interruptions while he is tending to your lord. Healing is a delicate process.”

“My lord,” the Castellan said to the Baron, ignoring the Assistant. “You have most fortuitous timing. We've been visited by a healer woman travelling from Exeter. She has an excellent knowledge of herb-lore and might alleviate your pain while we wait for the Bishop's efforts to take effect.”

The Castellan turned on his heel and limped from the room before anyone could respond. The four remaining occupants awkwardly tried to size up the room. The Baron propped himself up in bed and appraised the newcomer, also viewing her ragged appearance with open distaste. Godfrey's assistant moved to shoo her away but in the same instant she spoke directly to the Bishop and the Baron.

“My lord. Your Excellency. I am indeed a healer. What is it that ails the Baron? I would be honoured to do what I can to assist.”

Godfrey was shocked on two counts. First, that a lowly peasant had the gall to directly address nobility, without being asked to speak. More surprisingly, he registered that she spoke to them in French. The language of nobility. It was a strange dialect but unmistakably French.

*Who was this woman?*

Walter responded first. “My damned finger is about to fall off!” He brandished his bloody hand at the woman, splattering droplets across his quilt.

The peasant made to move towards the bed.

“Your services won't be needed,” Godfrey told the woman firmly in French, testing her understanding. “Walter's humours are in balance and I have already administered appropriate treatment. You can do nothing more but pray for his speedy recovery.”

The peasant's steely eyes revealed complete comprehension and a hint of disapproval.

“Your treatments haven't worked Bishop,” Walter told him acidly. “If anything, they've made it worse. Let the girl take a look.”

Godfrey was stunned by the Baron's insolence. He was only minor nobility, well beneath a bishop in rank, and surely knew when to defer to authority. The Bishop's blood began to boil.

“She wouldn’t even know where to begin,” Godfrey scoffed. “If she thinks she knows more than the Lord’s highest representative to these lands, then by all means.”

“I’ll try anything at this stage,” the Baron groaned. “Let her have a look.”

With Walter’s permission, the woman placed her bags by the door and delicately walked around the Baron’s bed. As she passed, Godfrey noticed that beneath her ragged clothing she wore the most beautifully crafted boots he had ever seen. They looked better than any boots Godfrey had ever owned, an unusual design and precisely cut from the finest leather. The blatant display of wealth by one so far below his station stoked Godfrey’s rage even further.

“Greetings lord Baron, I’m Matilda. What happened?” She spoke to the Baron in an insultingly casual tone.

“I got stung by a wretched bee out in the woods,” he grunted. “Now my finger is the size of a carrot.”

Matilda inspected the finger before turning to Godfrey.

“What treatments have you administered to remedy the situation?” she asked in an accusatory tone.

“I have released blood from the finger to reduce its size. Three times.” Godfrey replied, though he was unsure why he defended his actions to a mere peasant.

“Has anyone tried to cut the ring off?” the woman asked.

“No!” Walter commanded. “This is my family’s heirloom, a gift from the Conqueror himself.”

The girl nodded and continued her examination of Walter’s hand. Propped on the edge of the Baron’s bed, she paused in thought before suddenly reaching up to her head and removing the ribbon from her hair. Her red curls fell down over her face, completely inappropriate for a woman in the company of clergy.

She pushed the ribbon under the Baron’s ring using a hairpin which caused Walter to bellow in pain once more.

“Hush,” she reassured him, like a mother calming a babe. “That was the worst part. I’ll be able to remove the ring now, then the swelling should start to reduce.”

She spoke in English, something about miniature suffering and extended reward. Godfrey didn’t understand but the Baron gave a forced laugh and allowed her to continue.

Matilda pulled the ribbon so there was a length on either side of the ring and began to wrap it tightly around Walter’s finger, causing him to wince with each loop. She wound the ribbon with deft hands and before long had wrapped the entire finger.

Matilda caught Godfrey’s eye before gently pulling the length of the ribbon closest to Walter’s knuckle. Like magic, the ring slid along the coiled ribbon with ease, leaving a only puffy red finger in its wake. With a final tug that made Walter cry out in pain, the ring suddenly fell into Matilda’s outstretched hand. The bloody ribbon hung from her other. She beamed at the Baron as she held up both prizes.

The Baron’s face flooded with relief and Godfrey saw colour already seeping back into the finger.

“How does it feel?” Matilda asked, handing Walter his heirloom.

“Better. So much better.” He hollered in glee. “Where did you learn a nifty trick like that?”

“Just here and there,” Matilda said with a smile. “My father was once asked to help a man in a similar situation, though his hand had been struck with a hammer and lost the finger before they could remove the ring.”

“But I didn’t! I’d have sworn it were magic if I hadn’t seen you do it with my own eyes. A ribbon!” He shook his head in disbelief and accepted the bloody ribbon from the girl. “A reward! You name it, I will see that you are handsomely compensated. What do you want? Silks? A horse?”

“That is very kind my lord,” she said absentmindedly as she removed some small white stones from her bag. “But for now, let’s focus on your recovery. Swallow these. It’ll take time for your finger to return to a normal size and the pain from the sting will remain for a few days, though those cuts look like they might be more painful.”

“They are,” Walter said, glaring at Godfrey again. He waved his uninjured hand. “Bishop, leave me to recover. You’ve done enough.”

The rude dismissal was Godfrey’s final straw. Determined not to let his inferior see him crack, the Bishop managed to maintain his composure just long enough to collect his instruments. His diligent assistant received them on a tray and the pair strode from the room without a word. As they left, Godfrey heard the Baron tell Matilda to return later that afternoon to discuss her reward. It was galling to think that a peasant would be rewarded for a bishop’s hard work.

Godfrey marched up the hallway to the guest quarters with both his jaw and his fists tightly clenched. His assistant trotted to keep up, making Godfrey’s tools jingled on the tray.

Godfrey exploded into his room and slammed the door behind his assistant.

“Put those on the table and leave me. I’ve never been so humiliated!”

His assistant obediently placed the tray on the table and made to leave.

“Actually,” Godfrey called, “on second thoughts. Prepare our things, we’re leaving. I’ll not be stuck in this hellhole of a town for a moment longer.”

“But Your Excellence, we postponed our arrival at the next town for another two days. And we wouldn’t arrive before nightfall. Surely you would be more comfortable here.”

“I don’t care Peter, just make it happen. Let’s get this trip back on schedule. Perhaps even return to the cathedral early. I am growing weary of these rural paupers and their self-righteousness.”

“I’ll send a rider ahead to warn our next host to expect us this evening,” Peter replied diligently. “But it will take time to pack your things and prepare your carriage before we can depart. Will you be staying here in your room?”

Godfrey strode over to the narrow arrow slit in the wall. Pulling back the heavy drape he looked down into the castle courtyard just in time to see the Redhead depart the keep and walk back into town.

“That’s fine Peter, do what you must. I’ll go stretch my legs before the ride.”

Peter closed the door softly behind him and Godfrey continued to peer outside, watching as the mass of curly red hair disappeared beyond the castle walls.

Godfrey walked back to the table and inspected his collection of medical instruments. Forced to relive his humiliation, he snapped and launched a vial of blood across the room. It shattered against the keep’s thick stone wall, the blood seeping down along the mortar.

Without a backwards look, Godfrey marched from the room.

With purpose.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

*20 October 1123*

With a spring in her step, Matilda strode away from the keep and back towards Nether Stowey. There was a slight drizzle but she didn't mind. She was elated to have helped the Baron. As a child, she'd often played doctor with her father who had taught her the ribbon technique using his wedding ring. Matilda never dreamed that she would need to use it but her brain had dredged the technique from the depths of her memory and she'd operated by instinct.

Baron Walter's relief had been instant and he repeatedly insisted that Matilda be rewarded. Her mind ran wild with possibilities. Some were practical and in aid of her mission while others – like asking for formal ownership of her cave – were much more fanciful.

Walter had insisted on solitude to catch up on rest after his painful ordeal. He summoned Sir Phillip back into the room and explained the situation before ordering that the Castellan take care of Matilda's belongings and grant a small allowance to enjoy the market. Matilda graciously accepted, though she took her satchel with her despite Phillip's continued offers to mind it. It was much too precious.

Matilda found she had an entire afternoon to explore the town and experience medieval life. She enjoyed every step of the journey back into Stowey, admiring the architecture and craftsmanship of the town's simple buildings. Ignoring the smells, it was actually quite quaint and Matilda happily foresaw frequent returns if Baron Walter became her patron.

The only dampener on Matilda's day was the Bishop. She'd tried to be diplomatic but knew that her necessary intervention had destroyed any chance that he would help with her quest to meet the King.

It had been a calculated decision. Matilda had quickly judged that the elderly Bishop was a thoroughly unpleasant man, from his arrogant attitude to his sagging face. His approach to medicine was barbaric and Matilda couldn't bring herself to let a patient suffer through his primitive ministrations. Plus, approaching a baron had always been the Institute's plan and Walter could still provide the introduction needed for her mission.

There was a slim chance that Pa would still be at the market so Matilda headed there first. He could relay the good news back to William. Matilda longed to see Rachel and Mama's faces when they learnt of her success.

Matilda passed a small stone chapel as she exited the castle. It looked newly built, the mortar still unweathered. The friendly priest from the castle was out the front, sweeping the stairs with a well-worn broom. He stopped and waved at Matilda so she detoured to say hello.

“You managed to help the Baron?” the Priest asked.

“I did, thanks to your tip-off. How did you know?”

“The screams from the keep finally stopped. Shortly after you ran off. And the Bishop’s assistant just informed me that they would leave town today. He seemed quite agitated.”

The Priest’s brilliant blue eyes bored into Matilda, evoking a feeling of guilt.

“My methods may have differed from the Bishop’s,” Matilda admitted sheepishly. “You’re right, he wasn’t pleased.”

“Not to worry. Bishop Godfrey will soon be gone, no doubt wanting to return to a life of luxury in his palace. He will quickly forget little old Stowey.”

Matilda raised an eyebrow. “Careful Father, you wouldn’t want people to think you’re slandering your superiors.”

He laughed. “Let them think what they will. I’m much too small a fish for anyone higher up to waste time with me. No ambition, you see. I’m content to sweep my little chapel and tend to my flock of parishioners. Leave the politics to the thrusters, they can keep the palaces.”

“Well said,” Matilda agreed. “Though I’ve definitely seen shabbier chapels. And in worse locations.”

“True. I see most of the traffic passing into the castle, perfect for keeping watch over my flock...and keeping up with town gossip.” The Priest patted the stone building. “It was a gift from the Baron for tending to his mother during her final days. Poor Isabel, and so soon after her husband’s death. Walter is often a real pig, risk averse and primarily concerned with protecting his status quo. But he’s also fiercely loyal and can be generous when he wants.”

“That’s nice to know,” Matilda said. “He asked that I return to the castle to discuss a reward for my services. You have pretty good friends for a little fish.”

“I’m blessed. And what of you? The town is already abuzz with news of the mysterious redhead with the strange accent. Where have you come from?”

“I’m travelling to London and only arrived in Nether Stowey today. I trekked from a tiny village in the hills not far from here. Speaking of which, I need to see if my travelling companion is still at the market.”

The Priest looked disappointed at the abrupt end to their conversation but recommended merchants to avoid and told Matilda to return for directions to London.

Pa was nowhere to be seen when Matilda arrived at the market but many stalls remained open so she purchased an apple and inspected their wares. She took great joy in examining the simple tools and trinkets on offer, asking perplexed sellers in great detail how they were made. Even the produce was fascinating, many items differing in size or colour to those she knew from the future.

Matilda eventually exhausted the market’s offerings but, being too early to return to the Baron, decided to explore the town. She combed the interconnected buildings of the inner streets before following a random road to the town’s outer limits. She was surprised how quickly the town’s population melted away, the buildings replaced with recently ploughed fields.

Matilda enjoyed seeing the rural area in action. She watched the rudimentary farming techniques until the clouds parted and revealed that the sun well into its descent. Ready to see the Baron, Matilda turned around and happily strolled back toward the castle.

Fields transitioned to houses and she had just passed a particularly derelict hut when there was a sudden flurry of movement, followed by a sharp crack over her head.

Stars burst before her eyes and she dropped to a knee. Two strong pairs of hands were upon her in an instant. She was dragged behind the shack and pinned against a wall before she could put up a fight.

It took Matilda a moment to come to her senses and take stock of the situation. A bulky ox of a man held her arms tightly against the wall while another weedy man stood nearby with a club. Feeling groggy, Matilda channelled her Institute combat training and lashed out with her legs while simultaneously trying to bite the larger man's hand. He shrugged off her attack and pinned her even tighter against the wall. Looking entertained, the smaller man sauntered over and struck her across the face with the back of his hand. A fresh wave of stars obscured Matilda's vision.

The hut's rickety door swung open and the Bishop emerged, his face livid and eyes ablaze.

"Who the hell do you think you are?" he spat. "A peasant girl thinking she could outsmart a bishop? A peasant girl that speaks French? A peasant girl with fancy boots and knowledge of medicine? It's preposterous! Who the hell are you?"

Matilda stayed silent, glaring at him but clutching for a way out of her predicament.

"Do you know who I am? How powerful I am? And yet you try to undermine me. Do you think yourself smarter than a bishop?"

When Matilda failed to reply, he pointed to the smaller assailant.

"Bring me her bag. If she won't talk then I'll find out myself."

The smaller man dropped his club and moved to unloop the satchel from over Matilda's head. He dodged Matilda's flailing legs but her head surged forward as he reached for the strap and she sank her teeth into his arm. She bit with all her might and managed to draw blood before he wrenched his arm away with a yelp. Yet still the bigger man held her steady, squeezing her arms with immense force.

The smaller man inspected his arm before punching Matilda in the face and taking the bag. "She's a fighter," he noted as he handed over the satchel.

The Bishop scowled at him before opening the flap and emptying its contents onto the ground. Vials of chemicals shattered as he shook the bag, filling the air with fumes. Matilda's mind jumped to the memory of emptying her pod after her arrival and, despite everything, laughed at the absurdity of her mind's priorities. The three men looked at her as though she were deranged.

The Bishop continued to empty the bag and with one final shake, Matilda's bible fell into the dirt. He tossed the bag aside and gingerly knelt down to pick it up.

“A peasant carrying a bible?” he asked, reading the cover. He flipped through the pages, frustration etched across his face as he tried to make sense of the text and images. “This is no bible. Plants and star signs. What pagan blasphemy is this?” he roared, waving the Book in the air.

Matilda worried that the Bishop would damage her precious Book and in her panic let her already fragile façade drop. Godfrey registered the new fear in Matilda’s eyes and correctly judged the Book’s value to her. With a devilish grin of pure spite, he grabbed Matilda’s bible in both hands and tore it in two with an almighty wrench. He punctuated his vandalism by throwing one half of the Book forcefully into a nearby puddle.

Matilda felt her stomach wrench. Something within her snapped and defeat swelled up within her.

The Bishop gestured threateningly at Matilda with the other half of the Book. “Your belligerence with the Baron was one thing but this blasphemy is unforgivable.” He paused, tapping the tattered tome to his head. “But I’ve no time to deal with this properly...”

He turned to his thugs.

“Do away with her. I don’t care what you do or how you do it, just make sure she’s gone. I’ll see that you are suitably rewarded for your services.”

With that, Godfrey marched off into the street without a backward glance, the ruined Book still in his hand.

When it was clear he was gone, the two men exchanged a puzzled look.

“He wants us to do *what?*” the larger man asked.

“You heard him,” the smaller man snapped, still clutching his arm. “Do away with the bitch.”

He pulled a knife from his belt and the magnitude of the situation struck Matilda with an icy wave of pure terror. Her struggles to break free became more frantic.

“That’s not what we agreed to,” the larger man protested, barely registering Matilda’s struggles. “That’s murder! A mortal sin!”

“No it’s not you idiot. We were *ordered* to do it, by a man of God. The bloody bishop no less. It’s sanctioned by the Church so we might as well have some fun while we’re at it.”

The smaller man leaned in closer to Matilda, her already knotted stomach churning even further at the smell of his rancid breath. A trickle of blood snaked from the bite marks on his arm. He held the knife to Matilda’s neck, pushing hard enough to prick the skin.

“You try any more funny business and I promise to make this as unpleasant for you as possible.”

He pulled away from Matilda and she defiantly renewed her violent struggle but was still unable to escape the giant’s grip. She had trained for situations like this but had never felt so powerless. So hopeless.

The smaller man grabbed Matilda’s tunic and ripped his knife down the front, cutting through Ma’s loaned peasant clothes. He tore them apart, expecting Matilda’s naked body, but was met by chainmail instead.

“Woah,” the weedy man exclaimed. “That’s the fanciest mail I’ve ever seen! The Bishop’s gonna pay us a fortune when we’re done here.”

He lovingly stroked the mail with the back of his hand, chilling Matilda to the core as it inched lower along her stomach. The Bastard paused as he reached for his belt and looked her dead in the eyes, his wicked grin revealing several missing teeth.

“Stop!”

A yell came from the road and all three heads jerked towards the sound.

“You stop what you’re doing right now or, so help me God!”

Matilda’s eye had already started to swell over from the attack but she felt an immense flood of relief as the blurry form of Stowey’s kindly priest marched towards them, his wispy white hair flailing in the wind. The Bastard stepped away from Matilda and hope roared like a wildfire within her chest.

The Priest stood a full head shorter than the Bishop’s two brutes but he showed no sign of intimidation.

“What in Christ’s name are you two doing?”

His brilliant blue eyes blazed with a righteous fury that rivalled Godfrey’s as he surveyed the situation. The thugs stayed completely still and silent.

“I might’ve expected this from foreigners but people from our own town? I’ve known you both since you were children. What would your wives say? Your mother? Your friends? God?”

He lowered the temperature of his voice but continued to stare the pair down. The smaller thug glared back defiantly but Matilda felt the larger man’s grip ease.

“Let her go,” the Priest commanded. The larger man released Matilda instantly, earning a reproachful look from his partner. Matilda’s legs were jelly and she collapsed to the ground.

The Priest pointed threateningly at both of them. “You two leave this place right now. Return to your families and consider what you might’ve lost if the constable had found you rather than me. I’ll expect to see you both at Mass on Sunday, you’re both due for some serious penance.”

The Bastard still looked ready to stand his ground but his bulky companion grabbed his elbow and dragged him away. They were both running before they rounded the corner onto the street.

Matilda remained crumpled on the ground, weeping uncontrollably. The Priest knelt down beside her and placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. She flinched at his touch.

“Hush, my sister. I am so sorry. I saw the Bishop and those two dolts rush down from the castle just after you left. I came searching for you as soon as their purpose finally dawned on me.”

Matilda’s whole body shook with her sobs. The Priest crouched down and tried to help her cover up.

“Don’t touch me!” Matilda cried, shoving the old man away. He stumbled and fell to the ground himself. Matilda surged to her feet and tried to cover herself before hobbling away from the infernal ruin. The Priest looked up at her with a mix of shock and devastation.

Matilda threw up by the shack but ran as soon as she reached the road. Each step hurt and she didn't know where she was running to but she needed to be away from that place. From people. She was terrified that the Bishop would send his men after her again. She needed to find safety.

Knowing she couldn't appear in front of the Baron half naked and with a swollen face, she turned away from the town and fled to the safety of the forested hills.

She ran through the woods until her legs shook and could move no further. Matilda dropped to the ground, willing the earth to swallow her whole. The reality of her ordeal set in and she was forced to relive the pain. The fetid breath. The hopelessness.

Matilda was numb and time seeped by but as twilight fell she discovered a new fear. Faced the prospect of night alone in the forest, her mind failed her as she struggled for a solution to her predicament.

After an eternity, it finally recalled Pa and his promise of hospitality. Matilda forced herself up from the rotting leaves and headed in the rough direction of William's village. It was difficult to travel in the failing light but she eventually discovered some familiar landmarks and stumbled back towards Holford. Creepy forest sounds haunted her steps and were only drowned out when the heavens finally opened to release a torrent of rain.

Darkness had fully set in by the time she passed Holford's ruined mill. Matilda was freezing in her tattered clothes but the village's scattered lights promised warmth and comfort. She spotted the family's hut and hobbled towards it.

Just as Matilda reached the front gate, Rachel emerged from the building carrying a basket of dirty dishes. William's eldest sister was startled when she spotted Matilda but smirked upon realising who it was.

"Look what the cat dragged in," Rachel sneered, noticing Matilda's state of undress and swollen face. "You didn't get far. It looks like you got what you deserve."

"Rachel, please..." Matilda pleaded, only to be cut off.

"No!" Rachel barked. "We don't want your filth here, corrupting our village. You don't know a woman's place in the world. I've no idea how things are where you're from but parading around like you do isn't right! Get out of here. Go!"

Rachel's scorn hit Matilda as hard as the Bastard's punch and tears welled in her eyes once more. She stood in dumbfounded silence but when Rachel started hurling bowls at her, Matilda ran.

Not knowing where else to go once again, she ran back into the mountains and hobbled toward the only other place she knew.

Matilda's adventure is just getting started

and there are more Chronomads to come

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