



# *The Deceiver*

An enquiry into the strange case of the murder in the cathedral of Canterbury,  
as a chamber play in one scene,  
(Canterbury, England, January 1171.)

Christian Lanciari 1988, translated 2017.

*Dramatis personae:*

A monk titled Monsignore, papal legate

Bertram, servant to the church

De Broc of Saltwood Castle

Bishop Jocelyn of Salisbury

Rosamund de Clifford, the King's mistress

King Henry II of England

*The Monk (sitting at a desk with a feather pen in his hand, dipping it in an inkhorn, writing a protocol, becomes aware of the audience and interrupts himself.)*

Pardon me. I did not notice the curtain was up. You must wonder what someone like me is doing here on a stage. I can assure you that I am not here by my own free will. God knows that I would rather be miles from here and anywhere on the significantly more secure continent. For after what has occurred here there is no holy man who can feel safe anymore on this distant and isolated island beyond the treacherous fogs of La Manche.

But since you now have disturbed me, I might as well let you hear the whole story.

*(lays his pen aside and rises from the desk.)*

What has happened here is a murder of the most hair-raising dimensions, and I am here to secretly investigate it. I have direct orders of the pope to be very discreet about it. Yes, what is it, Bertram? *(is disturbed by a servant in monk's outfit but of lower rank)*

*Bertram* Monsignore, Monsieur de Broc is here.

*Monk* Show him in at once. *(Servant leaves.)* The very man I wanted to see most of all. He is neither an eyewitness nor an accomplice. He has no part in the case but is probably still someone who knows too much. *(The servant enters de Broc.)*

Monsieur de Broc of Saltwood Castle, welcome.

*De Broc* You have the advantage over me that you know more of me than I of you. I don't even know who you are.

*Monk* It's of no importance who I am.

*De Broc* It must be if your mission is what I suspect.

*Monk* Monsieur de Broc, I know you are innocent of the death of Thomas Becket. You have nothing to fear.

*De Broc* I know. That's why I am here. But why this secrecy? What have *you* to fear?

*Monk* I am in England.

*De Broc* Is then England something to fear?

*Monk* I am in Canterbury.

*De Broc* That's not any reason for fear either. After the Becket murder no one in England has anything more to fear.

*Monk* You sound as if you approved of the murder.

*De Broc* It was unavoidable.

*Monk* No murder is unavoidable and least of all in a cathedral.

*De Broc* Apparently you did not know Becket.

*Monk* I knew him before he became Archbishop. He was an honest man very much cherished by everyone who knew him.

*De Broc* As an Archbishop he became the contrary.

*Monk* That is not indicated by the people's grief over his death. As an Archbishop he seems to have become unpopular only among villains in a position of power.

*De Broc* Take care, stranger. I could have you thrown into the English channel for good if it would be necessary.

*Monk* You English cannot hide a murder under new murders.

*De Broc (takes a seat)* Come now, honourable legate, let's take it easy and reason objectively. I think I now know who you are. You are on a special commission by the pope to investigate the facts of the case. I guess that the pope's purpose is to find out whether Becket was a saint or not.

*Monk* His death makes him automatically a saint. That's a matter of no discussion.

*De Broc* I can assure you he was no saint.

*Monk* That's another issue. Monsieur de Broc, I think I can be honest with you. You have guessed half of my mission. I am only here to investigate the case. Nothing else.

*De Broc* For what purpose?

*Monk* For what purpose was Becket murdered? The purpose of the Holy Father is to understand the motive.

*De Broc* Ask his murderers. Ask the King. Ask the Archbishop of York. Ask any other bishop in the country. All would answer the same thing: because he wanted it himself.

*Monk* Then we are faced with the issue: why would he have wanted it himself?

*De Broc* I can't help you with that. The only one who knew why was himself, and he is dead.

*Monk* To know that is my only mission, and as long as the issue is inconclusive I will have to go on digging in the leftovers. I would be grateful if you would help me in the only way you can.

*De Broc* Which is?

*Monk* Explain my mission to the King, to the Archbishop of York, to the other bishops and to Becket's murderers. If you understand my mission and want to help me, the others would certainly want to help me as well.

*De Broc* What would be the reward?

*Monk* Safe conduct by the pope. My mission has a theological character. I am in no position to judge anyone. I am only to investigate the truth of Becket's disposition and personality. All I really want to know is just one thing. That he will be canonised as a saint is inevitable. But the pope must know if he really was a saint or just a deceiver.

*De Broc* He was a deceiver.

*Monk* Prove it!

*De Broc* No one can prove it, but I think we could convince you with the help of the King and the bishops.

*Monk* I shall not leave Canterbury until I am convinced of either one or the other.

*De Broc* Monsignore, we accept the challenge. (*reaches forth his hand, the monk answers, and they shake hands.*) Who will you see next?

*Monk* Any of the guilty bishops.

*De Broc* It will be easy to pick one of the rabble. To the pope they would all gladly defend the necessary murder of a saint. (*exit*)

*Monk*            Whatever did he mean by that? "To the pope they would all gladly defend the necessary murder of a saint"? There is something very obscure here. (*sits down and continues working on his protocol.*)

(*Enter the servant*)

*Bertram*        Monsignore, his excellency the bishop of Salisbury.

*Monk*            Show him in. (*The servant leaves.*) Jocelyn of Salisbury, one of the more cautious, who shuts his eyes and keeps silent to anything as long as he may retain his position.

                    Welcome bishop Jocelyn of Salisbury.

*Salisbury*      Monsignore, I beg your forgiveness.

*Monk*            For what? Do you feel complicit to the murder? In that case you have nothing to beg forgiveness for. A feeling of guilt is a symptom of innocence.

*Salisbury*      I don't ask forgiveness for anyone who took part in the murder. I only beg forgiveness on behalf of England that this scandal has occurred.

*Monk*            So you ask forgiveness for the murder but not for the murderers?

*Salisbury*      Yes, that is about how we feel about the case.

*Monk*            If you don't accuse the murderers, how will you then defend them?

*Salisbury*      I defend no one.

*Monk*            Not even the King?

*Salisbury*      The King least of all, for he was the most innocent of all. He didn't ask anyone for the murder.

*Monk*            Still it was committed in his name.

*Salisbury*      I know nothing about that. Blasphemies are also committed in God's name.

*Monk*            So you place the King on level with God?

*Salisbury*      No man can be placed on level with God. Who is mortal and placed on level with God cannot survive.

*Monk*            Was that why Becket died??

*Salisbury*      Your guess is not far from the truth.

*Monk*            Was Becket then a blasphemer?

*Salisbury* He often took the name of God in his mouth to defend himself against the King.

*Monk* Was that blasphemous?

*Salisbury* It's difficult to say. The fact is that many felt seriously offended by it.

*Monk* And most of all the King?

*Salisbury* And most of all the King.

*Monk* Did he never express any direct wish that someone should deliver him of Becket?

*Salisbury* Only in anger.

*Monk* Never seriously?

*Salisbury* Never in my presence.

*Monk* You protect the King.

*Salisbury* Do you accuse him?

*Monk* I accuse no one. I am here to absolve Becket from all guilt of his own. Monsieur de Broc of Saltwood Castle did explain that to you, did he not?

*Salisbury* That's why I am here. I couldn't quite understand what he meant, but I became interested in the hidden meaning. Is it true that Becket might not be made a saint at all?

*Monk* The Church cannot afford not to make him a saint. The question is if he was.

*Salisbury* In that case I know the answer. He was a saint until he was made archbishop.

*Monk* In that case, what made him cease to be a saint?

*Salisbury* Thomas Becket before and after his appointment to archbishop of Canterbury were two different persons. Before, he was the best of humans, King Henry's ideal chancellor, his best friend and only brother, the only warrant for a good government of King Henry's realms, the unflinching good conscience of England, the man who resolved all problems, the people's favourite and protector, social minister and of justice and perfect in both capacities, the safety of all England; afterwards, the man who upsets everyone's circles, the impertinent provocateur, the conceited hypocrite, the constant troublemaker, the impossible fool, the diplomatic idiot, the autocratic extra pope, the infallible church dictator, the intolerant fanatic and the unbearable supremacist. And his actions as archbishop can only be excused by the fact that he never himself wanted to become archbishop.

*Monk* Why did he then accept the appointment?

*Salisbury* Search me. He never should have. The King forced it upon him, and he was too good to be able to decline. But what decided the issue was apparently that his predecessor appointed him for his successor on his death bed. Another contributing reason that should be observed was that he might have seen the appointment to archbishop as a means to realize himself as a martyr.

*Monk* Could you expound on that?

*Salisbury* From the moment when he saw no other choice than to accept the archbishop appointment he became a fatalist and always spoke of his own martyrdom as something inevitable.

*Monk* Was it some kind of infatuation or was there any logic behind?

*Salisbury* We couldn't disregard the logic of it from the day when the conflict between him and the King broke out, which then inexorably grew worse.

*Monk* Whose fault was the conflict, the King's or Becket's?

*Salisbury* The King saw it as Becket's fault. Becket did not blame the King.

*Monk* Was it Becket's then?

*Salisbury* The fact is that the King several times made great efforts to settle the conflict, but Becket had a strange ability to always inflame it again.

*Monk* How?

*Salisbury* He used God as a weapon against all mundane authorities and both against the King of England and King Lewis of France.

*Monk* Was he right in doing so?

*Salisbury* I can't tell. The fact is that it was politically very unwise and directly self-destructive.

*Monk* Would you attribute any guilt to the King for the murder of Becket?

*Salisbury* None at all. I already told you.

*Monk* Would you attribute any guilt to any English bishop?

*Salisbury* None at all.

*Monk* Who was guilty then? His four murderers?

*Salisbury* Yes, directly, but not indirectly.

*Monk* Who was then indirectly guilty?

*Salisbury* Becket himself.

*Monk* That was the conclusion I wanted to reach. So you could consider standing up to the pope for the defence of both the King, all bishops and even the four murderers?

*Salisbury* Yes.

*Monk* That answer weighs heavily against Becket. Who shall we then turn to who could defend him?

*Salisbury* I know one.

*Monk* Who?

*Salisbury* The King's mistress, lady Rosamund de Clifford.

*Monk* Whom the Queen tried to murder? Who gave the King a bastard?

*Salisbury* There is no evidence of the Queen's murder attempt. It's just a legend. At most, maybe she made herself guilty of blackmail.

*Monk* But what has this Lady Rosamund to do with Becket?

*Salisbury* She stood under his protection, and she was there when he died.

*Monk* Was she then Becket's mistress? Was she a motive for the King to wish for Becket's death?

*Salisbury* Absolutely not, although the Queen tried to make her so, which the King now never will forgive his Queen. She will probably be interred for life.

*Monk* The Queen?

*Salisbury* Yes.

*Monk* For Becket's death?

*Salisbury* For the King blaming her for Becket's death.

*Monk* This calls for some investigation. When can I meet this Lady Rosamund?

*Salisbury* At once. I have brought her with me. She is waiting outside.

*Monk (ringing a bell, enter the servant)* Please enter immediately Lady Rosamund de Clifford, whom the bishop of Salisbury has brought with him. *(exit servant)*

Is she worth the life of an archbishop?

*Salisbury* You will judge that for yourself. (*The servant brings on Rosamund de Clifford, bows and leaves.*)

*Monk* Fear nothing, my girl. You are under the protection of us both.

*Rosamund (curtsies)* I have nothing to fear from a servant of the Church sworn to celibacy.

*Salisbury* Let's say two.

*Rosamund (curtsies again)* Well then, I have nothing to fear from two servants of the Church.

*Monk* Did you know Thomas à Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury?

*Rosamund* Oh yes, he was very kind to me.

*Salisbury* Tell us what you know about the conflict between the Archbishop and the King.

*Rosamund* I am afraid that I was the one who caused it. You see, the King had seduced me, although I didn't know then he was the King – I thought it was the King's brother, for he was like the King, - and I even bore him a child, my beloved little Geoffrey, who everybody loves so much and even the King. But what was it I was going to say? Oh yes, when chancellor Becket had become archbishop, the King was with him just like before, that is, he joked and played with the archbishop just as if he was still only a chancellor, although he had become both archbishop and chancellor. You see, as chancellor he was the King's best pal. They drank together, they played chess together, the King told him his wicked stories and sometimes asked him to help him in awkward affairs, like when he was almost recognized and exposed when he had partied in a brothel incognito – perhaps you know all about what a King can get up to. In any case, the King continued like that and trusted his archbishop in all his intimate debaucheries like before, but then the archbishop tried to pull out. He took his position seriously, and the King hadn't counted on that. When the archbishop – may I say Thomas, although he is dead?

*Salisbury* Please do.

*Rosamund* When Thomas was asked to fix me a secret flat, he felt that was going too far and sent the King his chancellor's seal. I think it was then the King really went angry.

*Monk* The things you hear.

*Rosamund* The King was so angry I thought he would be boiling over. "That haughty bladder thinks he is something!" he cried. "How does he think he can treat me? Who the devil does he think he is when he so mortally dares to affront me who always stood up for him with everything?"

*Monk* So the reason for the division between him and the King was only that the Archbishop didn't feel able to continue as chancellor if he was asked to accommodate a mistress of the King's?

*Salisbury* Yes, that's how it started. Becket just snubbed the King for the first time in their common life.

*Monk* And the King could never forgive him that?

*Salisbury* Never completely. From there the conflict amounted.

*Monk* The King and Becket simply could not understand each other anymore. Please continue, my girl.

*Rosamund* But Thomas was still so good that he took care of me. He was very kind to Geoffrey, my boy, whom he praised as a beautiful baby, and everything went well until the Queen discovered us.

*Monk* What a story!

*Salisbury* The pope would laugh his sides off.

*Monk (reproving)* Hrmhm. Please go on, my girl.

*Rosamund* After much spying the Queen succeeded in finding me, and she almost scared the wits out of me. She came with all kinds of threats and demanded of me to give up all claims for my son with the King, although it was his son, and I conceded more than gladly, since I, like Thomas, considered all mundane power was of hell...

*Monk* Did the Archbishop say so?

*Rosamund* It was his hobby-horse. Therefore he never wanted to be archbishop, since he thought that title would give him a dangerous power, which he would rather do without...

*Monk (meaningly to Salisbury)* It seems as if the good Becket really had found himself a true lawyer.

*Rosamund* ...but just as I was to satisfy all the jealous Queen's demands, Thomas arrived interrupting us, and there was a terrible quarrel between him and the Queen. He thought she had come to murder me, and she became quite hysterical. "The King shall hear about this!" she yelled, and that was the last I saw of that terrible termagant.

*Monk* What was she going to tell the King?

*Rosamund* That I lived with Thomas.

*Salisbury* Good gracious!

*Monk*           What a kettle of fish!

*Rosamund*     She was quite demented.

*Monk*           And she told the King?

*Rosamund*     She must have done.

*Monk*           And what did the King say then?

*Rosamund*     I don't know. But then came the killers and murdered Thomas in the middle of his cathedral with all the people watching.

*Salisbury (to the monk)* You can imagine the extent of the misunderstanding.

*Monk*           I would like to vomit. Do you think I could speak with the King himself?

*Salisbury*     You have to ask His Majesty.

*Henry II (bashing the door and storming in)* Salisbury! And Rosamund! What are you doing here?

*Salisbury (collected)* Talking with our confessor.

*Henry*         I heard from that fool de Broc that the pope had sent some propitiator. Is this the fellow?

*Monk (rising and bowing)* At your service, Your Majesty.

*Henry*         Never think that I issued some kind of order of Becket's liquidation!

*Monk*           We never did.

*Henry*         He drove me mad, but I never wanted his death!

*Salisbury*     Still he was murdered in your name by four of your own knights.

*Henry*         I know, those common lackeys and clouts Fitzurse, Brito, Tracy and Morville. None of them has any brains. They misinterpreted my weakness. It's all the Queen's fault, and she shall pay for it for the rest of her life!

*Monk (with calm)* Tell us, Your Majesty, what really happened.

*Henry (takes a seat, and the others do the same)* Eleanor came to me in France. She was mad of jealousy, and she made me mad of jealousy. But the worst about it was that Becket had deceived me. I asked him to take care of you, Rosamund, but I didn't know that his new title of Archbishop of Canterbury already had turned him so supercilious. He snubbed me and resigned as my chancellor, which meant that he washed his hands of all my further affairs with women. Then I knew he was no longer human, which I could never forgive him. But I

never suspected, Rosamund, that he still obliged me and took care of you. Answer me now straight, Rosamund, mother of my most beautiful son, – did he more than just take care of you?

*Rosamund* Never. He was a perfect gentleman.

*Henry (staring hollowly at nothing)* Then everything is Eleanor's fault. She came to me like a mad but calculating witch and insinuated in the way of women that Rosamund had deceived me with Becket and that Becket had deceived me with Rosamund. And she did it so cleverly that I went mad. Those four miserable churls just happened to be with me at the time, and unfortunately my weakness ran out on my lips. I said something like: Can no one then deliver me from my life's constant nightmare that pest of a dog called Becket? And those four louts took me seriously. They thought they would be rewarded for granting my wish. Rewarded! Their reward shall be to spend the rest of their lives in intimate contact with the most terrible hag of all times Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine in her prison within four walls without a window and without even room for four beds! She could well please herself by trying to provoke them to treat her as she deserves! Those villains will end up tearing her limb from limb for a start and then each other! O Becket! And all because you preferred to oblige me in secret!

*(They all fall silent.)*

*Monk* King Henry, thanks for your visit. I think you can leave now. I think we now know all we needed to know.

*Rosamund* I never thought, Henry, that you were guilty of your pal's death.

*Henry* Thanks, Rosamund. You were better than my queen. Yes, anyone, any cursed whore anywhere is better than my queen.

*Salisbury* Allow us to bring you back to your convent, Rosamund.

*Rosamund* Yes, please, Sir, take me back to my convent.

*(Salisbury and Rosamund leave. Henry rises to follow them. He turns at the door.)*

*Henry* What will you tell the pope, brother legate?

*Monk* What do you suggest? That the Becket murder was just an ordinary sex scandal?

*Henry* I am afraid that's closest to the truth.

*Monk* England can do with a national saint, Sire. The Church at least can't afford to miss the chance of getting a well-established saint. Thomas Becket is solid. His nimbus will hold. Therefore I intend to say nothing to the pope.

*Henry*        Then we thank you, brother legate, for Thomas Becket.

*Monk*         Don't thank me. Thank his stupid killers.

*Henry*        There is only one thing I would ask of you and the pope and your Church.

*Monk*         How can we please you?

*Henry*        Pray for me when you all together are summoned to hell. *(leaves)*

*Monk*         Whatever did he mean by that? *(after some moments of reflection)*

Alas, I fear the English crown in time will become rather risky to our holy church. The risk is that these sensitive conscientious Englishmen at length will not be able to conceal that they see us through.

*Curtain.*