CHAPTER I

JOHN FITZ GILBERT

William Marshal was of knightly birth. Two vigorous generations had raised his family to a place within the pale of the nobility. The feudal aristocracy never really accepted anyone who had been born outside its ranks. No matter how capable or how successful an upstart might be he was always hampered by the contempt, dislike, and distrust of the dominant class. But within this charmed circle the distinctions, great as they were, were economic rather than social. While the heir of an earl who was lord of two hundred knightly vassals inherited a position which one less fortunate could scarcely hope to attain, he was perfectly willing to accept as a peer any man of knightly birth who might acquire equal feudal power. One well-worn path—the service of the crown—had led many a landless English noble into the ranks of the baronage. If a member of the feudal aristocracy could not assure his son of a position in society by leaving him a fief, he could lay open before him the road to ultimate success by endowing him with the royal favor and the abilities required to turn it to account. In this latter respect the father of William Marshal was eminently successful.

The Marshal family first rose to prominence in one of the most tumultuous eras of England's history. Toward the end of November, 1135, Henry, king of England and duke of Normandy, the youngest son of William the Conqueror, after a strenuous day's hunting in the forest of Lyons regaled himself too generously with lampreys, a dish forbidden by his physician.¹ He died a week later. His death delivered his broad domains to the anarchy, inherent in the feudal system, which had lain dormant during the latter years of his vigorous

reign. The spontaneous outburst of feudal disorder following
the death of the master who had known how to control it was
aggravated by a disputed succession. After the death of his
sole legitimate son, Henry had compelled his prelates and
barons to do homage to his daughter, Matilda, as his rightful
heir. The widow of Henry V, Holy Roman Emperor, Matilda
was the wife of Geoffrey Plantagenet, count of Anjou, a man
who could well supply the masculine arm so sorely needed until
his young son, the future Henry II, should come of age. But
Theobald, count of Blois, and his brother Stephen, count of
Boulogne and Mortain, sons of Stephen, count of Blois and
Adela, daughter of William the Conqueror, laid claim to the
throne on the ground that they were the only surviving male
descendants of the Conqueror old enough to rule. According
to feudal custom their right as heirs male was superior to that
of Matilda herself, but inferior to that of her infant son, Henry
Plantagenet. But there were other considerations. On the one
hand the great men of England had sworn allegiance to Matilda
as her father's heir—on the other many claimed that the Eng­
lish crown was elective and that the oaths forced from them
by Henry were not binding. The country needed the hand of a
man, and few wanted the hand to be that of Geoffrey Planta­
genet. Confusion reigned. While the barons of Normandy
were acclaiming as their duke Count Theobald of Blois, Geof­
frey of Anjou was advancing on the duchy.2

The question was decided, at least temporarily, by the ener­
getic action of Count Theobald's brother, Stephen. From the
vantage point of his county of Boulogne, he promptly crossed to
England where he was accepted as king by a part of the baron­
age and duly crowned by the archbishop of Canterbury. His
brother Theobald immediately resigned his claim in his favor
and, after concluding a truce with the count of Anjou, retired
from Normandy. Stephen was in possession of the throne, but
his position was still far from secure. While he had a number

2 For a thorough study of the dispute concerning the succession see J. H.
Round, Geoffrey de Mandeville, Chapter I.
of staunch adherents, most of the barons remained aloof with the obvious intention of selling him their support at a high price in lands and privileges. For a time his cause prospered. Most of the important men of England assembled at his Easter court in 1136, and shortly thereafter the most powerful baron of the realm, Robert, earl of Gloucester, an illegitimate son of Henry I, made his submission. The apparent unanimity of the barons’ acceptance of Stephen was, however, a mirage that was soon to fade from view. Within a year Robert of Gloucester was in Normandy plotting with Matilda. Here and there throughout England and Normandy individual barons rose in revolt. Stephen’s efforts to restore order were of no avail—when one rebel was crushed several more appeared. The arrival in England in September 1139 of Matilda and Robert of Gloucester was the signal for the outbreak of civil war. From his bases at Bristol and Gloucester Earl Robert ravaged the lands of those who remained loyal to the king—a policy that was followed by the other partisans of Matilda operating from their various castles. Stephen occupied himself with retaliations on the lands of his enemies and attempts, usually fruitless, to reduce their castles. On February 2, 1141 he was defeated under the walls of Lincoln and fell into the hands of Robert of Gloucester who imprisoned him in Bristol castle. For the time being Matilda was mistress of England. Discouraged by the king’s capture, most of Stephen’s partisans hastened to submit to the countess of Anjou. Among these was John fitz Gilbert, the marshal of the court.

The origins of the Marshal family are veiled in obscurity. John’s father, Gilbert, was marshal of the court to King Henry I and held some land in Wiltshire. On one occasion father and son successfully maintained before the king’s court, probably in a trial by battle, their right to the family office which was


†Ibid., pp. 70-71.
contested by two other claimants. Before his elevation to the marshalship Gilbert may have been a royal serjeant in Wiltshire, but the family cannot be identified with that of any Domesday tenant in that county. When Gilbert died about 1130, John paid a relief of £22 13s 4d for his land and ministerium and an additional forty marks for the office of marshal of the court. At about the same time he married the daughter and heiress of Walter Pipard, a minor Wiltshire landholder. John Marshal, as he was usually styled, attested at least eight acts of Henry I—three in England and five in Normandy. While he was serving his master and acquiring a reputation as an energetic and capable soldier, his wife bore him two sons, Gilbert and Walter. He was not a man of wealth or position, but simply a trusted royal official.

John Marshal recognized Stephen as cheerfully as the majority of his fellow barons, and in 1137 he accompanied his new master on his expedition to Normandy. Five of the acts issued by the king during the first four years of his reign were attested by his marshal. John, however, was fully aware of the opportunities offered by the turbulent state of the country for improving his own fortunes by indulging in his favorite pastime—war. In 1138 he took possession of the castles of Marlborough and Ludgershall in Wiltshire and strengthened their fortifications. Acting in the king’s name, possibly at his express command, he was far more intent on consolidating his own position than on
furthering the cause of his master. His skill as a captain, his liberality to his followers, and his strong personality attracted to him a large number of knights. With a private army and two strongholds, John fitz Gilbert was in a position to dominate northern Wiltshire while he watched the course of events.

In 1140, the year after Matilda’s arrival in England, a Flemish mercenary named Robert fitz Hulburt, who had at one time or another been in the service of both Stephen and Robert of Gloucester, collected a party of kindred spirits and surprised the royal castle of Devizes which lay to the southwest of Marlborough. He suggested to John that adhering neither to Stephen nor Matilda, they form a partnership for plundering the region. As this was just about what John was doing, the idea cannot have shocked him greatly, but he neither trusted Robert nor saw any reason for sharing his spoils with him. He followed a far more profitable course. Enticing Robert into his castle with fair words, he threw him into prison and later sold him to Robert of Gloucester for five hundred marks. John’s position at this time was decidedly equivocal. Holding his castles for his own profit, he was willing to negotiate with Robert of Gloucester but hesitated to espouse openly Matilda’s cause. Too loyal or too wise to change his allegiance as frequently as did many of his fellow barons, he was far too canny to precipitate himself into the wrong camp.

The capture of King Stephen at Lincoln in February 1141 convinced John, as it did many more powerful barons, of the justice of Matilda’s cause. The king’s brother, Henry of Blois, bishop of Winchester, received the countess of Anjou in his city, and most of the great men of the land hastened to her court. There in the royal city of Winchester on April 8, 1141, Matilda was elected queen of England by the assembled magnates of the realm. But the citizens of London still hesitated to renounce their allegiance to Stephen, and it was not until about

June 20th that she was able to proceed to that city for her coronation in Westminster Abbey. On June 24th, before the coronation had taken place, the citizens, stirred up by Stephen's wife, rose against Matilda and drove her from the city. While the countess retired to Oxford to muster her forces, the bishop of Winchester joined his sister-in-law in plotting Stephen's release from captivity.\(^\text{13}\)

Toward the first of August Matilda left Oxford and marched on Winchester at the head of her partisans to the great surprise of the bishop who barely escaped through one gate while the countess rode in at the other. Making her headquarters in the royal castle, Matilda laid siege to the bishop's castle on the other side of the town. Meanwhile Henry of Blois summoned to its relief all those who were still loyal to King Stephen. His appeal was successful, and a formidable army was soon assembled under the command of Stephen's queen, also named Matilda. With Queen Matilda were a large force of Flemish mercenaries under their captain William des Ypres, the Londoners, and three powerful earls, Simon de St. Lis, earl of Northampton, Geoffrey de Mandeville, earl of Essex, and William de Warren, earl of Surrey. The queen then advanced to Winchester and proceeded to lay siege to the besieging force with such success that the countess and her army were soon in desperate straits for provisions.\(^\text{14}\)

On September 14th, the leaders of the countess' party decided to send a strong force in the direction of Ludgershall. The authorities differ as to the object of this expedition. While John of Hexham states that its purpose was simply to bring in a convoy of supplies, the Gesta Stephani asserts that the partisans of the countess intended to fortify the passage of the river Test at Wherwell in the hope of breaking the blockade of Winchester.\(^\text{15}\) The History furnishes what is probably the true

\(^{13}\) See Round, Geoffrey de Mandeville, pp. 55-122.


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explanation of this manoeuvre. Finding themselves hemmed in by superior numbers, the first care of Matilda's partisans was to secure her person from capture. John Marshal suggested that she take refuge in his fortress of Ludgershall.18 While the main body of the army under Robert of Gloucester occupied the attention of the royalists by continuing their siege of the bishop's castle, John with a force of some three hundred knights would escort Matilda to Ludgershall. Once their mistress was in safety, earl Robert and his followers would retire as best they could from their uncomfortable position.

The plan was almost frustrated by the alertness of the enemy. John and his party had barely commenced their journey when William des Ypres, the ablest of Queen Matilda's captains, started in pursuit with an overwhelmingly superior force. The countess, who was sitting sideways in her saddle, so greatly impeded the speed of her followers that the enemy gained on them rapidly. When they reached the village of Wherwell, John decided that the time had come for desperate measures. Persuading the countess to ride astride, he sent her on toward Ludgershall under the escort of her faithful retainer, Brian fitz Count, lord of Wallingford, while he and his knights prepared to dispute the passage of the river Test to cover her retreat. John and his men managed to hold their position long enough to allow Matilda to escape before they were crushed by the superior numbers of their adversaries. While some of his followers were killed and others captured, John himself with one knight took refuge in the church of Wherwell Abbey. Unwilling to face so redoubtable a warrior in his improvised stronghold, the enemy set fire to the church to drive him out. As the flames engulfed the building, John and his companion retired to the tower. The latter then suggested that the time had come to surrender, but John cheerfully offered to kill him with his own hands if he made any move in that direction. Finally the heat grew so intense that it melted the lead roof of the tower, and one of the drops of fluid metal fell on John putting out

18 Hist., 187-199.
one of his eyes. By that time the knights of William des Ypres were convinced that their enemy had perished in the burning church. While they rode back to Winchester rejoicing at the success of their expedition, John, wounded but still alive, made his way to his castle of Marlborough.17 Within a few days he was once more harassing the royalists. But in spite of John's good fortune and the escape of Matilda, the day had been a sad one for the countess' cause. In an attempt to retire from Winchester, the main body of the army was routed, and Robert of Gloucester was captured by Earl William de Warren. When a month or so later he was exchanged for King Stephen, both parties were just where they had been before the battle of Lincoln, and England was doomed to continued civil war.

The varying fortunes of his mistress had little effect on the prosperity of John fitz Gilbert. From his bases in the castles of Marlborough and Ludgershall he ravaged and plundered the lands of the royalist lords of the neighborhood. A perennial menace to the peace of the region, he was a most annoying thorn in the side of Stephen's party, and the loyal barons were determined to remove him. One in particular, Patrick, constable of Salisbury, a great landholder in Wiltshire, was most anxious to free the countryside from the ravages of the castellan of Marlborough. One day some time after the affair at Wherwell, John was at his castle of Ludgershall when Patrick and other royalist leaders sent word from Winchester that if he would await them, they would attack him next day. Encouraged by John's reply that he certainly would not wait for them, they prepared to move against him in force. At dawn the next day the royalist barons started the long ride from Winchester to Ludgershall. Confident that their enemy was retiring before their advance and unwilling to burden themselves on the journey, they did not put on their helmets or hauberks. But they had underestimated the daring of their opponent. Before

17 For an attempt to reconcile the conflicting accounts of the events of this day see Sidney Painter, "The Rout of Winchester", Speculum, VII (1932), 70-75.
they had gone very far, John and his knights, fully armed, sprang on them from ambush. Unarmed and confounded by the sudden apparition of an enemy whom they had believed to be miles away, the royalists were an easy prey. Killing, wounding, or capturing many of the knights, John and his men took a rich booty in the form of horses and arms. In that fierce combat Patrick of Salisbury lost many of his best men.\textsuperscript{18}

This affray merely increased Patrick's anxiety to put an end to John Marshal's activities. So energetically did he press his attacks on John's men and lands that the castellan of Marlborough longed for peace with his too powerful neighbor. Patrick on his side was far more interested in the peace and safety of his Wiltshire lands than in the cause of Stephen. Thus a compromise was reached. John Marshal put aside his wife and married the lady Sibile, a sister of Patrick, while the constable himself went over to Matilda and was, in due time, rewarded with the dignity of earl of Salisbury.\textsuperscript{19} This arrangement was eminently satisfactory from John's point of view. Not only had he removed his most dangerous enemy, but he had decidedly increased his social position by a marriage alliance with one of the great feudal families of England. Such advantages were well worth the trouble of changing wives.

The civil war was fulfilling John's fondest hopes. With Patrick of Salisbury as his ally he could plunder and oppress at will the people of Wiltshire, Berkshire, and Hampshire. The \textit{Gesta Stephani} kindly describes him as "a limb of hell and the root of all evil." It charges him with building adulterine castles, seizing the lands of both clergy and laity, and exacting contributions from the church.\textsuperscript{20} While the author of the \textit{Gesta} was a partisan of Stephen and hence prejudiced against John, there was undoubtedly much truth in his accusations. John needed money to pay and support his followers, and he doubtlessly levied it from the countryside. The castle at Newbury in

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Hist.}, 283-354.
\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Ibid.}, 360-375. Patrick was an earl by 1149 (\textit{Sarum Charters, Rolls Series}, p. 16).
\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Gesta Stephani}, pp. 107-8.
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Berkshire which was in his possession in 1152 may have been one of the adulterine castles referred to in the Gesta. All in all, John's position was excellent. From his castles of Marlborough, Ludgershall, and Newbury he could dominate the entire region. He was high in the favor of Matilda who demonstrated her regard for him by making his brother, William, her chancellor. Meanwhile in the security of one of his strongholds his new wife had faithfully performed her task of bearing him children—four sons and two daughters of which the two elder sons at least were born before 1152. As he already had two sons by his first wife, the doughty John was well supplied with progeny to enjoy the fruits of his labor.

The time was approaching when the partisans of Matilda were to be rewarded for their fidelity to her cause. In 1153 the civil war was brought to an end by a treaty between King Stephen and Henry Plantagenet, duke of Normandy, the eldest son of Matilda and Geoffrey of Anjou. By its terms Stephen was to rule in peace for the rest of his life, but Henry was to succeed him on the throne. Stephen died on October 25, 1154, and on December 19th Henry Plantagenet was crowned king of England. John Marshal had chosen the right party—the son of his patroness Matilda was master of England. The castellan of Marlborough did not fail to reap the reward of his faithful service to the house of Anjou. Henry gave him the manors of Marlborough, Wexcombe, and Cherhill in Wiltshire yielding a total annual revenue of eighty-two pounds. In 1158 the king gave Marlborough to Alan de Neville, but John retained Wexcombe and Cherhill until his death. In addition to these manors and the lands in Wiltshire which he had inherited from his father, he possessed some seven scattered knights fees. Thus he held land of the bishops of Winchester, Exeter, and Worces-

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21 See Matilda's charter to Aubrey de Vere (Round, *Geoffrey de Mandeville*, p. 182).
22 *Hist.*, 381-398; 480-492.
ter, of the abbot of Abingdon, and of three lay lords, Richard de Candos, Manasser Arsic, and Geoffrey de Mandeville. While in point of wealth he was still a very minor baron, he had materially increased the inheritance left him by Gilbert Marshal. Unfortunately the most valuable of his acquisitions, Wexcombe and Cherhill, were not hereditary grants and reverted to the crown at his death. Despite his energetic and faithful service to Henry I, Matilda, and Henry II he lacked enough lands to endow his sons. The eldest would be the king's marshal and a minor baron—the younger ones would have to shift for themselves.

If the sons of John Marshal inherited his qualities of mind and body, they would be well able to make their own way in the world. Little as is known of John's life, one can get a fairly clear impression of his character. He was known primarily for his ability as a soldier—one chronicler describes him as "a man illustrious as a knight." The History praises his liberality to his followers, a quality very necessary for a successful captain. William of Malmesbury states that he was "a man of great cunning" while the Gesta Stephani mentions his fondness for stratagems. Almost completely heartless, he was ruthless in his oppression of the countryside and cared but little for his own family. To make peace with Patrick of Salisbury he cheerfully gave up his wife and as we shall see, he valued a son far less than a castle. A skilful captain who knew how to attract men and hold their loyalty, a clever, unscrupulous, ruthless baron with tremendous daring, energy, and ambition—such is the picture of John Marshall.

Of far greater value to John's sons than the property or the personal qualities which they might inherit from him were the confidence and favor of Henry Plantagenet. From the point of view of a feudal sovereign fidelity was the supreme virtue—
an unreliable vassal was only more dangerous if he were a man of ability. While John Marshal had failed in loyalty to King Stephen, once he had given his allegiance to Matilda he had served her faithfully both in prosperity and in adversity. Considering the frequency with which such barons as Hugh Bigod and Geoffrey de Mandeville changed sides during the course of the civil war, John with his one change of allegiance was a model of fidelity. But his service to Matilda was more than passive loyalty to her cause. In the retreat from Winchester he risked his life to hold back the enemy while she made good her escape. To him the countess owed her control of northern Wiltshire and the adherence to her party of Patrick of Salisbury. When Henry Plantagenet came to the throne, he recognized and paid the debt which the house of Anjou owed to its marshal. If fate were kind enough to give John Marshal's sons his abilities, they were sure of an opportunity to use them in the king's service. Prowess and loyalty, the two knightly virtues through which John obtained the favor of Henry Plantagenet, were to be the most salient qualities of his son, William Marshal.