THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF HENRY VIII

With Notes by His Fool, Will Somers

A NOVEL

MARGARET GEORGE

Author of THE MEMOIRS OF CLEOPATRA and MARY QUEEN OF SCOTLAND AND THE ISLES
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—San Francisco Chronicle
ALSO BY MARGARET GEORGE

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MARGARET GEORGE

St. Martin's Griffin New York
Edward III

Edward IV

Edward V

Henry VII

James I of England
did long for martyrdom and went to ... heroic? ... lengths to achieve it. He literally forced the King to kill him. And
got that so-called heavenly crown he lusted after as old Harry had lusted after Anne Boleyn. Harry found the object
of his lust not as palatable as he had imagined; let us hope More was not similarly disillusioned once he attained his
desire.

I forget. I must not make such jests with you. You believe in that Place too. Believers are all alike. They seek—
what was More’s book title? —Utopia. It means No Place, you know.

As I said, I live quietly here in my sister’s household in Kent, along with my niece and her husband. They have
a small cottage, and Edward is ... I hesitate to write it ... a gravedigger and tombstone carver. He makes a good living
at it. (Just such puns used to be my living.) But he tends his garden as others do (we had wonderful roses last year),
plays with his children, enjoys his meals. There is nothing the least death-like about him; perhaps only that sort can
stomach such a profession. Although I think being a jester is equally bound up with death. Or providing a scent to
cover it, anyway.

I came here before Edward had his coronation. The boy-King and his pious advisers had no need of a jester, and I
would have stood about like a loose sail luffing in the wind. Neither is Queen Mary’s court the sort of place where
one makes jokes.

Do you remember, Catherine, that summer when you and I and all your Boleyn family and the King gathered at
Hever? You and your brother Henry were brought to see your Boleyn grandparents. Hever is delightful in the
summer. It was always so green, so cool. And the gardens had truly the best musk-roses in England. (Do you
perchance remember the name of your grandparents’ gardener? I am not far from Hever now, and perhaps could
consult with him... assuming he is still living.) And it was an easy day’s ride from London. Do you remember how
the King used to stand on that hill, the first one from which you could glimpse Hever, and blow his hunting horn? You used to wait for that sound, and then go running to meet him. He always brought you something, too. You were the first Boleyn grandchild.

Remember your uncle George that summer? He was trying so hard to be the gentil parfit knight. He practised riding about in his armour, ran lists against trees, and fell in love with that sloppy girl at The White Hart. She gave her favours to every man who frequented the tavern, except George, I think. She knew that to do so would stop the flow of sonnets he wrote exalting her purity and beauty, and she enjoyed laughing at them.

Your mother Mary and her husband were also there, of course. I always thought your mother more than her sister Anne’s equal in beauty. But of a different sort. She was sun and honey; the other was the dark of the moon. We were all there that summer before everything changed so horribly. The tide has indeed gone out, leaving that little time as a brave clump of ground projecting above the muddy, flat rest of it.

I am rambling. No, worse, I grow romantic and sentimental, something I abhor in others and will not tolerate in myself. Now, to return to the important thing: the legacy. Tell me how I may get it safely into your hands across the Channel. It is, unfortion against destruction. In fact, it can all too easily be destroyed by any number of things—sea, fire, air, or even neglect.

I pray you make haste with your reply. I am distinctly less curious to discover at first hand the shape and disposition of my Maker than are you and others of your sect, but I fear I may be honoured with a celestial interview in the near future. The Deity is notoriously capricious in his affections.

Ever your
Will Somers

Catherine Carey Knollys to William Somers:

June 11, 1557. Basle.

My dearest Will:

I beg your forgiveness in taking so long to place this answer in your hands. Messengers who will openly carry things from England to us here in exile are few in these times; the Queen makes sure of that. However, I trust this carrier and equally trust your discretion in destroying this letter once you have read it.

I am distressed to hear of your ill health. But you, as King Henry’s favorite jester, were ever prone to exaggeration in your talk, and I pray God this is but a further example of your art. Francis and I have prayed for you nightly. Not in the idolatrous Mass, which is worse than worthless, it is a travesty (O, if the Queen should see this!), but in our private devotions. We do not do badly here in Basle. We have enough clothes to keep us warm, enough food to keep us fit but not fat; more would be an affront to God, many of whose poor creatures are in bodily need. But we are rich in the only thing worth having—the freedom to follow our consciences. You no longer have that in England. The Papalists would take it all away. We pray daily for that tyranny to be lifted from your shoulders, and a Moses to arise to lead you from spiritual bondage.

But about the legacy. I am curious. My father died in 1528, when I was but six. Why should you wait near thirty years to hand it on? It could not have been scurrilous or treasonous. And that is another thing that puzzles me. You spoke of his “enemies.” He had no enemies. William Carey was a good friend to the King, and a gentle man. I know this not only from my mother, but from others. He was well regarded at court, and his death from the plague saddened many. I am grateful that you remember now to do it, but if I had had it earlier... No, I do not blame you. But I would have known my father better, and sooner. It is good to meet one’s father before one becomes an adult oneself.

Yes, I remember Hever in the summer. And my uncle George, and you, and the King. As a child I thought him handsome and angelic. Certainly he was beautifully made (the Devil did it) and had a certain presence about him, of majesty I should say. Not all kings have it; certainly Edward never did, and as for the present Queen...

I regret to say I cannot remember the name of the gardener. Something with a J? But I do remember that garden, the one beyond the moat. There were banks of flowers, and he (of the forgotten name) had arranged it so that there was always something in bloom, from mid-March to mid-November. And great quantities, too, so that the little
manor of Hever could always be filled with masses of cut flowers. Strange that you should mention musk-roses; my favourites were the her. It is extremely valuable, and many people would like to destroy it. They know of its existence but so far have confined their efforts to asking the Duke of Norfolk about it, the remnants of the Seymour family, and even Bessie Blount’s widower, Lord Clinton. Sooner or later they will sniff their way to me here in Kent.

There, I have told it all, except the last thing. The journal was written not by William Carey, your supposed father, but by your true father: the King.

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Catherine Knollys to Will Somers:
September 30, 1557. Basle.

Will:

The King was not—is not!—my father. How dare you lie so, and insult my mother, my father, myself? So you would rake up all those lies from so long ago? And I thought you my friend! I do not wish to see the journal. Keep it to yourself, along with all your other misguided abominations of thought! No wonder the King liked you so. You were of one mind: low-minded and full of lies. You will not muddy my life with your base lies and insinuations. Christ said to forgive, but He also told us to shake the dust off our feet from towns filled with liars, blasphemers, and the like. Just so do I shake you from mine.

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Will Somers to Catherine Knollys:
November 14, 1557. Kent.

Catherine, my dear:

Restrain yourself from tearing this letter to pieces in lieu of reading it. I do not blame you for your outburst. It was magnificent. A paradigm of outraged sensibility, morality, and all the rest. (Worthy of the old King himself! Ah, what memories it brought back!) But now admit it: the King was your father. This have you known always. You speak of dishonouring your father. Will you dishonour the King by your refusal to admit what is? That was perhaps his cardinal virtue (yes, my lady, he had virtues) and genius: always to recognize the thing as it was, not as it was generally assumed to be. Did you not inherit that from him? Or are you like your half-sister Queen Mary (I, too, regret your relationship with her), blind and singularly unable to recognize even things looming right before her weak eyes? Your other half-sister, Elizabeth, is different; and I supposed you were also. I supposed it was the Boleyn blood, added to the Tudor, that made for a uniquely hard, clear vision of things, not muddied by any Spanish nonsense. But I see I was wrong. You are as prejudiced and stupid and full of religious choler as the Spanish Queen. King Harry is dead indeed, then. His long-sought children have seen to that.

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Catherine Knollys to Will Somers:
January 5, 1558. Basle.

Will:

Your insults must be answered. You speak of my dishonouring the King my father. If he were my father, did he not dishonour me by never acknowledging me as his own? (He acknowledged Henry Fitzroy, made him Duke of
Richmond—the offspring of that whore Bessie Blount!) Why, then, should I acknowledge or honour him? First he seduced my mother before her marriage, and now you say he subsequently committed horror wherever he went. The only good he did, he did merely as a by-product of evil: his lust for my aunt, Anne Boleyn, caused him to break from the Pope. (Thus the Lord used even a sinner for His purposes. But that is to the Lord’s credit, not the King’s.) I spit on the late King, and his memory! And as for my cousin, Princess Elizabeth (the daughter of my mother’s sister, naught else), I pray that she may... no, it is too dangerous to put on paper, regardless of the trustworthiness of the messenger or the receiver.

Go thy ways, Will. I want no further correspondence from you.

Will Somers to Catherine Knollys:

March 15, 1558. Kent.

Catherine:

Bear with me yet a little. In your wonderfully muddled letter I sensed one essential question; the rest was mere noise. You asked: If he were my father, did he not dishonour me by never acknowledging me as his own?

You know the answer. He was taken out of his true mind by that witch (now I must insult you again) Anne Boleyn. She tried to poison the Duke of Richmond; would you have had her try her hand on you as well? Yes, your aunt was a witch. Your mother quite otherwise. Her charms were honest, and her thoughts and manner honest as well. She suffered for it, while your aunt-witch thrived. Honesty seldom goes unpunished, and as you know, your mother did not have an easy berth in life. He would have acknowledged you, and perhaps your brother as well (though he was less certain of his parentage), if the Witch had not prevented him. She was jealousical purposes, forbidden. Ostensibly this was for our protection. But it had the effect of cloistering us. No monk lived as austere, as circumscribed, as dull a life as I did for those ten years.

And that was fitting, as Father had determined that I must be a priest when I grew up. Arthur would be King. I, the second son, must be a churchman, expending my energies in God’s service, not in usurping my brother’s position. So, from the age of four, I received churchly training from a series of sad-eyed priests.

But even so, it was good to be a prince. It was good for elusive reasons I find almost impossible to set down. For the history of the thing, if you will. To be a prince was to be—special. To know when you read the story of Edward the Confessor or Richard the Lionheart that you had a mystic blood-bond with them. That was all. But enough. Enough for me as I memorized reams of Latin prayers. I had the blood of kings! True, it was hidden beneath the shabby clothes, and would never be passed on, but it was there nevertheless—a fire to warm myself against.
I should never have begun in such a manner. These jumbled thoughts cannot stand as a passable collection of impressions, let alone a memoir. I must put things in some reasonable order. Wolsey taught me that: always in order.

Have I forgotten so soon?

I began it (I mean this journal) in a vain attempt to soothe myself several weeks ago while suffering yet another attack from my cursed leg. Perhaps I was so distracted by the pain that I was incapable of organizing my thoughts. Yet the pain has passed. Now if I am to do this thing, I must do it properly. I have talked about “Father” and “the King” and “Arthur” without once telling you the King’s name. Nor which ruling family. Nor the time. Inexcusable!

The King was Henry VII of the House of Tudor. But I must not say “House of Tudor” so grandly, because until Father became King it was not a royal house at all. The Tudors were a Welsh family, and (let us be honest) Welsh adventurers at that, relying rather heavily on romantic adventures of both bed and battle to advance themselves.

I am well aware that Father’s genealogists traced the Tudors to the dawn of British history, had us descended directly from Cadwaller. Yet the first step to our present greatness was taken by Owen Tudor, who was clerk of the wardrobe to Queen Catherine, the widow of Henry V. (Henry V was England’s mightiest military king, having conquered a large portion of France. This was some seventy years before I was born. Every common Englishman knows this now, but will he always?) Henry and the French king’s daughter married for political reasons and had a son: Henry VI, proclaimed King of England and France at the age of nine months. But Henry V’s sudden death left his twenty-one-year-old French widow alone in England.

Owen’s duties were such that he was in constant company with her. He was comely; she was lonely; they wed, secretly. Yes, Catherine (daughter to one king, wife to another, mother of yet a third) polluted—so some say—her royal blood with that of a Welsh rogue. They had two sons, Edmund and Jasper, half-brothers to Henry VI.

But Catherine died in her mid-thirties, and Owen’s sufferance was up. Henry VI’s Protector’s Council ordered “one Owen Tudor the which dwelled with the said Queen Catherine” to appear before them, because “he marriage with the Queen to intermix his blood with the royal race of Kings.” Owen first refused to come, but later came and was imprisoned in Newgate twice, twice escaping. He was elusive and supremely clever. After his second escape he made his way back to Wales.

Once Henry VI came to maturity and discarded his Protector, he treated Owen’s two sons kindly. He created Edmund Earl of Richmond, and Jasper Earl of Pembroke. And Henry VI—poor, mad, sweet thing—even found a proper Lancastrian bride for his half-brother Edmund: Margaret Beaufort.

To recount these histories is like unravelling a thread: one means only to tell one little part, but then another comes in, and another, for they are all part of the same garment—Tudor, Lancaster, York, Plantagenet.

So I must do what I dreaded: go back to Edward III, innocent source of all the late troubles. I say innocent because what king does not wish an abundance of sons? Yet Edward’s troubles, and those of the next generations, stemmed from his very prolificness.

Edward, who was born almost two hundred years before me, had six sons. A blessing? One would have thought so. But in truth they were a curse that echoes d lost none: a military genius.

The strands of all three families were, as I said, interwoven. It is difficult for me to tell of the cruelties visited by one upon the other, as the blood of all now flows in my veins.

Yes, Edward IV was a great fighter. I can take pride in that, as he was my grandfather. Yet my great-grandfather was fighting against him, aided by my great-uncle, Jasper Tudor. They were crushed, and Owen was captured after the Battle of Mortimer’s Cross in 1461. He was executed—by Edward’s orders—in the marketplace of Hereford. Until the axeman appeared to do his office, Owen could not believe he would actually die. The headsman ripped off the collar of Owen’s doublet, and then he knew. He looked about and said, “That head shall lie in the stock that was wont to lie on Queen Catherine’s lap.” Afterwards a madwoman came and took his head and set a hundred candles burning about it.

I tell this so that when I recount that Owen’s eldest son, Edmund, married Margaret Beaufort, thirteen-year-old heiress to the claims of the House of Lancaster, you will not imagine they lived quietly. The battles raged all about them. Edmund escaped from all these cares by dying at the age of twenty-six, leaving his wife great with child. That child was my father, born when his mother was but fourteen. It was January 28, 1457.
WILL SOMERS:

Seeing this date chilled me. It was also on January 28 that Henry VIII died. In 1547—the reversal of the numbers it is like a parenthesis. The father born, the son dying.... Yet I do not believe in such things. I leave them for Welshmen and the like.

HENRY VIII:

She named him Henry, a royal Lancastrian name. Yet at that time he was by no means an important heir, merely a remote figure in the overall confusing fabric. This in spite of being the grandson of a queen (on his father’s side) and the great-great-great-grandson of a king (on his mother’s). But as the battles went on, those with higher claims to the throne were killed (Henry VI’s only son, Edward, and Richard, Duke of York), and each battle advanced Henry Tudor closer to the throne. In the Battle of Tewkesbury in 1471, every male Lancaster was destroyed, save Henry Tudor. And he fled to Brittany with his uncle Jasper.

Henry VI was done to death in the Tower that same year. The Yorkists did it. It was a mercy: Henry VI was, perhaps, a saint, but he was not meant to be King. His poem,

\[
\text{Kingdoms are but cares} \\
\text{State is devoid of stay} \\
\text{Riches are ready snares} \\
\text{And hasten to decay,}
\]

proves that. A Yorkist sword released him from the cares of his kingdom, and I cannot but say they did him a good office.

But my father’s tale is also long to tell: there is nothing simple in these histories. Father went into exile, crossing the Channel to Brittany, where the good Duke Francis welcomed him—for a fee. Edward IV pursued him, tried to have him abducted and murdered. Father outsmarted him—Edward was stupid—and outlived him, watching and waiting in Brittany e of York. They say he had them smothered as they slept, and buried them somewhere in the Tower.

Many men smarted under Richard’s rule and fell away, joining Father in Brittany until he had a court in exile. And in England there was such discontent that rebellious subjects invited Father to come and claim the throne.

He tried first in 1484; but fortune was against him, and Richard caught and executed his principal supporter, the Duke of Buckingham. The next year things were again ready, and Father dared not wait longer, lest what support he had erode. He set sail and landed in Wales with an army of only two thousand men, against a known ten thousand for Richard III.

What compelled him to do this? I know the story well, yet I also know Father: cautious to the point of inaction, suspicious, slow to decisions. Still, at the age of twenty-eight he risked everything—his life as well—on what looked to be a hopeless venture. Two thousand men against ten thousand.

He was greeted wildly in Wales, and men flocked to join him, swelling his ranks to five thousand, still only half the number of Richard’s forces. Still he pressed on through the August-yellow fields, until at last they met a few miles from Leicester, at a field called Bosworth.

There was fierce fighting, and in the end some of Richard’s men held back. Without them the battle was lost. Richard was slain, hacked in a dozen places by his own lost supporters as he sought to attack Father himself.

They say the crown flew off Richard’s head in the heat of battle and landed in a gorse bush and that Father took it from there and placed it upon his own head amidst cries of “King Henry! King Henry!” I doubt the truth of this, but it is just the sort of story that is repeated and eventually believed. People like simple stories and will twist even the profound into something plain and reassuring. They like to believe that one becomes king by a Sign, and not by anything as inconclusive or confusing as a mêlée. Hence, the crown in the bush.

In fact, it was not simple at all. Despite the battle and the crown in the divinely placed bush, there remained many recalcitrant people who simply would not accept Henry Tudor as King. True it was that he had royal blood, and had made the late Yorkist King’s daughter his wife, but diehard Yorkists were not so easily placated. They wanted a
genuine Yorkist on the throne, or no one. Thus the treasons began.

There were no Yorkists left, but the traitors would resurrect the smothered sons of Edward IV (my mother’s brothers). They did not dare to “discover” the eldest, Edward; even they were not that bold. Richard, the younger, was their choice. Each coterie of traitors found a ready supply of yellow-haired boys willing to impersonate him.

The first was Lambert Simnel. The Irish crowned him as Richard IV. Father was amused and tolerant. After crushing the uprising in the Battle of Stoke in 1487, he appointed the erstwhile King a cook in the royal kitchens. Working before the hot ovens rapidly deflated his royal demeanour.

The next, Perkin Warbeck, was less amusing. The Scots hailed him and provided him with a hightborn wife. Father executed him.

And yet the uprisings went on. There was a bottomless well of traitors and malcontents. No matter what Father did, there were always dissatisfied groups somewhere, plotting for his overthrow.

In the end it made him bitter. I can see that now, and understnext;Ever since I was five years old I have been either a prisoner or a fugitive,” he once said, and even after he had supposedly won his right to peace, they would not let him be. They meant to drive him from the throne, or into his grave.

Father married his archenemy’s daughter. He hated Edward IV, yet he had made a solemn vow in Rennes Cathedral that should his invasion of England be successful, he would wed Elizabeth, Edward’s daughter.

Why? Simply because she was the heiress to the Yorkist claims, as he was of the Lancastrian. He had never even seen her and knew nothing about her person. She could have been crook-backed or squint-eyed or pockmarked. Yet marrying her would end the wars. That was all he cared about.

As I said, he despised Edward IV. And why not? Edward had tried to have him assassinated. Edward had killed his grandfather Owen. Yet he would marry his daughter.... He understood the times. You murdered people, and it was like cultivating a garden: you nipped tender shoots, or the whole trunk, of whatever plant you perceived might be a threat later in the growing season.

I put a stop to all that. No one is put to death surreptitiously in England now. There are no more pillow-murders or poisonings or midnight stabbings. I count as one of the great achievements of my reign that this barbarism has passed forever.

But I was speaking of Father’s marriage. Elizabeth, Edward’s daughter, was brought out of sanctuary (where she and her mother had hidden from the ravages of Richard III) and given to him as part of the spoils of war.

Thus Elizabeth of York married Henry Tudor. Royal artists created an especial emblem for them: the so-called Tudor rose, combining the red of Lancaster with the white of York. Less than a year later they had their sought-for heir: Arthur. They named him thus to avoid all “claimed” names (Henry was Lancastrian, Edward and Richard Yorkist), and to hark back to the legendary King Arthur. That would offend no one while promising fine things.

Then followed other children. After Arthur, Margaret (named for the King’s mother). Then me. (It was safe to give the third child a partisan name like Henry.) After me, Elizabeth. Then Mary. Then Edmund. Then ... I cannot recall her name, if indeed she had one. She lived but two days.

Father was twenty-nine when he married. By the time he was forty there remained to him four living children—two princes and two princesses—and the survival of his new dynasty seemed assured.

I am told my father was handsome and popular when he first came to the throne. People saw him as an adventurer, and the English always like rogues and heroes. They cheered him. But over the years the cheering faded as he did not respond to it. He was not what they had expected after all. He was not bluff like Edward nor rough and plain as a soldier-king should be. In fact, he was hardly English at all in his thinking, as he had spent most of his life outside the country, or in Wales, which was just as bad. He was suspicious of people, and they sensed it and finally withdrew their affections.

Here I am describing Father as an historian would, trying to note how he looked and how he ruled. Of course, as a child I saw and understood none of this. Father was a tall, thin man whom I saw but rarely, and never alone. Sometimes he would come to where we—the four children—lived, and pay one of his unannounced visitroops, calling on us for Latin or sums. Usually his mother, Margaret Beaufort, was with him, and she was a tiny woman who always wore black and had a sharp face. By the time I was eight years old, I had reached her height and could look her directly in the eye, although I disliked her eyes. They were bright and black. She always asked the sharpest questions and was most dissatisfied with the answers, because she fancied herself a scholar and had even left her
husband for a time to go and live in a convent so that she could read all day.

It was she who selected our tutors and guided our education. Of course, the best tutors went to Arthur and the second-rank ones served the rest of us. Occasionally I shared some tutors with Arthur. Bernard André taught us both history, and Giles D’Ewes taught us French. And John Skelton, the poet laureate, began by teaching Arthur but later became my own tutor.

Skelton was a profligate priest, and we liked each other immediately. He wrote coarse satires and had a mistress; I thought him marvellous. Until then I had assumed that to be scholarly, one must be like my grandmother Beaufort. The black, the convent, the books were all linked in my mind. Skelton broke those links. Later, in my own reign, scholarship was freed completely from the convents and monasteries. (And not simply because I closed the monasteries!)

We studied Latin, of course; French, Italian, mathematics, history, poetry. I received an extra heavy dose of Scriptures, theology, and churchmen, as I was earmarked for the Church. Well, no learning is ever wasted. I made extensive use of the knowledge later, though in a way that would have horrified my pious grandmother and her chosen tutors.

How we lived: forever moving. Father had—or, rather, the Crown had—eight palaces, and with every change in season, the royal household would move. But we, the King’s children, seldom lived in the same palace as the King and Queen. They preferred us to live in the country, or as near to open fields and clean air as possible. Eltham Palace was an ideal site. It was small and set in green fields, but only three miles from Greenwich and the Thames. It had been built for Edward IV, my pretty grandfather, and was all of stone, with a quiet moat and well-kept gardens. It was too small to house a full court, but was perfect for royal children and our reduced household of cooks and nurses and guards.

And we were guarded. In our pretty little walled garden we might as well have been in farthest Scotland rather than ten miles from the center of London. No one was allowed to come and see us without Father’s permission; he remembered the fate of the Yorkist princes too well. We did not, and found all the restrictions irksome.

I was sure I could defend myself against any assassin. I practised with sword and bow and soon became aware of how strong and dexterous I was for my age. I almost longed for an evil agent to make an attempt on me, so that I could prove myself to Father and win his admiration. But no obedient murderer appeared to grant my childish wish.

We were to take exercise outdoors. As I said, I early discovered my facility in physical things. I rode easily and well, from the beginning. I am not boasting; if I am to record everything, I must be as honest about my talents as I am about my weaknesses. It is this: I was gifted in things of the body. I had more than strength, I had innate skill as well. Everything came easily to me, on the field or in the saddle. By the time I was seventeen I was one of the ablest men in England—with the longbow, the sword, the lance; ing e made a gesture, and the crowd turned obediently toward the main gate.

Margaret and Brandon and I stood where we were. As the crowd thinned, we saw what was lying on the ground beneath the dogs: the body of a lion. It was maimed and bloody.

“What is it?” cried Margaret. “Why is the lion dead? Why are the dogs hanged?” She seemed merely curious, not sickened. I myself felt a great revulsion.

“The King set the dogs upon the lion. He meant it as a demonstration of how the King of Beasts can destroy all enemies. Well, the dogs had the best of it. They killed the lion instead. So the King had to punish the dogs as traitors. It was the only way to salvage his lesson.” Brandon chose his words carefully, but the tone of his voice told me he did not like the King. Immediately I liked Brandon better.

“But the King—” I began cautiously.

“Is very concerned about his throne,” replied Brandon, incautiously. “He has just gotten word of another uprising. The Cornish this time.” He looked around to be sure we were not overheard. “This is the third time....” His voice trailed off. Or perhaps he sensed a coming welter of questions from Margaret.

But her head was turned toward the crowd and the noise that met Arthur’s arrival into the manor grounds. The gates swung open, and Arthur rode in, clutching his saddle. He winced when he saw the eager faces and large numbers of people. A great shout arose on cue. The King stepped forward and embraced Arthur, almost dragging him from his horse. For a moment they clung together, then the King turned to the people.

“Now my holidays will begin indeed!” he proclaimed. “Now that my son is here! My heir,” he said pointedly.

He never noticed that Margaret and I were there; and a few minutes later we were able to slip easily in with our
own party and endure nothing worse than a tongue-clucking from our nurse, Anne Luke.

As we passed through the courtyard, I saw the body of the lion being dragged away.

We were shown to our quarters, and our household servants began unpacking and assembling the furniture we had carted with us. Soon silver ewers of heated water were brought for us to wash ourselves with. The festivities were to begin that evening with a banquet in the Great Hall.

Then Nurse Luke informed me that Mary and I were not to go.

I could understand why Mary must remain in the nursery—she was but two! But I was seven and surely should be allowed to go. All year I had assumed that when this season’s Christmas revels began I would be part of them. Had I not reached the age of reason with my birthday that past summer?

The disappointment was so crushing that I began to howl and throw my clothes upon the floor. It was the first time I had ever shown an open display of temper, and everyone stopped and stared at me. Well, good! Now they would see I was someone to take notice of!

Anne Luke came rushing over to me. “Lord Henry! Stop this! This display”—she had to duck as I flung a shoe at no one in particular—“is most unlike you!” She tried to restrain my arms, but I flailed out at her. “It is unworthy of a Prince!”

“A Prince old enough to attend formal banquets does not throw his clothes on the floor and scream like a monkey.” Satisfied that I was under control, she lumbered up from her knees.

Now I knew what I had to do. “Nurse Luke, please,” I said sweetly, “I want so badly to go. I have waited for it all year. Last year he promised”—this was pure invention, but it might serve—“and now he makes me wait in the nursery again.”

“Perhaps His Majesty has heard about what you and Margaret did this afternoon,” she said darkly. “Running ahead of the party.”

“But Margaret is going to the banquet,” I pointed out, logically.

She sighed. “Ah, Henry. You are a one.” She looked at me and smiled, and I knew I should have my way. “I will speak to the Lord Chamberlain and ask if His Majesty would reconsider.”

Happily I began picking up the strewn clothes, already planning what I should wear. So that was the way it was done: first a show of temper, then smiles and favour. It was an easy lesson to learn, and I had never been slow at my lessons.

At seven that evening, Arthur and Margaret and I were escorted into the Great Hall for the banquet. In the passageway outside I saw a band of musicians practicing. They hit many sour notes and looked apologetic as we passed by.

As part of our education, all Father’s children were tutored in music. We were expected to be able to play one instrument. This was a source of much struggle to Arthur and Margaret. I, on the other hand, had taken as readily to the lute as to horses, and loved my hours of instruction. I wanted to learn the virginals, the flute, the organ—but my tutor told me I was to wait and learn one instrument at a time. So I waited, impatiently.

I had expected the King’s musicians to be well trained, and now disappointment flooded me. They were little better than I.

WILL:

This is misleading, as Henry was extraordinarily talented. Most likely at seven he performed better than slipshod adult musicians.

HENRY VIII:
As we came into the Hall there was a fair blaze of yellow light. I saw what appeared to be a thousand candles on the long tables that ran along the sides of the hall, with the royal dais and table in between. There were white cloths for the full length of the tables and golden plate and goblets, all winking in the unsteady candlelight.

As soon as we entered, a man appeared at our sides and bent over and spoke to Arthur. Arthur nodded and the man—all richly dressed in burgundy velvet—steered him toward the royal dais where he would take his place with the King and Queen.

Almost at the same time, another man appeared and addressed himself to Margaret and me. This one was somewhat younger and had a round face. “Your Graces are to be seated near the King at the first table. So that you may see the jester and all the mimes clearly.” He turned and led us through the gathering number of p welcomed his beloved son and heir, Arthur—here he made Arthur stand so that all could see him—to the revels. He made no mention of Margaret and me.

Servers brought us watered wine, and the courses began: venison, crayfish, prawns, oysters, mutton, brawn, conger-eel, carp, lamprey, swan, crane, quail, dove, partridge, goose, duck, rabbit, fruit custard, lamb, manchet, and so on, until I lost count. After the lampreys I could take no more and began declining the dishes.

“You are not supposed to take more than a bite of each dish,” lectured Margaret. “It is not like eating in the nursery! You filled your belly with prawns, and now there’s no room for anything else!”

“I did not know,” I mumbled. I was feeling drowsy from the wine (watered as it was), the late hour, and my full stomach. The flickering candles before me and all up and down the table were affecting me oddly. I had to struggle to stay awake and upright. I hardly saw the grand dessert brought in, a sugared replica of Sheen Manor, and I certainly did not want any of it. My only concern was to keep from slipping sideways, lying down under the table, and falling fast asleep.

Then the tables were cleared and jesters and mimes came in for what seemed an interminable time. I could not focus on them and just prayed for it to be over before I disgraced myself by collapsing and proving Father right — that I had been too young to attend the banquet.

WILL:

A candid opinion of how jesters are perceived by their audiences. It was always a mistake to have us follow a banquet; full stomachs make people unreceptive to anything pertaining to the mind. After eating, a man does not want to laugh, he wants to sleep. I have always believed that in place of the old Roman vomitorium (where they could relieve their distended bellies) there should be a dormitorium, where people could sleep and digest. Perhaps royal architects could incorporate this design in their plans. It should, of course, be directly off the Great Hall.

HENRY VIII:

At last it ended. The jesters exited, tumbling and throwing paper roses and paste beads out over the spectators. The King rose and prodded Arthur to do likewise. No one in the Hall was permitted to stir until the Royal Family had left the dais, and I wondered what Margaret and I were to do as I saw the King, the Queen, and Arthur making their way out. Suddenly the King turned and, with a solemn nod, indicated that Margaret and I were to join them. He had known all along, then, that we were present.

They took no notice of us as we trailed along behind them. The King was busy talking to Warham, and the Queen walked alone, seemingly lost in her own thoughts. Behind her, like a raven, came Margaret Beaufort, all in black, straining to overhear the King’s private conversation. Beside me my sister Margaret walked, complaining about her tight shoes and the late hour and the roast swan, which was upsetting her digestion.

The King’s apartments were on the opposite side of the Manor from the Great Hall, a matter for great grumbling in the kitchens. But when we finally reached them I felt a sense of disappointment. They were old and shabby, not even as spacious or well furnished as the nursery at Eltham. The ceiling was uneven, who was extending her hand.
“Also for your marriage.” She handed me a slim package, then nodded at me to unwrap it. I did so, and found an exquisitely illustrated Book of Hours. I looked up at her in surprise.

“Your marriage with the Church,” she explained. “Now that you have progressed so far with your lessons, perhaps you can make use of this.”

I was disappointed for inexplicable reasons. Yet what had I expected? “Thank you, my Lady,” I said, and returned to my seat.

The evening continued in such strained merriment. The King spent much time conferring with his mother, and the Queen never left her ornately carved chair to speak with any of us, but fidgeted with her hands and the fastenings of her dress and listened to Margaret Beaufort’s urgent whispers beside her.


And still no one had mentioned the lion or the dogs. That was the most puzzling part. I did not understand, but then I understood so little.

I did not understand, for instance, why the King, who was known to be stingy, had had such a sumptuous banquet. I did not understand why, in spite of his words about making merry, he was so obviously glum. I did not understand what the Cornish had to do with all of it.

I was trying to sort out all these things in my mind while dutifully staring at the Book of Hours to please my mother, when a messenger burst into the room. He looked around wildly and then blurted out for us all to hear: “Your Grace—the Cornish number some fifteen thousand! They are to Winchester already! And Warbeck is crowned!”

The King sat, his face a mask. For an instant there was no sound but his heavy breathing. Then his lips moved, and he said one word: “Again!”

“The traitors!” spat the King’s mother. “Punish them!”

The King turned an impassive face to her. “All, Madam?” he asked blandly.

I saw her expression change. I did not know then that her husband’s brother, Sir William Stanley, had just gone over to the Pretender.

She met him, steel against steel. “All,” she said.

Then the messenger went up to them, and there was a huddle of consultation and much alarm. I watched the Queen’s face: she had gone pale, but betrayed no further emotion. Suddenly she rose and came toward Arthur, Margaret, and me.

“It is late,” she said. “You must to bed. I will send for Mistress Luke.” Clearly she wanted us gone, just when I most wanted to stay.

Nurse Luke came promptly, to my great disappointment, and ushered us out. She was full of cheerful questions about the banquet and our gifts. As we walked back to our quarters, I could feel the cold, worse even than in the King’s chamber. It seeped into the open passageway like water through a sieve.

The torches on the wall threw long shadows before us. They were burning low; it must be extremely late. As they dwindled down to their sockets, they gave off a great deal of smoke.

In fact the passageway seemed blurred from the smoke, and ahead it was even thicker. As we turned into another passageway, suddenly the cold was gone. That was how I pe’d: “Now we must go to the Tower. So it will look as if we had to take refuge. They planned it well.”

Suddenly I understood it all. I understood the little, puzzling things: that Father had had the banquet in order to show the court and powerful nobles what a wealthy and mighty King he was, how secure, how established. He had brought his children to Sheen and obliged Arthur to sit by his side, had pointed Margaret and me out after the revels to show the solidarity of his family, to present his phalanx of heirs.

He had hanged the dogs because there was treason all about, and he wished to warn potential traitors that they could expect no mercy from him. Appearances were important, more important even than reality. People credited only what their eyes beheld; no matter if it were calculatedly false or staged.

And I understood the big thing: the enemy had its own resources and could pull everything down around you in an instant, leaving you to curse and throw rocks into the river. All enemies must be destroyed. One must ever be on guard.

And the most frightening thing of all: Father’s throne was not secure. That fact hammered itself into my soul with cold nails. Tomorrow, or next week, or next year, he might be King no longer....

“Oh Henry, why?” wept Arthur, still clutching the white, ermine-furred gift robes against himself. Then he answered his own question. “I suppose it was a careless cook.” He pushed his hand across his nose, sniffing. “When I am King, I will make the kitchens safer.”

Then I began to cry, too, and not for the burning Manor, but for Arthur, poor, foolish Arthur....

“Aye,” I said. “Make the kitchens safer. That would be a good thing.”
Sheen Manor burned to the ground. We went to the Tower for safety, and Father’s forces defeated the Cornish, finally, but not before they had reached London itself. A great battle was fought across the Thames on Blackheath, and from the high window of the Tower we could see the men milling, see the puffs of smoke from guns. We could see, too, small sprawled figures that no longer moved, until, as the day went on, they outnumbered the moving ones.

The pretender Warbeck was taken and locked securely in the fortress portion of the Tower, and we came out almost as he went in. A simple matter of which side of the walls one was on determined everything. Father was King again and could walk freely where he chose, while Warbeck was confined within the sunless walls.

Father made grand plans to have Sheen Manor rebuilt in the modern style, with great numbers of glass windows. To emphasize his recent victory, he changed its name to Richmond Palace. (He had been Earl of Richmond before becoming King.) He spent uncharacteristic sums on the new palace, and as a result it was surprisingly magnificent.

He also began making plans for Arthur’s long-standing betrothal to Princess Katherine of Aragon finally to lead to a wedding. He was determined to see Arthur settled in the marriage bed as soon as possible.
IV

Arthur had been betrothed practically from the font at which he had first been christened Arthur, “in honour of the British race.” And what better to realize that he would have made an excellent gambler. What a pity—and loss for his purse!—that he did not play, on principle.) Spain was an obvious choice, as Father preferred not to importune our ancient enemy, France, for a bride. If Spain would allow its princess to marry into the House of Tudor, this would constitute recognition that we were, indeed, legitimate rulers. It would be another bit of showmanship for Father, like the treasonous dogs. It would say to the world: Look, look, I am a true King. For the old, established royal houses would never sign marriage contracts with a Perkin Warbeck or his like. And once there were sons from that marriage, all unspoken reservations about the worthiness of the Tudor blood would be stilled. Arthur and Katherine’s children would be welcomed in every court in Europe.

I think there persisted a feeling at the time that England was not a country in the civilized sense of the word. We were perceived as backward, remote, and barbarous—the latter because of our horrible dynastic wars, which had been going on since living memory. We were not truly wild, like the Scots or the Irish, but we were not yet an integral part of the rest of Europe.

Everything took so long to reach us. When I was ten, that is, around the year 1500, glass windows in common dwellings were almost unheard of. No bluff, common Englishman would use a fork (or had even seen one), would wear anything but wool, would eat anything but the traditional “three B’s”: beer, bread, and beef. There were no rugs on the stone floors, nothing but dirty rushes where people spit and threw scraps. Even the King dined on a collapsible trestle floor, and only women in childbirth could expect to have a pillow. This while Italian princes lived in open, sunlit villas, worked on inlaid marble tables, and sampled a variety of fine dishes.

The Renaissance, the New Learning—those were but foreign terms to us, and anything foreign was suspect. Our great lords still tried to keep their own private armies of retainers, long after the princes of Europe had begun concentrating all military power in their own hands. Music, even at court, consisted of a small band of poor musicians playing outdated tunes on outdated instruments. Parliament was summoned only in order to raise money for the King, and then, often as not, the people refused to pay up. European ambassadors regarded a posting here as going into exile, where they would have to endure privations and exist among a baffling, unruly people. They prayed to endure until they could be rewarded by being sent to a “real” court.

Of course, the common people would come out and gape whenever the English King would go from one palace to another. To them we were grand. They knew no better; but foreigners did. They used to mock the King and all our shabby, awkward, unfashionable grandeurs.

At ten, of course, I did not know all this, but I sensed it. I saw how reluctant the Spanish were actually to send their daughter here, in spite of the signed treaties promising to do so. I saw that the French King or the Holy Roman Emperor never met Father, never came to his court or invited him to theirs. I saw that the ambassadors who were here seemed to be old and badly dressed, and that some countries sent no ambassadors at all.

It would be different in Arthur’s reign, I hoped. I wanted him to be that old Arthur come again—to be a mighty King, so filled with honour and strength and a sort of shining that it would change everything. As I was trying desperately to shape myself for a churchman, I saw his reign as bringing a new Golden Age Katherine had been stalemated once again.

“No. She’s to arrive this autumn. And we’re to be married right after. I know the Spanish prize horsemanship. Katherine’s own mother rode into battle when she was with child! I—well, I—”

“You don’t want to fall off in front of Katherine,” I finished. “But, Arthur, you’ve ridden for years, had innumerable teachers. What can I do that they could not?” You hate horses and have no feel for them, I thought to myself, and no teacher can make up for that.

“I don’t know,” he said miserably. “But if only—”

“I’ll try to help you,” I said. “But if you aren’t a good horseman, why don’t you avoid horses in front of Katherine? Do something else. Sing. Dance.”

“I can’t sing, and I’m a clumsy dancer,” he said, his face set. “You can sing, and you can dance, but I can’t.”

“Recite verse, then.”

“I hate verse.”

What can you do, then? I wondered. “Then you must let others make fools of themselves dancing and singing and reciting, and look on with amusement.”

“And there’s something else! The—the wedding night!” His voice sounded higher than usual.

“Oh. That, I said nonchalantly, trying to appear wise.
He smiled wanly. “At least I can’t ask your help in that,” he attempted to joke—a joke that was to haunt me, literally, for years.

So it was to happen at last. Arthur was to be married straightway, and the Spanish Princess was already en route to England. The voyage would take two months at least. But she was coming! And there would be a royal wedding and festivities, after years of nothing. Father would be forced to spend money as all the eyes of Europe would be focused on the English Court, watching and judging. There must be great banquets and elaborate allegorical arches and statues and pageants in the streets to celebrate the marriage, and the public conduits would have to run with red and white wine all day. (Already my confessor had pointed out that I had an inordinate fascination for the glitter and pomp of this world, as he put it.) Most important to me, I would have new clothes.

I hated Father’s miserliness. I hated being in moth-eaten cloaks and wearing shirts whose worn sleeves ended halfway to my wrists. I was now just as tall as Arthur, yet I was put into the clothes of someone many sizes smaller. When I bent, the breeches cut into my backside; when I reached, the shoulders strained.

“You’re your grandfather all over,” Nurse Luke kept saying. She could not see how I winced at that. “He was outsized, and you will be, too. He was six feet and four inches.”

“Handsome, too.” I could not resist that.

“Yes,” she said tartly. “Perhaps too much so, for his own good.”

“One can never be too handsome for one’s own good,” I teased.

“No? He was. Anyway, handsomeness is wasted on a priest. If you—a perfect bride for Arthur.

I heard her voice before I saw her, and it was a low voice, and sweet, not scolding and shrewish. Then she emerged in her dressing gown, her hair still unarranged and free of any headdress; it fell, in thick, golden-brown waves, over her shoulders.

She was beautiful—like a maiden in the Morte d’Arthur, like the fair Elaine, the lovely Enid. Or Andromeda, chained to a rock, awaiting rescue by Perseus in the myth I had been dutifully translating. All the heroines of literature came to life for me as I stared at Katherine.

What can I say? I loved her, then and there. Doubtless you will say I was only a boy, a ten-year-old boy, and that I had not even spoken to her, and that it was therefore impossible for me to love her. But I did. I did! I loved her with a sudden burst of devotion that took me quite by surprise. I stood gaping at her, gripped by yet another unknown emotion: intense jealousy of Arthur, who would have her for himself.

And now the betrothal ceremony must be arranged. I was to represent Arthur and be his proxy in the ceremony promising them to one another, and I thought I could not bear it.

But I did. Early the next day we stood side by side and recited dull vows in Latin before a priest in her tent. Although Katherine was already fifteen, she was no taller than 1. I could turn my eye just a little and meet hers on the same level.

I found her continually looking at me, and it made me uncomfortable. But then I caught her expression and realized what she was seeing. Misled by my early height and thick chest, she looked at the second son and saw what no one else, thus far, had seen: a man. She saw me as a man, and she was the first to do it. And I loved her for that too.

But she was Arthur’s. She would be his wife, and he would be King. I accepted it without question—or so I thought. Can secret wishes, so secret they are not admitted even to the self, come true? Even as I ask the question, I do not want to know the answer.

The wedding was to take place on November fourteenth, and Arthur was expected to produce an heir within a year. The King never said so, but I overheard the jests and jokes among the servants (they always spoke freely in front of me, as if I were already a priest). They all wanted a baby by Christmas of the following year; indeed, they thought it their due.
For someone charged with such prodigious responsibilities, Arthur was oddly unenthusiastic. As his wedding day approached, he became more and more listless. He shrank; he dwindled; clearly he did not want to be married. One day he came to my chambers, ostensibly to ask my help in trying on his new clothes, but in reality to cry and confess he didn’t want it—any of it.

“I don’t want to go through a marriage ceremony before thousands of people,” he said in a tremulous voice, standing before a half-length mirror and looking pensively at his reflection, swathed in his white velvet cape. Three years later, he had finally grown into it.

“Well, you must, that’s all,” I said, grabbing his plumed hat off his head and plopping it on my own, making faces at myself in the mirror. “Think about afterwards.” I knew something about that business—in a confused sort of way.

“That’s the part I don’t want to think about,” he said, I made my way to a corner where I slumped against the wall. I could feel sweat trickling down my face and back, soaking into my shirt.

“D’you want yer fortune?” a voice suddenly whispered into my ear. I turned and saw a well-dressed woman standing beside me. But she had an odd expression in her eye, and she leaned over in a conspiratorial manner. “I ain’t supposed to be here. If they find me, I’m gone. But I come to all the royal weddings. I was at the King’s, now”—she jerked her head to indicate Father—“as well as poor Richard’s; and Edward’s ... aye, not that one, since he married her secretly—if he married her at all, that witch!”

She was talking about my other grandmother, Elizabeth Woodville. Still I sat stiffly and did not say anything.

“So you are not curious?” she said, as if I had wronged her. Slowly she picked herself up and prepared to go elsewhere. As she stood up, one of the King’s guard recognized her.

“That woman!” he choked, hurriedly coming over. “She’s a Welsh fortune-teller! A sorceress!” He apprehended her, hustled her toward the door, and shoved her out. He shook his head apologetically in my direction. “They cluster around like flies! I cannot keep them all out!”

That night Arthur took Katherine into his bed. Alone in mine, I thought about what that Welsh woman had said about my grandmother being a witch, to keep myself from thinking what Arthur was—or was not—doing. Strange to think that in years to come that very question was to be debated by scores of learned men.
The next morning Arthur called for courtiers to attend him in his bedchamber. He demanded cups of wine and was full of boasts about how marriage was thirsty work, and so on. He kept repeating this all day. It was the first thing he said to me as he emerged from his room and saw me. He even attempted a manful chuckle.

Arthur and Katherine were at court all during the Christmas holidays, and I found I could not bear to be with them. I sulked and tried to avoid the festivities. This was so unlike me that the Queen eventually sought me out in my secret, solitary spot: an empty room high in the eaves of the palace. I had thought no one knew I went there, but clearly she had noticed.

It was cold there; no fires were ever lit. But I could hear faint music and laughter from the Great Hall below. It was another masque, another dance. I shut my ears against it and looked out the small cobwebbed window, seeing the late-December sun slanting over the Palace grounds, and far beyond. Everything was brown and golden and still. I could see the ships on the Thames, anchored and waiting. Waiting ...

I wished I could be a sailor and live on one of those ships; spend my life on the water, sailing all over the world. Being a prince—the sort of prince I must be—was dull by comparison. I would ... I would start going down to the docks and learning about ships. I would go secretly! That way, Father could say nothing against it. I would disguise myself... and then, when I had become an expert sailor, I would sail away, forget my life here, disappear, become a vagabond prince—have high adventures! They would never know what had become of me; uninterrupted me.

I turned, guiltily, and saw the Queen.

"Henry, what are you doing here all alone?"
"I am planning my future."
"Your Father has already done that."

Yes. He thought to make a priest of me. Well, they would have to fit the chasubles and albs and cinctures to someone else. I would be sailing the high seas!

"You must not worry about your place," she said, thinking to soothe me, "nor hide yourself from the festivities."
"The festivities bore me," I said grandly. "And the costumes for the masque were moth-eaten!" Some how this one thing had greatly embarrassed me. I knew that the Spanish ambassador had seen, and laughed at us.

She nodded. "Yes, I know. They are so old—"
"Why doesn’t he get new ones, then?" I burst out. "Why?"
She ignored the question and all that lay behind it. "There will be dancing soon. Please come. You are such a talented dancer."

"A talented dancer!" I said grumpily. "I must forget dancing—unless Arthur will permit the clergy to dance in their vestments. Do you think His Holiness might give us such a dispensation?" It was hopeless; it must be the sea for me, that was clear.

Suddenly the Queen bent toward me and touched my face lightly. "Dear Henry," she said. "I disliked it, too. So much."

So she knew, she understood. She had been the eldest, but only a daughter. Unable to be Queen in her own right. Unable. And waiting— to be assigned her secondary role.

I nodded. And obediently followed her down to the Great Hall.

The Hall was hot and crowded, with everyone dressed in satins, stiff jewelled brocades, and splendidly coloured velvets. I was only too aware of my plain clothes. I had been allowed only three new outfits for the wedding and Christmas festivities, and I had long since appeared in them.

Arthur and Katherine sat at one end of the Hall. Arthur was gotten up like a jewelled idol, and he looked frail and doll-like in the overpowering chair. He kept glancing nervously at Katherine. He and his new wife were to leave London as soon as the holidays were over, and go to a cold, horrid castle on the Welsh border to play King and Queen in training. This was entirely Father’s idea; he believed in toughening Arthur, tempering him.

Arthur clearly did not want to be tempered. Yet he was willing, because it was his duty. Arthur always obeyed his duty. He seemed to feel that was what distinguished a king, or even was the essence of kingship.

The minstrels took their assigned places in the stone gallery. There were fifteen of them—double the usual number. Their leader announced that they were honoured by the presence of a Venetian lutenist and a shawm player from Flanders. There was a murmur of appreciation. Then he added that a French musician, well versed in French court dances, would play, as well as another artist who had trained at the Spanish court.

Initially they played only English dances, and almost all the lords absence of aalmain.
Arthur would not dance. He just sat, still and solemn, in his great chair, deliberately ignoring Katherine’s restlessness and tapping feet. She was longing to dance—it was evident in every line of her body.

Suddenly I was determined to satisfy that longing in her and in myself as well. We were both prisoners of our station: she, wed to a husband who refused to dance; I, a future priest. It was decreed that we must spend the remainder of our lifetimes without dancing. Perhaps so, but there was still a little time....

I made my way over to her and, bowing low before the dais, indicated that I wished her to join me in a Burgundian. She nodded hesitantly; I held out my hand and together we went to the middle of the floor.

I felt drunk. I had done what I longed to do, and in front of everyone! The exhilaration of it ... it was a taste I was never to lose, was to seek from then on.

I looked at Katherine. She smiled joyfully at having been rescued. And there was something else in her look ... she found me pleasing, found my person attractive. I felt her acceptance of me, her liking, and it was like the summer sun to me.

She was a stunning dancer and knew many intricate steps unfamiliar to us in England. I had to struggle to keep up with her. Her timing, her balance, her sense of the music were astounding. Gradually the others fell back and watched us as we progressed through a galliard, a dance du Roy, a quatre bransle, and a Spanish dance of the Alhambra that she showed me. When the musicians stopped, Katherine was breathless and her face flushed. The onlookers were silent for an awkward moment, then they began to cheer us.

Alone on the dais, Arthur glowered like a pale, angry child.
VI

Four months later Arthur was dead—of consumption in that drafty Welsh castle—and Katherine was a widow.
And I was, suddenly, the heir—the only thing standing between the young Tudor dynasty and oblivion.

I was alone in my chamber when the news came. One of the pages brought me a brief note from the King, asking me to come to him right away.

“All immediately?” I asked, puzzled. The King never sent for me, and certainly not in the middle of the day, when I was supposed to be doing my studies.

“Yes, Your Grace,” he replied, and his voice was different from before. So markedly different that even a ten-year-old boy would take note of it. I looked over at him and found him staring at me.

All along the passageway it was the same. People gaped at me. I suddenly knew that something terrible was about to happen. Was I to be sent away to some remote monastery, ostensibly to study?

I reached the King’s Privy Chamber and pulled open the heavy wooden door. Inside it was dark and dismal, as always. Father never lit enough firewood, out of his perverted sense of frugality, unless he expected a high-ranking visitor. He normally kept his quarters so cold that the servants used to store perishable foods behind the screens. Butter kept especially well there, or so I was told.

He nodded, dully.

I had entered the King’s chamber a second son and future priest; I left it as heir apparent and future King. To say that everything changed thereafter is to say what any fool could know. By that they would assume I meant the externals: the clothes I wore and my living quarters and my education. Yet the greatest change was immediate, and in fact had already occurred.

As I left the chamber, one of the yeomen of the guard pulled back the door and bowed. He was a very tall man, and I barely reached his shoulder. As he straightened, I found his eyes riveted on me in a most disturbing fashion. It was only for an instant, but in that instant I perceived curiosity—and fear. He was afraid of me, this great, strong man, afraid of what I might prove to be. For he did not know me, and I was his future King.

No one at court knew me. I was to meet that selfsame look again and again. It said: Who is he? Shall we fear him? At length I developed the habit of never looking directly into anyone’s eyes lest I again meet that look of wariness coupled with apprehension. It was not a good or restful thing to know that merely by existing I threatened the ordered pattern of others’ lives.

They knew Father well and had duly observed Arthur for some fifteen years, grown used to him. But Henry was the unknown, the hidden-away one....

The man smiled, falsely. “Your Grace,” he said.

The smile was worse than the look in his eyes, although they went hand in hand. I made some stiff little motion with my hand and turned away.

No one would ever be candid or open with me again. That was the great change in my life.

There were other changes as well, of course. I must now live at court with the King; I must exchange my priest-tutor for a retired ambassador. There were good changes: I was now allowed to practise dancing and even had a French dance-master to demonstrate the fashions in that court, where everything was elegant and perfect (to hear him tell it). I had my own band of minstrels and a new music teacher who taught me theory and composition, and even imported an Italian organ for me to use. Being constantly at court, I began to meet other boys of my own age, noblemen’s sons, and so I had friends for the first time in my life.

The bad things: I was not to engage in any “dangerous” activities, such as hunting or even jousting, as my person now had to be guarded against the remotest mishap. As a result, I had to stay indoors and watch my friends at play, or join them outside merely to stand about watching, which was worse.

I had to live in a room that connected to the King’s, so that I could go nowhere, and no one come to me, without passing through his chamber first. In that way he isolated me as effectively as one of those maidens in the Morte d’Arthur, imprisoned in a turret by her father. The only difference was that as long as my father lived, no one could
rescue me or even approach me.

And how long would my father live? He was only forty-five, and seemed healthy. He might live anot

a retiredo from young to old, beggar to king. It is simple: for a King, do like a King.”

He sat down beside me, glancing toward the door. “And now I fear the King will come in and see that we are somewhat behind.” He seemed embarrassed at what he had just said, as if he wished me to forget it as quickly as possible.

“Have you learned the things I told you?” he asked.

“Yes,” I replied. I glanced over at the fireplace. I wished I could add another log to the fire, as my fingers were chilled. But there were no more there. Father allowed only six logs per day until after New Year’s, no matter how foul the weather. I blew on my fingers. “First, France. There are sixteen million Frenchmen. They are the most powerful country in Europe. As late as my father’s exile, Brittany was an independent duchy. But when King Charles VIII married Anne of Brittany in 1491, it became part of France. The French are our enemies. Our great King Henry V conquered nearly all of France---”

“Not all, Your Grace,” admonished Farr.

“Nearly half, then,” I conceded. “And his son was crowned King of France in Paris! And I shall recapture those lands!”

He smiled indulgently. “And how many Englishmen live in the realm?”

“Three million. Three and a half million!”

“And sixteen million in France, Your Grace.”

“What matter the numbers? An Englishman is worth twenty Frenchmen! They are terrified of us. Why, French mothers frighten their children with threats of les Anglais!”

“And English mothers frighten their children with cries of bogymen.”

“We still have Calais,” I persisted.

“For how long? It is an unnatural outpost.”

“It is part of England. No, I mean to pursue my heritage! To recapture France.”

“Have you been reading those Froissart things again, Your Grace?”

“No!” I said. But it was not true, and he knew it. I loved those chronicles of knights and their ladies and warfare, and read them late at night, often when I should have been sleeping. “Well—perhaps a little.”

“A little is too much. Don’t fill your head with such things. They are silly and what is worse, dangerous and outmoded. Any English King who attempts to recapture France now would risk his life, his treasury—and being ridiculed. A King can perhaps survive the first two. But the third, never. Now, then, have you memorized the general map of Europe?”

“Yes. The French have swallowed up Brittany and gorged themselves on Burgundy. And Maximilian, Emperor ---”

“Of what?”

“The Holy Roman Empire.”

“Which is neither holy nor Roman nor an empire,” he said happily.

“No. It is merely a conglomerate of German duchies yoked with the Low Countries.”

“But Maximilian has some twenty million nominal subjects.”

“United on notroted.”

“Exactly.” He was pleased. “And Spain?”

“Ferdinand and Isabella have driven the Moors out, and Spain is Christian once more. They have eight million subjects.”

“Very good, Prince Henry. I believe you have been studying—in between Froissart.” He reached out and cuffed me playfully. “Next we will discuss Ferdinand’s schemes, and the history of the Papacy. Pope Julius is very much a part of all this, you know. He seems to be personally trying to demonstrate Christ’s statement: ‘I came not to bring peace, but a sword.’ Read further in the notes I gave you and read all the dispatches in the red bag. They cover the correspondence during my years in France.” He stood up stiffly. He was pretending we had come to the end of our lesson, but I could tell it was because he was so uncomfortable in that room. The fire was nearly out, and our breath was visible.

“I forgot,” he said. “Tomorrow is St. Martin’s Day, and so there will be no regular lesson.”

That was disappointing. It seemed that whenever we began anything, it was interrupted by the constant procession of saints’ days. There were more than a hundred of them in the year. Why couldn’t the saints be honoured by going to Mass? Why did they require that everyone stop work as well?

“And Your Grace—please tell the Queen how happy I am with her news, and that I am praying for a safe confinement and a fair new Prince.”
He bowed once and hurried out, back toward normal warmth and people. It was no matter; I could not have asked him, even had he stayed. I would never ask my tutor why he knew something I did not. The King had not told me of this, nor had the Queen. Why?

I walked over to the window. The rain had changed to sleet and was pelting against the walls and window. The window was poorly fitted, and small particles of sleet were working their way inside with no hindrance.

The window overlooked not the palace garden, but the ditches and outhouses. I hated all those ugly, straggling things attached to the palace, but especially the open, stinking ditches. When I was King I would have them all covered over. When I was King ...

The driving sleet had already covered the structures, making them white and smooth. But not pretty. They were no more pretty than a skeleton, which could be equally white and smooth.

A violent shiver drove me from the window to the dying fire.
It was true, what Stephen Farr had said. The Queen my mother was with child. She was confined in February, 1503, on Candlemas Day, and delivered not of an heir, but of a stillborn daughter. She died nine days later, on her thirty-seventh birthday.

Even today I must hurry over those facts, state them simply, lest I stumble and—rage? cry? I do not know. Both, perhaps.

There were many days of official mourning, days while the sculptors worked hurriedly to carve the customary funeral effigy that would sit atop her mourning-car. It must be an exact likeness, so that it would appear that she was still alive, clad in her robes and fur, as in again, must carry this last picture of her in their minds. Last impressions, too, were important. I wanted to tell Farr that.

But I would not see her again. Never, never, never ... And when I saw the wooden image I hated it, because it seemed so alive, and yet it was not. They had done their job well, the carvers. Especially as they had had to work from a death-mask and not from life. But then, she was but thirty-seven, and had not thought to sit for her funeral effigy. No, not that.

I heard the King weeping, late at night. But he never came in to my chamber, never tried to share his sorrow with me. Nor did he acknowledge mine, save for a curt announcement that we were all to attend the funeral.

The day of the funeral was cold and foggy. The sun never shone, but turned the mist blue, as if to drown us in eternal twilight. Torches blazed in the London streets even in midday as the funeral procession wound its way from the Tower to Westminster, to the beat of muffled drums. First came the three hundred yeomen of the guard, then the hearse, a built-up carriage some twenty feet high, all in black, pulled by eight black horses, with the (to me) hideous effigy of the Queen all smiling and in royal robes atop it. Then followed thirty-seven young women, one for each year of her life. They wore white, white which seemed like part of the mist, and carried white candles. Then came the King, and Margaret, and Mary, and I.

The ordeal did not end with the procession. Once inside Westminster Abbey, I still had a Requiem Mass and a eulogy to endure. The hearse was driven to the end of the nave where it awaited the next, the awful, part: the burial.

I believe Warham celebrated the Mass; I do not recall. But a young man rose up to deliver the eulogy. Someone I had never seen before.

“I have composed an elegy for the Queen,” he said, “which with your gracious permission I should like to read.”

The man’s voice was strangely compelling, yet gentle.

The King nodded curtly. The man began. He had written it as though the Queen herself were taking leave of us all. That had hurt the most; she had said nothing, no farewell to me. Now this man was attempting to repair the omission—as if he had known. But how could he have known?

Adieu! Mine own dear spouse, my worthy lord!
The faithful love, that did us both continue
In marriage and peaceable concord,
Into your hands here I do resign,
To be bestowed on your children and mine;
Erst were ye father, now must ye supply
The mother’s part also, for lo! here I lie.
Adieu, Lord Henry, loving son, adieu—
Our Lord increase your honour and estate....

His voice, his very presence, brought an extraordinary peace to me. It was not the words in themselves; it was, instead, a great, reaching compassion. Perhaps the first I had ever known.

“Who is he?” I leaned over to Margaret, who always knew names and titles.

That night as I prepared for bed, I was more tired than I had been in a long time.

At my bedside was a posset. I smiled. Nurse Luke would have seen to it, would have remembered me, even though she no longer had charge of me. I picked up the goblet. The contents were still warm. They tasted of honey and wine, and something else....

I slept. But it was not a normal sleep. I dreamed I was standing at the end of the garden at Eltham. And the Queen came toward me, looking as she had the last time I had seen her—laughing and healthy. She held out her hands to me.

“Ah, Henry!” she said. “I am so happy you will be King!” She leaned forward and kissed me. I could smell her rose-water perfume. “Such a lovely King! Just like my father! And you will have a daughter, and call her Elizabeth, just as he did.”

I stood up, and as happens miraculously in dreams, I was suddenly much taller than she, and older, although she remained unchanged. “Stay with me,” I said.

But she was fading, or retreating, I could not tell which. My voice changed to desperation. “Please!”

But she had already melted into something else: a strange woman with a pale, oval face. I feared her. The woman whispered, “For a King, do like a King!” and laughed hysterically. Then she, too, faded.

I woke up, my heart pounding. For an instant I thought there must be someone else in the chamber. I drew aside the bed-curtains.

Nothing but six squares of moonlight, exactly reproducing the panes of my window. But it had seemed so real....

I lay back down. Had my mother really come to me? No. She was dead. Dead. They had put her into her tomb that afternoon. Later, Father would erect a monument on the spot. He had said so.

With no one to overhear or stop me, I cried—for the last time as a child.
How fitting it was, then, that the next change in my life had to do with my coming manhood.

We had left Greenwich and removed to Father’s new showpiece, Richmond, where he intended to spend the next few weeks awaiting better weather and attending to affairs of the realm. Each time I came there, I noticed something different. Now I saw that he had put down polished wooden floors on top of the stone. It was a great improvement. And the new panelled wooden walls were far superior to the old-fashioned bare masonry. It would be good to wait for spring here.

But the ice was still on the bare branches of the trees when Father summoned me into his “work closet,” as he called it. It was a small panelled room off the retiring room, with its own fireplace which was, as usual, so meagrely lit it was scarcely functional. I always took a surcoat when I received a message that the King wanted me.

He scarcely looked up when he heard me come in. He was bent over an array of papers on the flat, scarred table that served as his desk. I was expected to stand mutely until he decided to acknowledge my presence.

Eventually he did so by muttering, “Another appeal about these cursed vagrants!” He shook his head, then suddenly turned to me. “And what do you say about it? More to the point, what do you know about it?”

“About what, Sire?”

“Which?” There were so many of them.

He raised his hand and pointed to his ear.

“The one against quacks and fortune-tellers? On their second offence they have one ear cut off. On the third offence they lose the other ear.” I remembered the Welshwoman at Arthur’s wedding feast. I wondered if she still retained her ears.

“But what if the ... soothsayer wears the cloth and claims his revelations are divinely inspired? What then?”

“It would depend entirely on what his revelations were.” I had meant it in sarcasm, but the King nodded in approval.

“You surprise me,” he said tartly. “I would have thought—”

He was interrupted by an official from one of the neighboring townships. When Father was at court, he held a sort of business open-house on Tuesdays, and this was Tuesday.

The man entered, dragging something. It was a large, torn net. He held it up in distress. Evidently the King was supposed to gasp when he saw it. Instead he just grunted.

“Well?”

“Your Grace, look at the state of this crow-net!”

“It is unfit for capturing anything smaller than a buzzard. Are you much troubled with buzzards in Oatlands?”

“We need new crow-nets, Your Grace. When we sow this year—”

“Then buy them,” he said curtly.

“We cannot! The law says each town must provide adequate crow-nets to trap rooks, crows, and choughs. But we cannot, because of the taxes levied this year—and we cannot afford to pay the taker of crows his accustomed price, and—”

“God’s blood!” The King leapt up and looked around accusingly. “Who let this beggar in?”

The man cowered in the midst of his crow-net.

“Yes, beggar!” the King roared. I was surprised at how loud he could speak when he chose. “Where is your licence? Your begging licence? You are required to have one, since you are begging outside your normal township limits. Do you expect me to pay for your cursed crow-nets? The taxes are levied on all my subjects! God’s blood, you’ve had a respite for years—”

The man gathered up his spread nets like a woman bringing in laundry before a storm. “Yes, Your Grace—”

The King flung a coin of some sort at him. “Put this in your alms-box!”

When he was gone, the King asked calmly, “And what is the law regarding alms?”

“If one should give alms into any place besides the lawful alms-box, he shall be fined ten times the amount of the alms he gave.”

He beamed at me, as his mother used to when I successfully conjugated an irregular Latin verb. “You know the law, then. And will you apply it? No nonsense about the poor, and a Golden Age where we shall all be one and dance on the village green together, festooned in crow-nets?” He looked away. “It is natural, when one is young... I too had ideas, when I was—how old are you?”

“Eleven.” He had a faraway look. “When I was eleven, I was a prisoner of the Yorkists. Two years later things
changed, and poor, daft Henry VI—my uncle, remember—was on the throne again. My other uncle, Jasper Tudor, Henry’s half-brother, took me to him in London. And when the mad King saw me, he said, so that everyone nearby could hear: ‘Surely this is he to whom both we and our adversaries must yield and give over dominion.’ Henry was a saint, but he was feeble-minded. A prophecy? Should he have been punished, then?”

“Clearly it depends as much on the status of the prophet as on his revelation. I amend my earlier statement.”

He coughed—not a polite cough, but a true cough. Why did he refuse to heat his rooms adequately?

“I pray you excuse me,” he said, making for the alcove off his work closet. Another innovation at Richmond Palace: he had had a privy closet built to house a magnificent structure where he could relieve himself. It was a great, throne-like chair, all padded in velvet. Beside it was a huge pewter pot, a royal version of the jordans kept in all bedchambers, that must be emptied every morning. (In the French term, a *vase de nuit.* He turned to this and proceeded to void into the Jordan for what seemed an interminable time, all the while conversing in regal tones.

WILL:

When Henry became King, he tried to outdo his father in everything, and particularly in this area. He had a truly celestial “privy stool” (as he named it) constructed for his own use. It was so decorated, so studded with gems and padded with goose-down, that using it must have been a dazzling experience. How Harry restricted himself to retiring to it only once a day (unless he had some digestive upset, of course) is just one of the many puzzles about him. I would have arranged to spend half my day upon it.

In spite of this—now that I think of it—Harry was abnormally fastidious about this subject. He never allowed me to make any references to those functions (a crippling injunction for a jester), nor even to use the good old words “piss” or “fart,” or—as he used to say—“the word that rhymes with hit.”

HENRY VIII:

“I did not summon you here to talk about crow-nets or mad Henry VI, but about marriage,” the King said. I could hardly hear him above the furious sound of his body function.

He turned and I stepped back, making sure my eyes were turned respectfully away. “Marriage!” he repeated, rearranging his robes. “It is much on my mind these days.”

He smiled that thin-lipped, smug smile he affected when he thought himself clever. “Margaret will do for me what armies cannot.”

He had just arranged the marriage of my sister Margaret to King James IV of Scotland. She would wed the middle-aged but lusty Stuart, and go to live in that barbarous, cold country, whether or not she fancied it (or him). A union of sorts between England and Scotland would result.

He went to his dee, their daughter.

I try now to remember my first honest thought. And it was horror, a shrinking. Then, quickly—pleasure. “Arthur’s widow?”

“Is there any other Katherine, daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella? The same.”

“But she is—she was—”

“The Pope can give a dispensation. That is no obstacle. Would it please you? Would it please you, boy?”

“Yes,” I breathed. I did not dare to think how much.

“It pleases me as well. To keep the alliance with Spain. To keep the dowry.” He shot a look at me. “A woman warms your bed, but money eases your mind. And can buy the woman for the bed to boot.”

He disgusted me. And dishonoured my mother, whom he had certainly never bought. “Perhaps,” was all I could trust myself to say.

“I will arrange the betrothal, then. And now you had best leave me to the plaintive cries of other crow-net men.”
He turned back to his work table in exasperation, and indicated to his guard that he was ready to receive the next plaintiff.

I was glad to be gone. I was hungry and knew Father never ate until late afternoon. Once I was back in my own chamber, I asked for some bread and cheese and ale to be brought. While I waited, I walked about restlessly, thinking about Father’s proposal. I picked up my lute, but could bring no good music from it. I looked out the window, onto the snowy palace orchard. The trees were writhing black lines against the flat white snow.

A soft sound turned me round to see a server with a tray laden with food. I took it and sat at my small work table and ate. The cheese was exceptionally good, golden and mellow, and not hard as the cheese had been recently. The ale was dark and cold. I finished it all. No matter how much I ate, I never seemed to grow wider, only taller. I was hungry all the time, and at night sometimes my bones seemed to hurt. Linacre, one of the King’s physicians, said it was caused by my rapid growth. He said the bones were aching from being stretched. In the past year I had grown almost five inches. I was now taller than the King; I lacked only a little of the six-foot mark.

My favourite time of day approached: the late afternoon, when the boys and young men at court gathered in the enclosed exercise area (yet another innovation) or in the Great Hall for martial exercises. Since it was not dangerous, the King grudgingly allowed me to participate.

From November until March the boys at court were confined indoors. Their only release came during these exercises, which were rowdy, loud, and undisciplined. I was the youngest; most of the others were between fourteen and nineteen. Because of my size and natural ability I was by no means at a disadvantage by age, but because of who I was. At first they had been wary of me, inhibited, but, as always among young people, that wore off as we came to know one another. I was their future King; but I think that was overlooked as we (I can think of no better word) played. I certainly never felt anything except the usual striving the youngest feels to prove himself to his older companions.

WILL:

HENRY VIII:

There were a dozen or so of us. The oldest was Charles Brandon, the youth I had first met at Sheen. He was nineteen, but our age difference did not loom so large now. Unlike the others, he had not come to court with his father. His father was dead—killed in the same battle on Bosworth Field where Father had won his crown, singled out by Richard himself because he had held the Tudor dragon standard. Because he could not reward the dead man, the new King honoured his son instead, and brought him to live at court. Thus we were bound to one another by family ties as well as personal affinity.

Nicholas Carew was sixteen. He was very handsome and took a great interest in fashion, saying it was very important to be au courant in the French mode. He was betrothed to the sister of Francis Bryan, his best friend and companion, an equally avid follower of French fashions. They were always discussing their wardrobes and what sort of feathers might eventually replace fur on caps. Their hearts were more in the banquet hall than on the playing field, and perhaps that is why Francis Bryan was later to lose an eye in a joust. He simply ran right into a lance. Afterwards he commissioned a jewelled eye patch to be made.

Edward Neville, also sixteen, was a member of one of the most powerful families of the north country and had a more robust appetite for the outdoors than Bryan or Carew. There was an extraordinary physical resemblance between Neville and myself, so that from a middling distance it was difficult to tell us apart. This gave rise, in later years, to an absurd rumour that he was my illegitimate son. Quite an interesting thought, considering that he was about five years older than I.

Henry Guildford, William Compton—they were fifteen, and cared for nothing but reading battle stories and dreaming of invading France. And Thomas Wyatt, son of one of the King’s councillors, was even younger than I,
and was there only to watch. He was from Kent and, like me, had spent his earliest years in the country. Even at that age he liked to write poetry, although he never showed any of it to me.

WILL:

For which you should have been thankful. One of Wyatt’s later pastoral pursuits in Kent was being his neighbour Anne Boleyn’s lover ... perhaps the first? A signal honour, that. Later he wrote a number of indiscreet poems about her, which he wisely refrained from showing to Harry.

HENRY VIII:

When I descended the steps into the Hall that afternoon, most of my friends were already there and trying on their padded doublets. So they intended to use the swords this afternoon, and perhaps do a bit of hand-to-hand combat as well.

Bryan and Carew came in behind me, carrying a large black object, which is the new Italian armour!”

Quickly everyone rushed over to see it. Everyone except Brandon. He just stood, his large arms crossed. “Where did you get this?” he asked.

“We stole it,” said Carew.

“No,” amended Bryan. “We borrowed it. From a knight who came to petition the King. He left it in the guard room when he went in for his audience.”

“We will,” they chorused. “But we only wanted you to see it. Look, the decorations—”

“I said return it!” bellowed Brandon.

Carew raised his eyes in appeal to me, as I had feared he would. Yet it was bound to happen, sooner or later....

“Yes. Return it,” I muttered. I hated being put in this position.

“Only if you promise to establish an armoury of your own when you become King. There should be one in England, after all.”

“Oh, go!” I said, embarrassed. They picked up the half-suit of armour and reluctantly took it back up the stairs.

Afterward, as we watched Compton and Bryan facing each other in hand-to-hand combat across the rush-padded mat, I leaned over to Brandon. “Thank you,” I said, “for telling them. I dared not.”

He shrugged. “Yet it was to you they turned. Best get used to that, Your Grace.”

A thud. Compton had been thrown, and Bryan was bending over him. Neville and another boy took their places. The air was rank now from the sweat and exertion, which mingled with the odours of last night’s dinner in the Hall. Night was falling already. Someone had just come in to light the torches. Soon this must end, and I would have to go back to my solitary room.

I looked at the others around me. They were well-favoured and healthy and—young men. Some were betrothed, one was already married, and most had had women. They talked about it sometimes, casually, which meant it was not even new to them. Like the first time one takes the Sacrament, one anticipates it and thinks much about it afterwards. But as it becomes part of one’s life, -one says easily: “I have received my Maker.” Just so did Bryan and Compton and Carew talk of women.

WILL:
How like Harry to find a religious simile for the sexual act! The Sacrament, indeed!

HENRY VIII:

So I would think about Katherine alone. I was to be betrothed. I would not tell anyone yet. And I wondered: when was I to be married?

We were betrothed, formally, three months later, with the provision that the marriage would take place on my fourteenth birthday.

The ceremony of betrothal took place at the Bishop of Salisbury’s residence. We claimed, and certainly the plants continued to bloom an extraordinarily long time.

Father and I and the lawyers were to meet Katherine and her Spanish lawyers directly at the Bishop’s. So we rode through London, but took separate routes, lest it appear that we were too familiar already.

In truth, I had not seen Katherine since she and Arthur had left court to go to Ludlow. She had been ill herself of the same fever that had killed Arthur, and had not even attended the funeral or been able to return to London for some time. When she did come, she had been settled in a riverside house on the great open Strand between the city and Westminster. It was called Durham House. There she lived, surrounded by her Spanish household, speaking Spanish, wearing only Spanish clothes, eating Spanish food. For a time everyone had waited to see if she might be carrying Arthur’s child, but that soon proved to be merely wishful thinking on the King’s part. Arthur was dead indeed.

And now I was to have his leavings. That rainy June day a little over a year since his death, I went to claim the first of them.

We took the royal barge to the water steps of Blackfriars monastery. Horses awaited us there, and we rode up a muddy lane that led away from the river and up to Fleet Street, itself a muddy little path connecting the Strand to the streets of London. We saw few people, as we were outside the main part of London the entire time. It was not a pretty journey, and on the way it began to drizzle, just to complete our discomfort.

At the Bishop’s house on that dismal little street, we were ushered into a small room where Katherine and her party awaited us. It stank of wet wool and too many bodies packed into a tight space. It seemed that the number of lawyers required as experts and witnesses had emptied the nearby Inns of Court. And they were all chattering away at once, like a great company of monkeys.

Katherine was somewhere in the midst of them, but it took a moment to see her. When the noise of learned talking and the scratching of pens on parchment was done, they led her out and bade us stand together.

She is so small, was my first thought. She had not grown, whereas I had.

She is so beautiful, was my second.

Katherine was now seventeen, and at her peak of beauty. She was seen by so few people in those days that there remains no legend, no popular memory of that beauty. She spent her young years almost cloistered, and by the time she emerged, some of it had already gone. But then ... O, then!

We stood side by side, stiff and awkward. The King’s lawyer thrust a paper into the Bishop’s hand on one side, and that of the Spanish lawyer on the other. Then we repeated vows without once looking at each other, long vows in Latin. And signed our names on several pieces of paper.

That being done, we were immediately forced apart by our respective lawyers. We were not to speak to one another, apparently, until we found ourselves in bed together in two years’ time. We left the Bishop’s residence by separate doors, just as we had come in.

Father said nothing to me until we were safely on the big, clumsy royal barge, crossing the Thames on our way back to Greenwich. The water was a flat, ugly grey-brown, reflecting the overcast sky. Here and there a piece of
garbage floated by. People along the banks seemed to consider in and about London.” I saw a dead dog turn slowly
over and sink from sight in the water. When I was King, I would see that something was done about the misuse of
the river.
“You understand,” Father suddenly said in a low voice, so that the boatmen could not overhear, “that you must
not see or communicate with the Princess in any way. Leave her to her Spaniards in her Spanish house.”
“But surely I should send her tokens, write—”
“You fool!” He set his mouth in anger. “Do you see yourself as a suitor? Tokens!” He spat out the word. “You
will do nothing. Nothing. Leave her be.”
“But—why?”
“Because this betrothal is on paper only. I doubt that a wedding will ever take place.”
“Then why the ceremony? Why the arrangements?”
“It means nothing. What one ceremony does, another can undo. Surely you know that! It is nearly the first rule of
kingship. The ceremony was merely to buy us some time with the Spaniards, to make a show of our good
intentions.”
“Which are neither good nor honest nor kind.” Another dead animal swept past, churning in the foam. It stank.
Everything seemed corrupted to me: the river, Father, myself. Everything except the Princess.
“The Spanish are deceiving us about the dowry. There has been much lying and misrepresentation in the matter. I
do not think it will be satisfactorily settled. Therefore I feel that a marriage between you and the Princess will not be
feasible.”
“Does the Princess ... participate ... in these deceptions?”
“She knows nothing. She does as she is told. As you must.”
I gripped the carved railing so hard I hurt my hands.
I did not want to do as I was told.
In the end, I had no recourse but to do precisely that. I could get no message widened played games and fished off the Bridge. They all seemed to know one another. That was the oddest thing to me. Here there were so many of them, such a great gathering of families, yet all so familiar.

It was not that way at court. There were many families at court, to be sure, and often the husband would be in the King’s household as an attendant in the Privy Chamber, for example, and his wife serve the Queen as lady-of-the-Bedchamber and his children be pages and maids of honour. They were entitled to lodgings at court, which they usually accepted, and so the Palace might house some two hundred families. But it was not a close group, and there never was such camaraderie as I saw that June night among the bridge-dwellers.

We wound through the streets in the very heart of London. Houses here were closely packed, and each must have sheltered twenty inhabitants, judging from the number pouring out into the street. They were celebrating the end of their working day, and for a few hours would revel in the fading violet light.

As we turned west and went past St. Paul’s and then left the city by the Ludgate, I suddenly knew where we were bound. We crossed the little bridge over the stinking, sluggish Fleet River and were soon there, at the Bishop of Salisbury’s house.

It was almost full dark now. Father dismounted and bade me do the same. Once we were standing side by side before the Bishop’s door, he gripped my arm and said harshly, “Now you will tell the Bishop you are here to make a solemn protestation against your betrothal to Princess Katherine. You will sign papers saying it troubles your conscience. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” I said dully. So Father meant to have it both ways: an open betrothal, a secret disclaimer. The dowry business had not been settled. I had heard it from Brandon. People talked freely before him, and he in turn told me what I needed to know.

Father gave me a shove and indicated that I was to knock for entrance. The Bishop opened promptly; it had clearly been arranged in advance.

“The Prince is sore troubled in his conscience about the betrothal to his brother’s widow,” said Father. “He is here to assuage that conscience.”

The Bishop murmured sympathetically and led us in. The papers were already spread out on his work table, neatly lettered, with a large space on the bottom for my signature.

“He is anguished,” said Father. He played his part well.

“Ah,” said the Bishop. “And what troubles you, my son?”

Father had not rehearsed this with me. I had no idea of what to say, except the truth. “The thought of the Princess in my brother’s bed torments me! I cannot bear it!”

Yes, that was true. The thought of her and Arthur together was repugnant to me. I wanted her entirely to myself, for myself. Yet she had lain with him....

“Because it would be incestuous,” supplied the Bishop. “To uncover thy brother’s nakedness, as the Scriptures say.”

“No ...” I wanted to tell him it was not so much because Arthur was my brother as that he was—had been—a man. I would have felt the same no matter who iShe looked horrified. I could make out a pale face and the great, open O of her mouth. “Henry!” she whispered. “It is a sacrilege—”

“I meant no disrespect for the Sacrament. But oh, Katherine, I had to see you!” I reached my hand out and grasped hers. “Three years! Three years they haven’t let me see you, or speak to you, or—”

“I ... know.” Her voice was soft and her accent heavy. Possibly she had understood very few of my words.

“And you are my betrothed! I am—I am responsible for you.” Where I had gotten that notion I cannot say—certainly not from Father. It must have been from the knightly tales I still doted on. “It distresses me that you are alone, and have so little.”

She flared. “And who told you that?” Spanish pride—my first glimpse of it.

“It is well known. Everybody says—”

“I have no need for pity!”

(Of course not. But for love, my dearest Katherine—” My other hand sought hers. “I love you!”

She looked discomfited, as well she might. “We must go back,” was all she finally said.

“No one will find us here. Not for another hour,” I insisted. “Oh, stay a little! Talk with me. Tell me—tell me what you do, how you spend your hours.”

She leaned forward. Our faces were only a few inches away in the close, warm darkness. “I—I pray. And read.
And do needlework. And write the King my father. And”—this so low I had to strain to hear it—“I think of you, my Lord.”

I was so excited I could hardly refrain from embracing her. “Is that true? And I think of you, my Lady.” If only I had had my lute and been some other place, I could have sung to her, sung of my love. I had already composed several ballads to that effect, and practised them well. “I will wed you, Kate,” I promised, with absolutely no authority to do so. “I swear it! As soon as possible.”

“You promised to wed me on your fourteenth birthday. That was a year ago,” she said slowly.

“I”—I could not tell her of the hideous “denial” I had made—been forced to make. “I know,” I said. “But I mean to, and soon. The King—”

“The King does not mean you to wed me. That is clear. I am twenty years old, and no child—as others may be.”

That seemed unnecessarily cruel to say to her only champion and protector. “I cannot help my age, my Lady. I was not free to choose the day of my birth. But I am not so young as you and others may think.” With those cryptic words (I had no idea then, and have none today, precisely what I meant by them), I squeezed her hand once more.

“You shall see!” Then I whispered, “We had best leave. Priests will about be soon.”

She rose hastily and gathered her skirts. A light lemon scent came to me, floating over the stale incense. Then she was gone.

A moment later I stepped out of the confessional alcove, well pleased with my successful intrigue. I kneltified that the scurrilous rumors about Fra Diego were lies. She had been too distressed by the thought of my desecrating the confessional by my innocent rendezvous. She was clearly a deeply religious, pious woman.

WILL:

And better would it have been for Harry had she not been so “religious” and “pious.” If only she had cavorted with that disgusting friar (who, incidentally, was later deported for gross immorality in London—imagine that!—in London!), it would have been worth an earldom to him during Harry’s divorce campaign. But no, Katherine was pure. How Harry ever got any children on her is one of the mysteries of matrimony. Perhaps the Catholics are right in declaring marriage a sacrament. Sacraments bestow “grace to do that which is necessary,” do they not?

It is interesting to note that even at this tender age, Harry used the Church for his own purposes. I have no doubt that, had she consented, he would have cheerfully copulated with her in the shadow of the altar itself.
HENRY VIII:

I now had a Mission: to rescue the Princess from her tower of imprisonment, as a proper knight should do. And being in love (as evidenced by the rush of excitement I felt whenever I pictured her) made it all the more imperative.

Father was preparing to go on one of his summer “progresses,” which promised me freedom for the few weeks he was away. Once I had longed to accompany him and been hurt when he excluded me; now I just wished him gone.

Considering that Father disliked go/div>

On August first, the customary Lammas Mass was held in the Chapel Royal, in which a loaf of bread made from the first harvested grain of the season was brought up to the altar. That afternoon the King departed for his progress. He would not return until near Michaelmas at the end of September, when the year had begun to turn and slip toward winter. There was always goose on Michaelmas, a hearty autumnal dish.

I sat in an upper window, watching the royal party gather in the courtyard below. It was hot and sultry, and autumn and Michaelmas seemed a long way off. I felt dizzy with freedom. Everyone was going on the progress. I could see Fox and Ruthal and Thomas Howard and Thomas Lovell, as well as Father’s two finance ministers, Empson and Dudley. The King must think of finances, if not in the country sunlight, then late at night.

Only Archbishop Warham had stayed behind, and my grandmother Beaufort. The nobles and court dignitaries not accompanying the King would return to their own estates, as no business would be transacted at court during the King’s absence. Business followed him, and court was wherever he happened to be.

But there would be little business, because the whole world, it seemed, was lying idle during those golden weeks of August.

They were golden to me. I spent them in almost continual sport, participating in forbidden jousts and foot combats at the barrier with my companions, risking my person time and again. Why? I cannot tell, even now. Yet I sought danger as a man on the desert seeks water. Perhaps because it had been denied me for so long. Perhaps because I wished to test myself, to see at what point my bravery would break, to be replaced by fear. Or perhaps it is simpler than that. “Youth will needs have dalliance,” I myself wrote, and this was one form of dalliance, a knightly, death-defying one....

When I remember those contests, I cannot help but believe that Providence spared me, held me back from a severe punishment. It was that summer of 1506 cost Bryan his eye; and one of my comrades died from a blow in the head while jousting. The curious thing is that immediately after his accident, he seemed well enough. But that night he suddenly died. One of Linacre’s assistants (for Linacre had gone with the King) told me it is often so in head injuries. The bleeding takes place inside the skull, where it cannot be felt or stopped.

We were shaken, frightened—and young, so that in just a few days’ time we were back riding toward one another on horseback. Thus quickly and naturally do we kill one another in memory as well as in deed.

At night we would sup together, and then play our lutes and talk of our future conquests in France, where we would be brothers-in-arms. It was a good time for us, a little pause between what had come before and what must come after.

ote,Late at night, alone in my chamber, I found myself loth to sleep. Now that I was no longer confined, I relished my solitude after a day of boisterous companionship.

At Greenwich I had two windows in my chamber. One faced east, the other, south. The eastern one had a window seat, and there I found myself often, near midnight. It was always darkest in the eastern part of the sky. By mid-August the slow, lingering twilights had gone, and night came earlier. The stars were exceptionally clear now. I tried to pick them out, as I had been studying astronomy. I knew a great number of the constellations already. The heavens and the stars intrigued me. I was impressed that eclipses and other phenomena could be predicted by mathematicians. I wanted to learn how it was done. Already they knew that the third full moon from now would be partly shadowed. How?

I wanted to learn all things; to experience all things; to stretch and stretch until I reached the end of myself, and
found ... I knew not what.

The small casement window was open where I sat. A hot gush of wind came in, and there was a distant rumble. Far away I could see bright flashes. There would be a storm. The candles and torches in my chamber were dancing.

The wind was from the west. Without thinking, I felt myself at one with that wind, that hot, questing wind. I took my lute, and immediately the tune and the words came, as if they had always been there:

_O Western wind_  
_When wilt thou blow_  
_The small rain down can rain?_  
_Christ, that my love were in my arms_  
_And I in my bed again._

Summer ended, and the King returned. Within a few hours of his arrival, he summoned me to his chamber. Someone had told him about the tournaments. If I had not expected it, I should have. There are no secrets at court.

I fortified myself for the interview by drinking three cups of claret in rapid succession. (One of the changes I had instigated in Father’s absence was an abundant supply of unwatered wine in my chamber.)

Father was in his favourite place: his work closet. (It was popularly referred to as his “counting house” since he did most of his finances there.) He was wrestling with a great mass of chewed papers when I arrived, his head bent over a veritable ball of them. I noticed, for the first time, how grey his hair was. He was without his customary hat, and the torchlight turned the top of his head to silver. Perhaps that was why he never appeared in public without a head-covering of some sort.

“Curse this monkey!” He gestured toward the little creature, now impertinently crouching near the Royal Seal. “He has destroyed my diary!” His voice was anguished. “It is gone!”

Evidently the monkey had decided to turn the King’s private papers into a nest, first by shredding the paper and then by trampling it.

“Perhaps you should put him in the royal menagerie, Sire,” I said. _Six months ago._ I had always hated the creature, who refused to be trained like a dog for his natural functions, yet could not imitate humans in the matter either.

“Yes,” he said curtly. (”pretenders”) persisted in tickling Yorkist fancies and harbouring pretenders and claimants to the English throne. Father had had to fight three pitched battles to win and defend his crown, and I, most likely, would have to do the same. How would I fare on the battlefield? I might make a good showing on the rigorously prescribed area of the tournament field, but a true battle was something else. Richard III had been brave, and a good fighter, it was said ... but he was hacked in a dozen places, and his naked body slung over an old horse after the battle. His head bobbed and struck a stone bridge in crossing and was crushed, but no matter, he was dead....

There would be fighting, and a test, sometime, of whether I was worthy to be King. And I shrank from it. Yes, I must tell it: I did not want the test and prayed for it to fall elsewhere, at some other time, on some other man. I was afraid. As it came closer, I no longer wished to be King, so acute was my fear of failure. When I was a little younger, I had blithely assumed that since God had chosen me for the kingship, He would protect me in all my doings. Now I knew it was not so simple. Had He protected Saul? Henry VI? He had set up many kings only to have them fall, to illustrate something of His own unsearchable purpose. He used us as we use cattle or bean-plants. And no man knew what his own end or purpose was. A fallen king, a foolish king, made a good example of something, was part of the mysterious cycle.

The year I was seventeen, there were but two overriding concerns at court: when would the King die, and how would he die? Would he expire peacefully in his sleep, or would he remain an invalid for months, perhaps years, becoming cruel and distracted on account of the constant pain? Would he lie abed carrying on his affairs of state, or would he become incapable, leaving the realm in effect without a King for an unknown stretch of time?
And what of Prince Henry? Who would rule for him? The King had appointed no Protector, although surely the Prince could not rule by himself. Such were their fears.

Outwardly, things went on the same as ever. Father continued to meet with ambassadors and discuss treaties, to haggle over the precise meaning of this phrase or that as if the outcome would concern him in five years’ time. He would stop every few minutes to cough blood, as naturally as other men cleared their throats. He kept a quantity of clean linens by his side for this purpose. In the morning a stack of fresh white folded cloths was brought to his bedside; when he retired, a pile of bloody, wadded ones was taken away.

Father convened the Privy Council to meet by his bedside, and I was present at a number of these meetings. They were dull and concerned exclusively with money: the getting of it, the lending of it, the protecting of it. Empson and Dudley, his finance ministers, were unscrupulous extortionists. Evidently a King’s main concern (to be attended to every waking moment) was the chasing of money. It seemed sordid. Was Alexander the Great concerned with such things? Did Caesar have to fuss about Calpurnia’s dowry?

For Katherine’s dowry still had not been settled to Father’s satisfaction. He continued to berate Ferdinand’s ambassador and threaten to send Katherine back, to marry me to a French princess, and so on. He quite enjoyed it, I think, as other men enjoy bear-baiting. And it kept his mind from the bloody linens.

But the minds of everyone else at court black? The laundryman and washwomen were paid handsomely for this information.

At the Christmas festivities Father continued his slow, agonizing Dance of Death, while by convention all onlookers pretended not to see. It was treason to “imagine” the King’s death but at the same time not humanly possible to avoid it.

He continued playing political chess, using his two remaining unmarried children as his principal pawns and collateral. In a macabre (or perhaps only self-deceptive) gesture, he included himself in the marriage negotiations along with me and Mary. Just before New Year’s he put the finishing touches on his grand Triple Alliance, a confusing welter of marriages designed to weld the Habsburgs and the Tudors into a splendid family edifice. He himself was to become the bridegroom of Lady Margaret of Savoy, Regent of the Netherlands; I was to marry a daughter of Duke Albert of Bavaria; and thirteen-year-old Mary was to marry nine-year-old Charles, grandson of both King Ferdinand and Maximilian, and in all probability a future Holy Roman Emperor. (Although the Holy Roman Emperor must be elected, the electors seem singularly blind to the merits of any candidates outside the Habsburg family. It is no more an “election” than that of the Papacy, but is for sale.)

WILL:

To the highest bidder, as Henry and Wolsey discovered firsthand when they tried to buy the election of the Holy Roman Emperor in 1517 for Henry, and then the Papal election of 1522 for Wolsey. Those offices do not come cheap, and Henry and his pompous, puffed-up ass of a chancellor were simply not willing to pay the full market value. Henry sometimes showed a streak of perverse frugality—perhaps as a sentimental gesture to the memory of his father?

HENRY VIII:

Happy with this accomplishment, the King retired to his death-chamber. He went into it shortly after New Year’s Day, 1509, and never left it again. He chose Richmond as the place where he wished to die.

Yet the outward pose must be maintained. The King was not dying, he was merely indisposed; not weak, merely tired; not failing, merely resting. Every day he sent for me, and I spent several hours at his side, but he stubbornly refused to confide anything of real importance to me. He must play his part, as I mine.

When I came into his chamber, I must not remark upon his one luxurious concession to dying: the logs piled high in the fireplace and the abnormal warmth of the room. Nor must I sniff or allude in any way to the heavy perfumes
and incense employed to mask the odour of illness and death. The rose scent was cloying, almost nauseating, but eventually I became used to it—after a fashion. I was to be always alert and cheerful, to appear as blind and insensitive as Father had once pronounced me to be.

In spite of the splendid large windows, with their hundreds of clear, small panes set like jewels in a frame, the hangings were ordered closed, shutting out the abundant light. From where he lay, Father could have looked out upon fields and sky, but he chose not to do so. Instead he lay on his back on a long couch, surrounded by pillows and the ever-present small linens. He would talk idly, or say nothing at all, just stare sadly at the crucifix above the small altar at the opposite side of the room. The trees were in full bloom, and a bloated moon—not quite full—illuminated them. They looked like rows of ghostly maidens, sweet and young. Below me the Thames flowed swiftly with the new spring-water, sparkling in the moonlight as it rushed past.

It was the first time since dawn that I had been alone, and I felt a shuddering relief. Day after day in that death-chamber...

I walked slowly through the ghostly orchard. The shadows were peculiarly sharp, and the moonlight almost blue. I cast a long shadow, one that moved silently between the crooked, still ones of the trees.

“—dead soon. He can’t last.”
I stopped at the unexpected sound of voices. They seemed unnaturally clear and hard in the open night air.

“How old is he, anyway?”

“Not so old. Fifty-two, I believe.”

The voices were closer. They were two boatmen who had just tied up their boat at the landing and were walking toward the palace.

“He has not been a bad King.”

“Not if you remember Richard.”

“Not many care to.” They laughed.

“What of the new King?”

There was a pause. “He’s a youngling. It is said he cares for nothing but sport.”

“And women?”

“No, not women. Not yet! He is but seventeen.”

“Time enough if one is disposed that way.”

“Aye, but he’s not.”

They were almost level with me now. If they turned they would see me. But they did not and continued trudging toward the servants’ entrance of the palace.

“How much longer, think you?”

The other man made a noise indicating lack of knowledge or interest.

My heart was pounding. In that instant I resolved never to allow myself to overhear talk about myself again. They had said nothing of importance, and yet it had distressed me. The way they spoke so offhandedly about Father’s life and my character... as though they knew us, had proprietary rights over us.

WILL:

It was a resolve Henry seemed singularly unable to keep—not to listen in on conversations. (Happily for me, as this penchant of his is what led to our meeting.)

HENRY VIII:

For them, Father’s passing was of little consequence, as they assumed that it did not presage another bloodbath or upheaval.

But to me? I did not want him to die and leave me... leave me alone. I loved him. I hated him. I had not known
until that moment just how much I relied on his presence, on his being the prow of the boat upon which I rode, protected from the spray and all other discomforts inherent in the vo>

I felt great pity for him. His strange vagabond life had precluded any opportunity to have normal boyhood friends, to make those bonds that last for life. I was deeply grateful that I had been given friends such as Carew, Neville, and Henry Courtenay, and I felt privileged, as they were precious to me. I remember the thought, which came to me vividly and insistently. (How honest I am to record it, in light of their subsequent treason. How much more wise I would have myself appear!)

“I would not be a hermit,” was all I answered.

“Then you would not be King,” he replied softly. “And I see now that you are singularly unsuited to be anything else. You were right— it is God’s doing. And you must—” He was interrupted by a fit of coughing so violent that blood flew out of his mouth and splattered on the floor. “A priest—” he whispered, when it had stopped. “Wolsey.”

I rushed away from his bedside, seeking Wolsey. In the dim chamber, made more so by the clouds of smoke, I could not see him. Was he at the altar? I ran to it, but did not find him. He must be in the anteroom beyond. I ran at the heavy doors, bursting them open, and stood panting on the other side. Wolsey was sitting on a bench, calmly reading a Psalter. Even at that confused moment, I was struck by his almost unnatural composure.

“My fa—”—I corrected myself—“the King calls you.”

Wolsey rose, and together we entered the Privy Chamber.

“Go to him!” I almost pushed Wolsey toward Father’s bed. But he did not move toward him. Instead he dropped to his knees by my side.

“You Highness,” he said.

I looked about me. No one was facing Father; they were all turned toward me. Wolsey had seen it, whereas I had been blind.

“The King is dead,” said Linacre, coming toward me slowly. I saw Father lying still on the cushions, his mouth gaping open.

“Long live the King!” someone shouted from the back of the chamber, obscenely loud. Then someone else ripped asunder the closed velvet window hangings and wrenched open the casement windows. A flood of sunlight and wind rushed in, dispersing the clouds of sickroom incense.

“Long live the King!” Others took up the cry, until the chamber resounded with it as Father lay unhearing, forgotten.

My sister Mary came to me. I reached out to put my arm around her, to share our strange grief at being orphans. Instead she, too, fell to her knees in homage.

“You Highness,” she said, taking my hand and kissing it.

“Mary! You must not—”

“You are my King, to whom I owe all obedience,” she said, turning her shining young face up to mine.

Shaking, I pulled my hand away. I pushed past Wolsey and confusedly sought a little-known door from the anteroom, which led directly to the orchard where I had stood only a few nights ago. I sought it as though it had some magic, some comfort for me.

I pushed open the heavy, studded door and came outside, dazzled by the r. It was Wolsey.

“You Grace,” he said. “I stand ready to help you. As the late King’s almoner, I am well acquainted—”

Already the self-seekers were at me. “I myself am well acquainted with the late King,” I cut him off.

“You misunderstand me, Your Grace. I meant with the ... distressing business that is attendant upon a royal death. The obsequies, the funeral, the interment—”

“Father has already arranged for that.” I pulled at the door, but somehow he prevented me.

“Of course, with the final details,” he persisted. He was extremely persistent, this Wolsey. “The magnificent tomb he has commissioned from Torrigiano, the dazzling chapel in the Abbey, already near completed. But the personal details, such unhappy things as the embalming, the lying-in-state, the funeral effigy—”

“Minor things,” I said, trying once more to detach myself.

“Distasteful things,” he said pointedly. “Things dealing with ugliness, when your mind should be engaged elsewhere. You have much to attend to, have you not? Where is the son who could joyfully oversee his father’s funeral? And you must be joyful, Your Grace: you must rejoice, even as the Kingdom does. No gloominess, lest you remind them of—” He broke off tactfully. A rehearsed break. Yet he had touched me on vital matters.

“Then see to it!” I cried in frustration.

He bowed serenely in compliance as I wrenched open the door and at last found myself in the Presence Chamber, alone.

I walked across that large area, strangely plain in spite of the dais with the carved throne-chair upon it. It was situated so that the petitioner must cross the entire length of the room before seeing the King’s face. It was effective,
no doubt, yet the overwhelming feeling of the room was of greyness, bleakness, which no amount of royal presence could overcome.

And from there I passed into Father’s private apartments, where he actually lived. But he was dead, I reminded myself....

The great Privy Chamber, so lately turned into a dying chamber, was already changed. The incense burners were gone, the curtains opened. And the bed was empty.

“Where have you taken him?” I cried.

“The cry of Mary Magdalen,” said a voice behind me. I whirled around and saw Wolsey. Again, Wolsey. He must have followed me. “‘They have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid him.’”

“Do you seek to impress me with your knowledge of Scripture?” I said blandly. “All priests know such; I as well. I asked where you have taken him.”

Wolsey looked apologetic. “There were things to be attended to immediately. I regret I did anticipate my commission. They have taken him to do the death-mask, then to disembowel and embalm him.”

“‘I see.’ It was sickening. I looked around, feeling a great need of wine. Then I felt a cup pushed into my hand, like a wish fulfilled. Wolsey again. I drank deeply, hoping to dispel the strange se I almost laughed. It was all magic. I took another draught of wine. Ambrosia. I was immortal now, like a god. No, not immortal, I corrected myself. Kings die. Yet they are gods while they live....

I looked about me. This chamber was Father’s no longer, but mine. I walked, a little unsteadily, to the door leading to the King’s closet. This was where Father had spent much time, where he had summoned me often. (The term *privy chamber* was a misnomer. It was not private at all, but was the place where everyone personally attendant on the King converged: all the gentlemen and grooms of the chamber, the ushers, pages, servers, barbers, and so on. Beyond that, however, only select persons were allowed entrance. Thus the “closet” was truly the first privy chamber in a series of private rooms.) I flung open the door and stood looking at the bare, pitifully furnished room, recalling all the times I had been humiliated there. The hated monkey still chattered and jumped, even now at liberty to roam.

“Take this creature away,” I said to the page. (I regret to record this as my second royal command.) I reached out and grabbed it by the scruff of the neck, thrust it into the boy’s arms, and said, “Dispose of it. I care not where!”

The boy took the animal in his arms and carried it away. How easy that was! I stood amazed. Something I had had to endure for years, suddenly gone, swept aside with a word and a gesture. I laughed, delighted. Then I looked about the room, planning other changes. Was it cold? There would be fires. Was the desk old and lacking drawers? There would be a new Italian one, inlaid with rare woods. Was the room old-fashioned? Carpenters would repanel, sculptors redecorate, painters gild.

From there I made my way into the Retiring Room—the first exclusively private royal room, and one to which even I had been denied access—the room where the King took his nightly rest. Father had not slept there in many months, but his great bed (eleven feet on both sides) still squatted in the middle of the room, like a Norman tower. I walked around it, slowly. The hangings were moth-eaten and shabby. I raised my hand and patted one fold, and a great puff of dirt flew out, choking me. Then—I know not what possessed me—I began striking the hangings frantically, beating them, raising clouds of dust. And I felt near tears ... for what, I know not.

My tears and the dust drove me from the bed, and the room race. The horses saddled, those who are to accompany you dressed and waiting.”

Suddenly I hated him, hated his smug knowledge. “And who are those?” I asked. “I gave you—gave no one!—instructions—”

“That those who love you,” he said blandly. “Your dear companions and your sister. They will ride with you to the Tower, rest with you there. No Council members, no aged ones today. It is a day for youth.” He smiled depreciatingly, as if to exclude himself.

“You as well,” I said to Brandon. “You must ride with me.”

The day was fair, warm, already ripening toward summer. It charged my blood. I came out into the Palace courtyard to see many people waiting: my friends, my supporters and well-wishers. As I appeared, a great shout went up, a deafening roar. They cried themselves hoarse, their lusty voices rising in the spring air.

And suddenly all was swept away: all hesitation, all awkwardness, all fear ... borne to oblivion on the warm wind. I was King, and glad of it. All would be well; I sensed it, like a promise....

I mounted my great bay, a horse I had ridden in the lists and knew well, and turned him toward the Palace gates. As they swung open, I was stunned to see the unimaginably vast gathering of common people, surrounding the Palace grounds, stretching away on either side of the road to London as far as the eye could see, six, seven deep. Sighting me, they sent up a great cry. And I felt their presence as a kind, friendly thing, nothing to fear. They shouted for me, blessed me, cheered me. Without thinking, I swept off my head-covering and held my arms up, and
they cheered all the louder. And I was warmed all over: the sun on my head, their approval around me.

All along the way it was the same: cheering people, standing many layers thick along the riverbanks, as the strengthening sun sparkled the water. We shared that moment, they and I, making a mystic bond between us, exulting in that ultimate luxury: the beginning of things.

We did not reach the Tower until nightfall, so slow was our progress. The city walls of London glowed pink in the setting sun. As we crossed the Bridge, I saw yet more people leaning from the upper stories of their high houses, trying to glimpse me. They had had no time to prepare for this unannounced royal procession, yet they had strung the narrow passageway thick with garlands of fruit-blossoms that swayed in the brisk evening wind, showering us with petals of apple, cherry, pear....

Torch were already lit in the April twilight, great golden flares which turned the fluttering petals to gold as they fell.

Now it all becomes a blur, like the aura from those torches. At the Tower, more trumpets. I am there again, I am seventeen....

I am escorted inside the fortress by the royal guard, costumed in the April green and white Tudor colours. I go to the White Tower, dismount, throw off my cloak, call for wine. Then am overwhelmed by tiredness. The magic is gone; my legs ache, my eyes burn....

The others follow me inside: Brandon, Neville, Carew, Compton. Someone brings wine in great goblets. Neville plucks two from the tray and hands me one in the familiar, careless gesture he commonly uses, turns to clap his hand on my shoulder, suddenly stops, the familiar gesture frozen, the old companions now King and subject. His blue eyes, so like mine, register dismay.

Of the nine councilmen, all were accomplished. Seven were honest, two were not: Empson and Dudley, Father’s erstwhile finance ministers. In spite of the Council’s attempts to shield its own, lesser Crown servants managed to reach my ears with information regarding their unscrupulous methods of money-collecting and “law enforcement,” and how they were despised throughout the realm by noblemen and poor alike. It was they who had so tarnished my father’s reputation amongst the people in the closing years of his reign.

I ordered them arrested, and exempted from the general pardon. I cancelled the bonds they held for the payment of their extorted loans. They were traitors, for their victims were “by the undue means of certain of the Council of our said late father, thereunto driven contrary to law, reason and good conscience, to the manifest charge and peril of the soul of our said late father,” as my proclamation said.

They had imperilled my father’s immortal soul: for that they deserved to die. They were executed, as befitted their evil.

WILL:

So the tender-hearted youth, who so shrank from “political” executions, could be roused by “moral” crimes? He would not execute for a title, but for a soul....

HENRY VIII:

Of the seven remaining councillors, three were churchmen: Archbishop Warham, the Chancellor; Bishop Fox, Lord Privy Seal; Bishop Ruthal, Secretary. For the laymen, there were Thomas Howard, Earl of Surrey, Lord Treasurer; George Talbot, Earl of Shrewsbury, Lord High Steward; Charles Somerset, Lord Herbert of Raglan, Lord Chamberlain; Sir Thomas Lovell, Chancellor of the Exchequer and Constable of the Tower.

They met at half-noon every day, regardless of the amount of business at hand. The meetings were exceptionally boring: the first one I attended directed itself to an hour-long debate as to whether the expense for the late King’s coffin should be deducted from the Crown’s privy purse or from general household expenses.
Yet money was important, I realized that. What I did not realize was the extent of the fortune I had inherited, because the Councilmen tried to obscure this information and did everything to keep it from “the youngling,” lest he squander it. In the end it was Wolsey who secured the exact figures and presented them to me, totted up in his neat writing.

As I read them, I tried to keep my expression blank. It was a Herculean task—for the figures were so large they were, simply, unbelievable.

“Are these correct?” I questioned Wolsey, evenly.

“Indeed,” he replied. “I got them from three separate sources, each one entirely trustworthy. And I have checked them myself four times.”

“I see.” I put down the small, dangerous paper. It sany King of England had ever been—richer, most likely, than any king in the world. (Except the Infidel Sultan, about whose finances even Wolsey was ignorant.) I was numb.

“Thank you,” I said, finally.

I hardly noticed Wolsey as he turned and exited.

Rich; I was rich. Correction: the Crown was rich. Whatever the King desired, he could have. An army? Done, and outfitted with the latest weapons. New palaces? As many as I liked. And people ... I could buy them, use them to adorn my court, just as I would select jewels.

So whenever I think back upon those first, halcyon days of my reign, I see but a single colour: gold. Shining gold, dull gold, burnished gold, glittering gold. Cloth-of-gold and golden rings and golden trumpets.

I struck Father’s treasure chests like Moses striking the rock in the wilderness, and a dazzling river of gold poured forth. The Crown was staggeringly wealthy, as Wolsey had indicated. Wealthy enough that I could invite any subject with a contested debt, an unredressed grievance, or merely a complaint against the Crown to come forward.

We were overwhelmed by the response; hundreds of people came, and I had to appoint extra lawyers just to attend to their claims, most stemming from the cruel extractions made by Empson and Dudley.

The majority of the claims were decided in favor of the plaintiffs, and the Crown paid out. She, who had vowed that she would die in England rather than return to Spain unmarried, was about to break her vow.

If she stood ready to break her vow, I did not. She was pledged to me, and I was bound to her. I summoned her to come to the Privy Chamber next day.

She arrived exactly on time. I felt a flicker of disappointment as I saw her, small and poorly dressed, coming toward me across the great floor. She looked much older, and less pretty, than I had remembered. But I had not seen her in full light for almost six years, while I had gone from boy to man. Still, this was my betrothed....

“Katherine,” I said, coming to her and holding out my hands. I towered over her. She was ... squat. No, petite, I corrected myself. “My wife.”

She looked confused. “No. You are to marry a Habsburg. De Puebla has begun transferring my dowry to Bruges.”

“To hell with the dowry!” I said. “I have been left a fortune, the like of which no English King has ever been bequeathed. I do not need your dowry; I do not want it. It stinks of negotiations, subterfuge, lies, bargains. I want you, Katherine, not your dowry.”

She merely stared at me. I had a sudden dread: perhaps she still knew little English? I started toward her, and she drew away.

“Please, ne Boleyn, Jane Seymour, or Catherine Howard took place remains a mystery to most people.

HENRY VIII:

It was the third time I had stood beside Katherine to recite marriage vows in one form or another. The first time I was ten, the second time twelve, and now I was seventeen.

I try hard to remember that day, as what we later became blots it out. I was proud, and insisted that Katherine
wear my wedding gift to her: a necklace of gigantic pearls, each one as big as a marble. I did not know then that pearls are the symbols of tears, and that the common people say that for each pearl the bride wears, her husband will give her cause for weeping. Nor would I have believed it, then. As we stepped out onto the church porch, silvery drops began to fall: a sun-shower. Another omen, pointing the same way ... you will shed a tear for each raindrop that falls on your wedding day. But to us it felt like the sprinkling of holy water, a special benediction and blessing.

Laughing, we clasped hands and ran across the courtyard to Greenwich Palace, where we would have our private wedding feast.

Poor Katherine had no family in England, but no matter, so I thought; I was to be her family now. My grandmother Beaufort was there, although she was ailing, and my eleven-year-old cousin Henry Courtenay, Earl of Devon. There was my quasi-uncle, Arthur Plantagenet, the natural son of Edward IV and one of his mistresses. He was some nine years older than I. Other members of my family were noticeable by their absence: my cousin Edmund de la Pole, Duke of Suffolk, still imprisoned in the Tower, and his brother Richard, fled abroad to France. It was a small feast.

But it was a merry one. There was almost visible relief on Grandmother Beaufort’s face. Her grandson was safely King and had taken a wife, and the future of the family was no longer in jeopardy. She could die now, and she did, just three weeks later.

While I sat beside Katherine, I could not stop staring at her, in disbelief that she was to be mine. Nor could she keep from looking at me—at the ten-year-old boy who had been her friend, now a boy no longer, but a King.

Yet looking at her (all the while the minstrels were playing and the seemingly endless procession of dishes was presented) only made me more anxious and preoccupied. I wished the feast to be over; I wished it to go on forever.

Shall I confess it? I was a virgin. Unlike my companions of the tiltyard and the exercise field, I had never had a woman. How could I, guarded and sequestered as I was, and constantly watched by the King? Oh, there had been the customary invitations from the serving girls. But I had no desire for them—perhaps because they offered themselves so freely. Or perhaps because I was embarrassed to reveal my virginal state, which I assumed would be obvious, and then they would laugh at me in the kitchens and the laundry. In the beginning it was simply that I was too young, and was frightened; then, later, ironically, I was too old.

And now I must take Katherine to bed. The young King, proclaimed a second Hector, another Lancelot, and so on, was as inexperienced as his older, sickly brother had been before him. And with the same woman. I remembered how, with the blithe ignorance of a ten-year-old, I had disdained his timidity and lack of self-assurance.

We were alone in the Retiring Room. The entire humiliating court ritual of “putting the couple to bed” had been duly observed. Oua to be prescribed: there was nothing else one could do effectively to ease that desire.

Katherine seemed to be a virgin. But then, it is hard for one virgin to be sure of another. Thus, years later, when the controversy raged about this very question, I kept a diplomatic silence, lest I betray myself.
WILL:

All of England went on a general holiday for approximately half a year—from old Henry’s death in April until the autumn winds blew. There was a great rejoicing among the people, from the lowest (with whom I consorted in those days) to (I assume) the highest. The mood pervaded everything at the time but is very difficult to describe now: a feeling of jubilation and expansiveness. They were ready to embrace Young Harry (as they called him), permit him anything, then forgive him for it. They almost longed for him to sin, so that they could show him their great acceptance.

But he did not sin. He behaved well, as if he were following a private code entitled “The Honour of a Prince.” Not only was he young and handsome and rich, but he attended five Masses a day, had honoured his youthful promise to make the Spanish princess his wife, and had turned the gloomy court of his father into a glittering pavilion of wisdom, wit, and talent. The people waited anxiously to see what sort of Coronation he would give them. He did not disappoint them.

HENRY VIII:

I chose Midsummer’s Day for our Coronation. Midsummer’s Day, 1509. Even today I cannot write those words without stirring the scent of green summer from the dry leaves of an old man’s memory. High summer almost forty years ago, still preserved like pressed flowers in a few withered minds....

But that day there were thousands upon thousands who saw the young Henry and Katherine winding their way through the London streets to their Coronation in Westminster Abbey. They shrieked and held out their hands to us. I can still see those faces, healthy (perhaps slightly flushed with the wine I had ordered for the populace?) and filled with joy. They wanted me and I wanted them, and on both sides we believed we would live forever in this moment.

When we reached the Abbey, I dismounted while Katherine was helped from her litter by her ladies-in-waiting. She was wearing the costume of a virgin bride, all in white, with her golden-brown hair hanging loose. I held out my hand and took hers. Before us stretched a great white carpet over which we must walk before entering the Abbey. A thousand people lined the walkway.

Suddenly it was all very familiar. Once before, I had led Katherine over just such a walkway and into a great church. For a moment I had a chill, as if a raven had flown across the sun. Then it was gone, so that I could turn to her and whisper, “Do you remember another time when you walked beside me on a state occasion?”

She looked up at me (then, she had looked straight across). “Yes, my Lord. When you were but ten. But already then I sensed that you were—must be—”

She broke off as we reached the doors of the Abbey, where Archbishop Warham waited for us. Just then a great cry went up behind us, and I turned to see the people falling on the white carpet, attackd shears. They would cut out pieces to be saved, to remember the day King Henry VIII was crowned, to be passed on to children and children’s children. (Where are those pieces now, I wonder?) It was a custom, I was told. Still, the sight of those flashing knives...

Within the Abbey, Katherine and I walked slowly down the great nave, with platforms and seats on either side which had been put up to enable the great lords and noble families present to witness the ceremony. Upon reaching the high altar, we separated, and I went to the ancient, scarred wooden throne-chair which had been used for Coronations for centuries. I remember thinking how crudely carved it was, how rough the wood. Then I took my place in it, and it fitted as though it had been constructed just for me.

The Archbishop faced the people and asked them in a clear, ringing voice whether they would have me for King. They shouted “aye” three times in succession, the last so loud it echoed off the great vault. I wondered (it is strange, the thoughts that come to one during such moments) whether it reached my sleeping family in their private chapel...
behind the high altar—Father, Mother, my deceased siblings Elizabeth and Edmund and the last baby, all interred there.

But this was a day for the living. Warham anointed me, and the oil was warm and pleasingly scented. Then, after my vows, he placed the heavy, jewel-encrusted crown on my head, and I prayed that I might be worthy of it, might preserve and defend it. When he said Mass, I vowed to do only good for England, upon peril of my immortal soul. I would serve her as a good and perfect knight.

Some theorists say a Coronation is but a ceremony, yet it changed me, subtly and forever: I never forgot those vows.

But shortly afterwards, as I looked back on the two months since my accession, I was surprised at how many changes had crept into my being. In April I had been a frightened seventeen-year-old; now (having had my eighteenth birthday, I considered myself much older) I was a crowned King. And nothing untoward had happened, none of the disasters I had feared: no one had challenged my right to the crown (although I had not taken Father’s advice about executing de la Pole; he was still healthy in the Tower). I had taken command of the Privy Council and the Board of Green Cloth. I had married. When Katherine told me, a month after the Coronation, that she was with child, I laughed outright. It was all so easy, this business of being King. What had I feared?

And through all those days there ran yet another shade of gold: the gold of my Katherine’s hair. Her hair as we spun in dances; her hair flying as we rode across cleared fields and sun-spotted forests; her hair falling over the pillows, her shoulders, my arms, in bed. I was happier than I had ever believed it possible for mortal man to be, so blissfully content I felt it sinful—as indeed it was.
Then it ended—abruptly, as dreams do. It ended the day Wolsey (who had created a de facto position for himself as messenger between me and the Privy Council) came to tell me that “the French emissary had arrived.”

What French emissary? I wondered. Perhaps some catastrophe had overtaken King Louis XII? I mus days of our own Henry V’s virtual conquest of France, they had recovered like a moribund man throwing off the plague. First they gained some little strength and rallied their own forces; then they pushed us back—out of Normandy, out of Aquitaine—until we clung only to Calais and a small neighbouring area. Then they began gobbling up surrounding territory: Burgundy, Brittany. Then, again, their appetite grew ever more ravenous, like that of a recovering plaguelm. Not satisfied with recovering their own lost dominions, they wished to seize others: Italy in particular. No matter that they were sworn to “universal peace” by the Treaty of Cambrai, which they had signed along with the Emperor, the Spanish, and the Pope; they invaded northern Italy nonetheless, and began threatening Venice as well.

England was also formally bound to peace with France by a treaty concluded between Father and Louis. Yet upon Father’s death it became void, and I was not sure I wished to renew it. The Pope had been issuing distressed cries for help as he saw the French encroaching upon Italy; and I had not forgotten that Louis had honoured Edmund de la Pole at court, and even now was harbouring the younger de la Pole brother, Richard. So Louis’s death would solve many problems, or at least halt the voracious appetite of the French state for a little while.

I dressed (or rather, put on my “audience clothes”—this involved the ministrations of a good half-dozen men) and made my way to the Audience Chamber. Wolsey had hurriedly summoned the Privy Council to attend, so that they were awaiting me as I took my place on the Chair of Presence.

The French emissary was ushered in—a perfumed, dandified creature. He made a long-winded greeting, which I cut off, as his reeking person offended me. He stank worse than the rose incense in Father’s death-chamber. I demanded to know his business, and at length he disclosed it. He came bearing a letter from Louis in reply to the one I had purportedly written begging my brother the Most Christian King of France to live in peace with me. He handed me the letter. It stank as well—from proximity to its carrier?

As I unrolled the letter and read it rapidly, I could feel my face growing red, as it does in moments of stress, to my embarrassment.

“What?” I said slowly. “The King of France, who dares not look me in the face—let alone make war on me!—says I sue for peace?”

The phrase “dares not look me in the face” was, I admit, a trifle overblown, but I was stunned. Someone had written a cringing, demeaning letter in my name, forged my signature, and used the Royal Seal!

“Which of you has done this?” I asked, glaring at the line of councillors on either side of the dais.

Was it Warham, my Lord Chancellor? He looked up at me mournfully, like a sad old dog.

Ruthal, the Secretary? I stared into his blackberry-like eyes, which gave nothing back.

Fox, Lord Privy Seal? He smiled smugly, protected by his churchly vestments—or so he thought.

What of the others—Howard, Talbot, Somerset, Lovell? They smiled back, blandly. None of them had the wherewithal to have done it. It must have been one of the churchmen.

I turned and made to leave the room, shaking with anger, not trusting myself to.”

I whirled. “Then give him one!” My voice rang in the large chamber, all freshly bedecked in Flemish tapestry and gilt. “You who are so adept at composing royal utterances—you may continue.” I left the room. Behind me I heard the buzz of voices—angry, bewildered.

Had I distressed them, embarrassed them? No matter. I had wanted to kill Fox, to choke his leathery neck, then flinging him out into the courtyard and let the dogs fall on him. Yet I had restricted myself to the use of words alone. At least the foppish Frenchman could not report to Louis that the English King had bodily attacked one of his own ministers.

I leaned against the other side of the door and caught my breath. It was all clear now. Father meant to rule from the grave through his three faithful councillors. That was why he had appointed no Protector: this was surer and more secretive, both of which would appeal strongly to him. So now he could lie serenely in his magnificent tomb-monument—“dwelling more richly dead than alive,” as one court wit had put it—happy in the knowledge that his untrusted, wayward son would never actually rule.

He is insensitive and stupid.... Did he think me so stupid I would not object to others’ forging my signature or using the Royal Seal? This was treason. Did he suppose me insensitive even to treason?

Within the privacy of my Retiring Room, I poured out a large cup of wine. (I was free for the moment of the unwelcome ministrations of servers.) Anger and humiliation vied for control within me, both to be eventually
replaced by a cold hardness. At length, it was not Fox I wished to punish. He had merely followed orders, remaining obedient to the King to whom he had long ago pledged loyalty. God send me such a servant!

I walked over to Father's bed. I had stripped his drab hangings from it, replaced his straw mattress with one of down, had soft-woven woollen blankets put on. I had spent his money, destroyed his furniture, broken his marriage negotiations, negated his dowry correspondence, put logs in his barren fireplaces. I had done all this, yet I had not effaced his presence from my life. He was still King in his realm and council.

I flung myself out full length on the bed. What a fool I had been! (Was Father right, then? My mind shrank from that possibility.) So I thought being King was easy? So had it been planned to be, to lull me....

I needed my own men. Or even one man. Someone not a stale remnant from Father’s reign, but entirely mine. Who? I lay staring distractedly at the carved underside of the wooden canopy, seeing cherubs and lover’s knots and hunting parties, but nothing came to my mind.

“Your Grace?” The door had opened quietly. I sat up, angry. I had not given permission....

It was Wolsey. He bore a scroll of some sort.

“Not now,” I muttered, waving him away. I had no wish to read figures. “And I gave express orders I was not to be disturbed!” So I was not obeyed even in my own private quarters.

He bowed. “I know. Yet I was able to persuade your groom ...”

Wolsey. Yes. Wolsey was my man. I was able to persuade your groom. Subtle, golden-tongued Wolsey. Why had I not thought of him? Because I was a little afraid of him, afraid of that awesome efficiency, that inexhaustible energy, coupled with that tireless, amoral mind. Yet I needed f him.

These thoughts flashed through my mind so swiftly that there was no pause before I grunted, “What do you want?”

“To bring you a transcript of what happened after your departure.” He smiled. “ ‘Twas quite humorous. I wish there was some way you could have beheld that Frenchman’s discomfiture. Fox said—”

But I was hardly listening, as I observed him critically. How clever to bring me the transcript. And his flattery was subtle. He did not praise my looks, my prowess, did not compare me to Hercules or the like. Rather, he went to the heart of the matter; he knew where I was weakest and sought to shore it up. Yes, Wolsey ... Wolsey soon took his place on the Privy Council, by my express command. I told Fox and Ruthal and Warham blandly that perhaps they would welcome another cleric to their ranks, to make an even balance with the laymen on the Council. They seemed pleased. The fools.

In spite of my preoccupation with these matters, I did not wish to neglect Katherine. I arranged entertainments for her, so that she might pass her days serenely. In particular, I went out of my way to obtain good musicians for a season at court.

After a lengthy exchange of letters, I had finally acquired a musical coup: Friar Denis Memmo, the organist from St. Mark’s in Venice. It required a great deal of gold (everything did, I was learning) as well as a discreet defrocking and reinstatement as a royal priest in my employ. But it was done, and he had come to England, bringing with him from Venice a magnificent organ. I was anxious to examine it, as I was interested in the art and science of organ construction and how this affected its tone. Now the splendid organ was installed in Greenwich Palace, and Memmo was to perform for the entire court.

Wolsey (now in charge of such minute details as well as weightier ones) had assembled all the chairs from all the privy chambers in the palace, so that everyone could be comfortably seated. He had ordered a table of light refreshments to be laid along one wall, and placed fresh candles all about—large, fine ones which would certainly last the entire recital and not make foul smoke to damage Memmo’s instrument.

Katherine and I entered the room first and sat in the large royal chairs in front. It was November now, and Katherine’s gowns had had to be let out. Her movements were altered, and that made me proud. My heir lay beneath those green silken folds, growing toward his birth.

Memmo’s performance was dazzling. He played for almost three hours, and there was no stirring in the court audience. They were enthralled.

Afterwards, although it was not far from midnight, we gathered round the long tables, laid out with prawn jellies and custard and fritters with manchet. The dishes were still moist and fresh: Wolsey’s choices. Everyone was talking
at once, and Memmo was surrounded by admirers. That pleased me. The well-prepared repast pleased me as well. I must commend Wolsey.

Just then Wolsey appeared from a small side door, as if I had called him up. He stood inconspicuously in the corner, observing his arrangements. Another man saw him and went over to him, and they conferred for a lengthy space.

Curious as to who it was, I made my way to them. Wolsey was listening raptedly deeply. It was cold and clear, a pristine autumn night. An ideal time for star-viewing; perhaps the best in the year.

Shortly before one, More appeared. He looked around, surprised at the extent to which my roof had been transformed into a facility for the study of astronomy.

“Thank you for coming, Thomas,” I said. I gestured proudly at my equipment. “It does not rival Bologna or Padua, I know, but in time—”

“Your Grace has done marvellously well in assembling this.” He strode over to my table with the charts and astrolabe and quickly examined them. “Excellent,” he pronounced.

“I have been trying to measure Auriga,” I said.

“You must sight Capella first. Then five degrees off that—”

The time passed quickly as More showed me things in the sky I had not seen before, revealed mathematical formulae for deducing the exact time from the height of a star. We talked excitedly and never noticed how light it was growing in the eastern part of the sky. He spent a great length of time figuring precisely where Aldebaran should be, then adjusting the torquetum accordingly to find it. When indeed it was there, we both laughed and cried out in joy.

“A superlative set of brass servants,” More pronounced.

“You handle them well,” I said. “What sort do you have yourself?”

He smiled and raised his finger slowly to his eyes.

“You shall have one of these! I shall order one to be made straightway, and by spring—”

“No, Your Grace.”

That brought me up sharp. “Why not?”

“I prefer to take no gifts.”

“But this would help—”

“I prefer not.” His voice was quiet, and something in the tone reminded me ... called forth a painful remembrance.... “My good Lord Henry—”

Adieu, Lord Henry ... yes, that was it. “You recited the elegy to my mother,” I said slowly, interrupting him.

“Yes, Your Grace.” The voice was the same. Why had I not recognized it earlier? Yet it was a span of nearly seven years since I had heard it....

“And wrote it as well.”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

“It was—moving.” I waited for him to reply, but he merely nodded solemnly. The growing light showed his features now, but I could read nothing on them. “It meant a great deal to me.” Again he inclined his head. “Thomas—come to court! Serve me! I have need of men such as you. I wish my court to be filled with Thomas Mores.”

“Then the presence of one more or less can hardly matter.”

I had said it wrong in my excitement. “I did not mean—I meant that your presence would be precious to me.”

“I cannot, Your Grace.”

“Why not?” I burst out. All the others had come, even from the Continent on more important things, such as finding a servant like Wolsey ready at hand, and finally to my wife, Katherine, who was pleasing to me in every way and now pleasingly great with child. I remember leaning against the window in my work closet (through which I could feel the north wind; the sash was poorly fitted) and thanking God for all my blessings.

Warham celebrated High Mass in the Chapel Royal on Christmas Day, and the entire court attended: the Royal Family and the attendants on the upper level, the rest of the household on the lower level.

Then the secular festivities began. There were masques and miming, and three fools scampered about. A great banquet with some eighty dishes (one of them being baked lampreys, my favourite). Still later, a dance in the Great Hall.
Disguised, as custom decreed, I danced with many ladies to the lively string-melodies of the rebec and the thump of the wooden xylophone. Only one woman made bold to guess my identity: Lady Boleyn, wife of Thomas Boleyn, one of my Esquires of the Body. She was a vain, tiresome woman, much given to flirtation and, as she thought, charm. She began by announcing straightway that she danced with the King; she recognized him by his strength, his manliness, his renowned dancing skill. (A clever move. Should I not be King—as her chances were only so-so that I was—then the hearer would be flattered, as she imagined; and if she were, by accident, correct, then the King himself would marvel at her astuteness.) I did not enlighten her, but let her go on about her stepchildren, who were all deserving of accolades and (now it came) positions at court. Mary, George, and Anne. (Cursed names, all! Would that I had never heard them!) I extricated myself as soon as possible.

WILL:

I am sure he did not mean to include Mary in this wish; and certainly he would not undo the children that resulted from his inability to extricate himself truly from the Boleyns. If only the daughters had been as unappealing as the mother! Incidentally, this should lay to rest the old rumour that he dallied with Lady Boleyn as well. Where this got started I cannot imagine; ill-wishers are determined to give the King as large and indiscriminate a lust as Jupiter himself.

HENRY VIII:

It was time for the musical interlude. To everyone’s surprise, I myself took my lute and went to the middle of the floor. “I have composed a song for the season,” I announced. It was not strictly true; I had composed it merely for myself, when trying to settle in my own mind exactly what I wished from life. Everyone stared back at me, yet I struck the chord and was not in the least afraid. I sang, boldly:

*Pastime with good company*
*I love and shall until I die*
*Grudge who will, but none deny,*
*So God be pleased this life will I*
*For my pastance,*
*Hunt, sing, and dance,*
*My heart is set,*
*All goodly sport*
*To my comfort*

Who shall me lep in them. Just when it should have been finished, the doors opened and two Frenchmen appeared (one could identify them as such by the excesses in their costume, so much slashing that their topcoats were virtually nonexistent), carrying something the size of a large trunk by handles on either side. Every eye in the Great Hall turned toward them as they descended the steps, slowly, carrying their burden solicitously. Their abnormally high heels clicked on the stones. They came toward me slowly, making their way to within five feet of me. Then they laid their coffin-like weight down and pulled back the covering. It was a pie, the immense size of which no one present had ever seen.

“His Most Christian Majesty Louis, King of France, presents you with this meat pie as a New Year’s gift. It is made from a gigantic boar which His Majesty himself took.” They bowed.

I stood overlooking the vast pie, as large across as a desk. The pastry was intricate and teased into various shapes, baked a pleasing golden brown.

“A sword,” I said, and one was placed in my hands. I slashed open the top of that pretty thing and was
greeted with a foul odour: all was rotten within. The boar-meat was decomposing, the filling a green slime.
   I backed away. "'Tis foul," I said.
   "As French manners," finished Wolsey, his voice loud in the hush.
   We turned toward the grinning Frenchmen. "Give your master our thanks," I said. "But my taste does not run
to rancid meat. I have a livelier appetite for fresh French things. Such as my title and inheritance. Convey this
putrefying mass back to Louis, with our compliments."
   They looked sickened, as well they might.
   "Yes, it belongs on French soil," I said. "See that it returns to its true source."

   I hated Louis. Such a calculated insult must have reply! Yet I would not, must not, upset Katherine. I must
laugh at it, belittle the insult. For the time being.
That night was the appointed time for the “impromptu” invasion of the Queen’s quarters by myself and my attendants. (Perhaps you are not aware of this today, but the Queen had her own set of chambers, quite apart from mine. This was, I am told, traditional only in England and had, through the centuries, facilitated adultery on both sides. I record the custom here simply because I foresee its passing into disuse soon. If only Anne Boleyn had not been apart from me ... or Catherine Howard...) Twelve of us had costumes of Kendall green, all velvet, with silver visors. We were to invade Katherine’s room, to burst in suddenly with a great fanfare of trumpets, to pretend to be Robin Hood and his men abducting the fair maidens. Then, after a mock struggle, we would dance by torchlight. It was arranged, of course, that eleven of Katherine’s attendants should be present to make the numbers even.

It went according to plan. We waited outside the Queen’s door, then, of one accord, flung open the door. The women shrieked. Katherine dropped a jewel-box, a carved ivory thing, and it broke on the floor. Her hands flew up to her mouth. She had been preparing for bed and was wearing a wine-colgled in the torchlight. I thought her extraordinarily beautiful, in spite of her thickened figure.

“Ah!” I said. “The Queen yields herself to me.” I held out my hands (with rings that surely Katherine recognized) and nodded toward the musicians. “Play a pavane, if you please.” I took Katherine’s hand, and we began to dance.

“I know it is you, my Lord,” she whispered, as we came close in one measure.

“Do you?” I was enjoying the game. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” she said, as she passed me, her velvet cloak brushing mine. “I would know your hands, your touch, among ten thousand.”

I smiled noncommittally. I had always been fascinated by legends of kings and princes who wandered about disguised—the Roman Emperors and Henry V, before he came to the throne. It could be dangerous (if only for what one overheard), yet I longed to do it.

Suddenly Katherine went pale and reeled against me. She clutched her belly. The music went on, insistently, but she stood rooted. Then she cried out and crumpled to the floor.

We all stood where we were. Only Wolsey (ever-present Wolsey, who had stepped in to oversee that the midnight repast was adequately prepared) knew what to do.

“A physician,” he said quietly to a nearby page. He issued orders in a calm voice. “Take Her Grace to the lying-in chamber. It is not prepared? Then to her own bed.” The erstwhile Merrie Men picked Katherine up and conveyed her to her own chamber. Attendants, physicians, servitors—they all converged on the Queen’s chamber, bringing clean cloths and medicines and instruments, while Katherine cried out in the ancient pain of childbirth.

At dawn all was done: the child was born, a hideous, half-formed thing, three and a half months before its time. Dead. They carried it away in the early blue light and buried it—I know not where. It had no soul, and needed no churchly offices.

Alone in the blue-tinged light, I made my way to Katherine. She lay, white and sweat-stained, upon a couch, while her attendants changed the blood-soaked linen upon her bed. She grasped a crucifix and looked near dead, her mouth half open. I had a dreadful thought: how ugly women look in childbirth. This was not my Katherine, but a woman of fifty, a hard-faced stranger.

I knelt by her side, but she was deep asleep and did not stir. At length I rose and left the room. Although I had not slept, I did not feel tired, but quite the opposite: possessed by an abnormal alertness. I walked stiffly out into Katherine’s audience chamber, where the torches from the dancing still burned. I put them out, then continued my restless walk toward my own apartments. It was an ugly dawn. Sleet was whipping against the windows. The passageways were cold.

Earlier I had welcomed this cold. I had wanted a cold Christmas, and so I had it. Anything I wanted, I had only to command, or so it had seemed.

Yet the thing that I had most wanted, that above all I cared to keep, was lost.
WILL:

Yes, he had seemingly lost the magical power to command fate, which had briefly moment. He would spend the next twenty years trying to recapture it—years in which everything happened, and yet nothing happened. They were painful to him without touching him or changing him in essential ways. They left him confused and in that state somewhere between anger and hurt: they left him at the mercy of the Witch.

HENRY VIII:

Neither could I command happiness to return, and my sadness lingered for weeks afterward, well into the new year. Katherine and I brooded together over our loss, drawing ourselves tightly into a partnership of grief. We ordered extra Masses to be said and increased our personal pieties. I could talk to no one else about my feelings in the matter; it touched me too near my royal person. But Katherine, Katherine, royal herself, she understood....

When at length her time of healing was past, I found that our very closeness and sympathy of mind made me approach her differently when we returned to the marriage bed. Why is it, I wondered then (and wonder still), that friendship seems to stifle lust, to smother it under a pillow of intimacy? For lust is not intimate; it thrives on strangeness and mystery, and needs it to survive. Katherine, my mysterious princess from Spain, now my friend in sorrow... nevertheless I knew her, as a man should know his wife, so it says in Scripture.

It was Wolsey whom I asked to say extra Masses for Katherine’s and my private intentions. Wolsey had already proved himself my man in the Privy Council. It had been politic to appoint him, as he had immediately begun acting on his own initiative to counter some of the Fox-Warham-Ruthal schemes. Wolsey was subtle; I appreciated that, as when he showed no curiosity upon my request for the extra Masses. Wolsey was discreet, and he was honest. I had acquired a valuable servant. Now I must learn to use him to the best advantage—for both of us.

He sent a steady stream of summaries and memoranda about the shifting politics abroad. He seemed to compile a new report every hour. I was so engrossed in reading a stack of them (as well as a summary of the palace inventories) that I did not hear Katherine enter my workroom one morning late in May. Of course her step was very light. She was standing behind me before I even felt her presence.

“What does my love study so intently?” she asked softly.

“All our property,” I answered. “Were you aware, for example, that you—or rather we—possess”—I stabbed a finger at the paper and read the word it rested upon—“a dozen painted tiles from Spain?”

“No. But I should love to see them installed. I miss the tiles of home—so bright and clean. Not like the dark wood here.”

“Where were they used?” I was curious.

“On the floors. In the walls. Every place where you have paintings and hangings, or wood. Reds and oranges and yellows, they were.”

“I shall have them put in the floor of your Privy Chamber at Greenwich, then. With the date entered upon a new tile, to mark the end of the first year of our marriage—and of our reign.” I had just been thinking of the date, and how grow into just a husband and wife, yet the end of the first year of marriage was the end of being a bride; everyone knew that.

“Have I? But I, too, have something to give you.” She took my face in both her tiny hands and said, “I am with child. Our prayers are answered.”

I must have looked as I felt, for she kissed me then, long and sweetly—more like a bride, still, than a true wife.
Midsummer’s Day, and my nineteenth birthday, and the end of my first year of marriage came all in June. I could look back on the past twelve months and wonder how I had done as well as I had, considering that I had known nothing of either ruling or marriage when I started. By the grace of God, and my own determination, I had succeeded in making the transition from Prince to King, and now the thing seemed to be running by itself. I would soon venture into the one area as yet untouched: the business of foreign wars and dealing directly with the rulers of Europe. War was the calling of kings, and the sine qua non of great kings.

During the extended summer—warm weather lasted even into November—I studied the situation on the Continent like a man watching the steps of a complicated dance and awaiting the proper beat in which to enter it.

It seemed that King Louis XII of France was besieging Pope Julius in Bologna, laying violent hands upon Christ’s vicar, and calling a schismatic Council at Pisa to repudiate Julius’s authority. Ferdinand of Spain and the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian solemnly ordered him to desist, or face just punishment. They called their alliance the Holy League, and who could dispute its solemnity? Or that England, as a Christian realm, would be compelled by conscience to join it?

There was no obstacle of desire: I desired war, and my subjects would demand it of me. There was no obstacle of opportunity: as soon as the invitation to join was issued, then we would step in. There was no obstacle of means: the war could be easily financed out of the Royal Treasury, without having to bother with Parliament.

“But, Your Grace,” Wolsey had said, seeming to know my plans even before I uttered them, “it might be best to call a Parliament, and save your own treasury. The people will grant you anything, in your newness. Later it will not be so easy.”

“It would be stingy to do that,” I objected. “It smacks of my father, and that I would never do.”

“Your father was wise in financial matters. He would never have spent his own money when he could spend someone else’s instead. A splendid maxim.”

“An old man’s maxim! Not a true knight’s!” Somehow, to approach Parliament, cap in hand, asking for an allowance, like a child—no, never! “I hope never to call a Parliament as long as I live,” I suddenly thought out loud. “Yes, to be so rich I never have to raise money through them—I want that!”

“Then you will have to find other means, Your Grace,” said Wolsey. “For, as I pray God sends you long to reign over us, your treasury can scarcely last for sixty years! No, you must tap another source. Then good riddance to Parliament, I say.”

“Heavy, Your Grace,” Dr. Linacre warned as he handed him into my waiting arms. “Very heavy. He must be made all of muscle.”

Yes, the bundle was weighty, solid. I could feel the squirming power of the child.

“Praise be to God!” I cried, holding him aloft. “Now the future is assured!” I held my successor in my hands.

Striding in to see Katherine, who was already bathed and resting on fresh sheets, I could scarcely keep from shouting with joy. “Sweetheart,” I cried, “you have given England all she wished of you!” There she was, her face radiant, her amber-colored hair falling all about her shoulders—a Madonna, a Madonna whom I adored. I fell to my knees beside her and kissed her hand. “Thank you,” I said. “For the great gift you have bestowed on me, and on our country.”

“You enjoy playing with them,” she said, half-serious, half-smiling. Even then I wondered in which sense she meant “playing.” But I did not pursue it.
“In six weeks’ time,” I promised her. “After the christening.”

In six weeks’ time Prince Henry had grown amazingly, and was unable to fit into the christening gown Katherine had diligently embroidered. It was meant for an average-sized child, not for this chubby giant. Hastily, extra panels were added to both sides and sleeves.

The baptism, performed by Archbishop Warham, was glittering and splendid. Katherine, giving her Spanish love of lavish celebration free rein, insisted on the excessive number of candles, the double-length cloth-of-gold cape I would wear, and the coloured bonfires afterwards. The infant Prince Henry, wearing his two-yards-long white gown, became a member of the Body of Christ before a hundred witnesses. He cried when the water was poured over his head—a good sign, as it meant the Devil was being chased out of him. A murmur of approval passed around the nave of the church. That for Old Scratch.

Ioth eautiful, beautiful son—no puny Arthur, but destined to be the tallest, strongest King that England had ever had. They said that Edward III was a giant, and my grandfather’s height of six feet four was verified by men who yet lived. But Henry IX would be a Sun-God, a Helios for England.

Trumpets sounded their silver notes, and the procession made its long, slow way down the nave and out of the church, like a jewelled and languid snake. Outside, in the courtyard, it coiled round itself and waited—waited to pass into the Great Hall of Westminster Palace, where the christening feast was spread.

Did I imply earlier that Westminster was an outmoded palace? So it is, but its Great Hall is a treasure I must be careful not to let Time loot from me. Its dimensions are enormous, so that mounted knights can joust inside, should they so desire. Most arresting of all, the roof is a single span: the ceiling soars overhead in a graceful dance of supporting hammerbeams, scorning any supporting pillars. It was put up in 1395, just in time for the wedding feast of Richard II and Isabella of France. It was the king of its kind; none has surpassed it in size even to this day. Now this marvel welcomed us, with places set for a hundred. Upon the fair white linen the rows of golden platters looked like bright coins in a field of snow.

The dais would include not only the Queen and myself, but my blood relatives. Even those not at court had come to attend the christening of their royal cousin.

There are those—and I know who they are—who have claimed that I “killed off” anyone with any touch of royal blood, because I was so fearful of rival claimants to the throne. I can expose this nonsense for what it is by the very list of those I invited to sit at the royal table with me on this occasion. There was Henry Courtenay, my first cousin, the son of Catherine Plantagenet, my aunt on my mother’s side. There was Margaret Plantagenet Pole, a cousin of my mother’s, and her sons Reginald, Henry, and Geoffrey, my second cousins. There were my St. Leger second cousins, and the Stafford cousins and Henry Bourchier, Earl of Essex, more distant yet. I was happy and wanted to share my joy with all my family, like any normal man.

The prelates had a table of their own, the one farthest to the right. The Archbishop of Canterbury sat at its head, with the other ranking bishops, like Ruthal of Durham and Fox of Winchester, next to him. The rest of the length of table comprised almost the entire membership of Convocation, the “Parliament” of the Church. Wolsey was not at the table. His rank was too low, for at this time he was only an almoner and a lowly canon of Windsor.

The long middle table held the peers of the realm and their ladies. There was only one duke in England left now (except the imprisoned Duke of Suffolk): the Duke of Buckingham, Edward Stafford. There had been other dukes, of course, but they had lost their titles, or their lives, or both, fighting for or against Richard III. Thomas Howard, Duke of Norfolk, had fought my father at the battle of Bosworth Field, and lost. He was then demoted to an earl. His partisans put out a tale that after the battle he went to my father and said, “Richard was King, and as such I fought for him. If Parliament would make a post King I would fight for it, too, as would be my duty.” This is absurd, for Parliament does not make kings. And besides that, it is insulting to compare a king to a deaf-and-dumb post, and Howard was more clever than that. Now I was keeping him in the kenna-journey. An impossible wish. “In the meantime you are the Lady Willoughby, and an ornament to your husband,” I said pompously. I sensed even then how pompous I sounded.

A change in tempo: time to break, again. This time I chose a young maiden, blond and soft. She did not dance well.

“Are you new to court?” I asked. There were many come for the festivities, cousins and relatives of those already in residence.

“Yes, Your Grace. I have come at the invitation of my uncle, Lord Mountjoy.” She nodded toward the man Katherine was now dancing with. He was the chamberlain of her household.

“Ah, yes. A Yorkshire man,” I said.

“Lincolnshire, Your Grace.” She stumbled against me. Her body felt tender.

“You do not dance in Lincolnshire?”
My teasing fell flat. She tried to pull away, thinking I scolded her. I pulled her back. “I will teach you,” I said.

“Here at court we all dance. You will need to learn, if you stay, Mistress—what is your name?”

“Bessie Blount,” she mumbled. Still she tried to pull away, and then stumbled over her feet again. In embarrassment, she stopped dancing entirely. I held her and danced the steps for her, the way a child does its doll. She was as limp and unmoving as any doll. “I shall not stay,” she whispered.

“Nonsense,” I said. “Do not spend your beauty in Yorkshire. We need you here.”

“Lincolnshire, Your Grace.”

The beat changed; the drum thumped. She quickly slid away, and not to another partner, but to shadows.

When all the company (excepting only the old and infirm) were at last part of the dance, we went on to other steps and other rhythms. The French ambassador was easily persuaded to demonstrate “la Volta,” which he had learned in Louis XII’s court only last summer. Everyone danced there, except Louis himself, who was too aged and fragile to bend his knees.

Whilst the company was engrossed in the dances, I slipped away to oversee the preparations for the masquing to follow. As I moved along the high walkway connecting the Great Hall with the antechamber, I could see the huge crowd gathered outside, waiting to be let in, as they had been promised. Beyond them, on the hills surrounding the city, the bonfires blazed yellow, red, pink, ordering the skies themselves to rejoice with us.

“Your Grace.”

I turned quickly to see Don Luis Caroz, the Spanish ambassador.

“A word with you, por favor.”

“Indeed.” I smiled, giving permission for him to proceed.

“I have not had the opportunity to wish you, in person, my congratulations. It is a great day for Spain, as well.”

“The daughters of Spain are fair,” I said, “and bring Ferdinand fine grandsons.” Katherine’s older sister Juana had a ten-year-old son, Charles, who was said to be clever, and was likely to become Holy Roman Emperor someday. That is, if he had not int>

“Ummm. Yes. I believe I had promised”—a glance out the window, at the dancing bonfires, the happy crowd—“fifteen hundred archers. With longbow, of course.” There was no limit; I could do anything now, and I would. Something sang within me, something that had never been there before. “But I think three thousand would be more helpful. With”—go on, do it, you want to—“new cannon as well. We can test them in the field.”

“Oh! Your Grace!”

Had I not promised Father on his deathbed to fight the Infidel? Could I do less, now that God had so clearly shown his favour to me? “It is my privilege to fight the enemies of Christ,” I assured him.

Outside the crowd moved, like scales of a snake. Snake. I must see to the masque. I nodded to Caroz and indicated that the exchange was over. Still he stood staring at me, his eyes wide and almost fixed. “Your Grace ...” he said, “your cloak ... it is magnificent. It blinds me!”

It was a full-circled cape of cloth-of-gold, weighing almost ten pounds. I pictured with amusement the little Spaniard decked with it. Common men think only of the glow of gold, never of its weight. “It is yours,” I said, unfastening it, and draping it over his shoulders. He almost buckled, with both the weight and astonishment. O, his face!

Before he could utter a word, I was past him and opening the door to the antechamber, which served as a rehearsal room in which the players were already costumed and speaking.

“Continue, continue!” I ordered them. I could hardly wait to see this idea of mine enacted: the story of the baby Hercules strangling the serpents sent by jealous Juno to destroy him in his crib. I had needed a large child to play the part of the mighty infant; Sir John Seymour’s six-year-old son Edward was now wearing an infant’s robe and practising throttling the “snakes”—long tubes of multicoloured velvet that had young ferrets inside, so they would move and writhe on their own.

“I hate the infant!” “Juno” proclaimed, pointing toward the crib. “Jupiter has sinned, and this child is the product of this sin. He must die!”

Of course the infant prevailed over the serpents, and the happy conclusion was announced by “Britannia”: “Thus perish all the enemies of the King’s babe, who seek to harm him. Jealousy, envy, spite cannot stand against the will of the gods, and their protection gives our prince supernatural strength.” The company then gathered round the crib, raised their arms, and began an elaborate set-dance. I, as Jupiter, would appear in their midst, bringing the masque to a happy conclusion.

Then we would all come forward, leaving the stage, and present ourselves to Katherine. For it was she I was honouring; she, as the goddess who had brought forth an heir. And if they said it was unseemly for a king to “present himself” to anyone, no matter who ... well, I would do as I pleased.

The order had been given, and the commoneas past usual consumption time. My father stuck a large piece in his
mouth. “Harry would have had himself naked,” he said, his words slurred because of his chewing.

My mother tore off a piece of bread from a stale loaf and soaked it in the rabbit juice. “We could have had a gold letter,” she said wistfully. “Then our lives would have changed.”

“Only for a year,” replied Father. “And then what? Back to foul rabbit stew?” He made a face as he chewed up a semi-rancid piece.

Neither of them questioned the fact that the King lived in such wealth that the loss of the gold letters meant nothing to him. On the contrary, they were proud of having such a wealthy King. They did not connect their poor eating with the elaborate court masques designed by the revels-master.

As well they should not, in spite of the current idea held by some that dividing up the Royal Treasury would enable everyone to dine on dainties for the rest of their lives. A mathematician friend of mine has calculated that if the Queen’s wealth were distributed equally throughout the kingdom, each person would receive exactly enough to purchase five loaves of bread, shoe one horse, and purchase one blanket. Hardly a luxurious life.

But I digress. I speak now as a man, whereas I was then but a child, and as awed by the story of the King’s gold letters as anyone else. I lay in bed that night, imagining myself to be the young Prince. What would my life be like? I would lie beneath soft coverlets (I thought this as I scratched myself against the irritating rough wool), never have to do schoolwork, and have horses and hawks—in short, all the things an ignorant ten-year-old imagines when constructing the perfect life of another child.

Over the next week I thought of the young Prince Henry constantly. When I awakened I immediately thought, “Now his nurse is taking him up and dressing him in fine linen.” When I went out to play I thought, “They are readying rooms of toys for him.”

In truth, I was not far wrong. Upon birth, the infant Prince had been assigned his own household staff. He had his clerk of the signet, his serjeant of arms, and three chaplains, as well as a carver, a cellarman, and a baker—for his entertaining. He even had a special room set aside at Westminster for his future Council Chamber.

I was playing near my house in the muddy main street when my fantasy world was shattered.

“The Prince is dead,” Rob said, wiping his nose in the raw weather. Rob was an outsized boy who lived three houses away from me. I remember that the tip of his nose was bright red and his cheeks blotched.

“What?” I said, forgetting to kick the leather-covered ball.

“I said he’s dead. The new Prince.” Rob quickly took advantage of my pause to capture the ball for himself.

“What?” I broke up the game by trailing after him, demanding, “What?” over and over.

“I said he’s dead. What’s the matter? Are you deaf?” Rob planted his stocky legs in the mud and glared at me. I noticed that his hands had chilblains. There was red oozing between the cracks of his fingerjoints as well.

“Why?”

It was a fine answer—the very one that haunted the King himself, I was to learn years later.

The King gave his son a funeral that stinted nothing. The hearse alone was bedecked with a thousand pounds of candles. Prince Henry, aged fifty-two days, was laid to rest in Westminster Abbey—where the shouts from the nearby celebratory tournaments had rung against the stones only nine days earlier.

Curiously, Henry records the death in an almost Roman, stoic fashion, as if he confused the mood of the masque with the real event. It was most uncharacteristic of him, who was usually so vocal in his outrage.
HENRY VIII:

But the next morning I had no thoughts for the people or what they would do with the pieces of my clothes, nor did I care. The next morning I had to make funeral arrangements; for Prince Henry had died in his crib even while the play was being enacted. My Hercules had not been able to overcome the serpents (sent by whom?—for we do not believe in Juno) that sought to take his breath.

If he had lived, he would be thirty-five today.

It was here the split began between Katherine and myself. Her grieving took the form of submission, of prostrating herself before the will of God, of devoting herself to His demands, in the form of prayer life and observances. She joined the Third Order of St. Francis, a branch of that discipline for those still in “the world.” But it enjoined the wearing of a coarse habit beneath one’s regular clothes, as well as rigorous fasting and long hours of prayer. Although its adherents remained physically in “the world,” in spirit they began to dwell elsewhere.

I, on the other hand, turned outward. I looked into that inward-turning funnel of spiritual exercises that Katherine had flung herself into, and it frightened and repelled me. It was actions I understood—clean, precise, compelling actions—and it was here I must lose myself ... or find myself and, in so doing, restore myself to God’s favour. I had not been perfect enough in my deeds; I had not gone to war in person against Christ’s (and England’s) enemies.

Wolsey aided me, here when I most needed him. Despite his office as a priest, it was actions that he, too, understood best: the world of men, not of the spirit. And what was the world of men that was spread out before us, like a box of sweetmeats with its top flipped open?

The Holy League—the Pope’s alliance against the French—waited to welcome England into it. His Holiness had drawn up a document recognizing me as rightful King of France, once I had vanquished Paris. Maximilian, the Holy Roman Emperor, stood ready to serve in the field beside me.

I would take my place on the Continental stage, to pursue England’s lost dream of conquering France in its entirety. Perhaps that was what God truly required of me; perhaps it was here that I had failed Him. As King, there were certain tasks I must undertake, as sd huge chunks of French territory. Henry VI had even been crowned King of France in Paris. But that was nearly a hundred years ago, in 1431. Since then the French had rallied, had pushed us back little by little, while we Englishmen fought ourselves on our own land, until nothing remained of our holdings in France but little Calais and a pitifully small area surrounding it—some nine miles deep and twelve miles wide.

Perhaps, when I conquered France, God would turn His face toward me. I became more and more convinced of it.

My advisors and Council, by and large, were not convinced. Of my desire to redeem myself with God they were unaware; but they were against war with France. Father had spoiled them with his lack of involvement in foreign entanglements, and like any privileged state, they had got used to it. After all, it was Father’s leftover councillors who had renewed the peace treaty with France, behind my back. These churchmen—Ruthal, Fox, and Warham—a pacifist trio, continued to thwart me and preach endlessly of the uselessness, the expense, the evil of war. The nobles on the Council—Howard, Earl of Surrey, and de Vere, Earl of Oxford and Lord High Admiral, whose raison d’être was making war—were in favour of it. But the Church was not, and even the intellectuals (so carefully imported and cultivated to give a humanist polish to my court!) were not. Erasmus, Vives, Colet—they blathered and wrote such nonsense as “anyone who went to war because of ambition or hatred, he fought under the banner of the Devil.”

Disgruntled, at one point I asked Wolsey to ascertain the exact cost of provisioning and equipping a force of thirty thousand men, so I would have true figures with which to argue. I made no muster rolls or correspondence available
to Wolsey. By now I knew he was so industrious and resourceful he did not need any direction from me other than a vaguely worded request.

However, as days passed without my seeing him, and as need arose to consult with him about a rumour that the fierce Pope Julius lay deathly ill, I made inquiries as to his whereabouts. At that time he lived in a small suite of rooms in the palace, adjoining the Chapel Royal, with only one manservant and one secretary. I did the unusual thing of going to his quarters myself. But Jonathan, his manservant, told me that his master was “moved to an inn in Kent, thereby to keep counsel with himself for a time.” I glanced into the plain, sparsely furnished room. All the table surfaces were bare; he had taken all his papers with him.

“And where is that?”

“At Master Lark’s, Your Grace. He has an inn called the ...” The fellow twisted his face in remembering. “... Lark’s Morning. Near Chilham.”

Lark. Lark. Where had I heard that name? The Lark’s Morning. Good name for an inn. I would find it. By God, it would make a fine morning’s ride, and I was ready for one. Should I ask Katherine? A gallop together, in the damp March air—but no, this was her prayer-time. Nonetheless, I could ask. Perhaps she would ... ? No. She would not.

Thus we use our supposed “knowledge” of others to speak on their behalf, and condemn them for the words we ourselves put in their silent mouths.

Having asked Katherine in my mind, and bee PoMarch is an ugly month, uglier even than November, its lifeless counterpart. I was glad to reach the Lark’s Morning (easy to find, on the main road to Dover), warm myself inside at the fire, and put some heated ale in my belly.

The innkeeper’s daughter (she was too young and pretty to be his wife) seemed unusually flustered when she recognized me. I was accustomed, now, to the stir I caused by my presence (odd how easy it is to become used to being taken for a god), but she seemed more frightened than awed. This puzzled me. I made sure I spoke to her gently, to ease her fears.

“I seek Thomas Wolsey, one of my almoners. Tell me, is he hereabout?”

She smiled; or rather, her mouth twitched.

“Father Wolsey,” I said. “A priest.”

“Aye. He’s—he took quarters in the adjoining farmstead.”


The ramshackle building lay some fifty yards behind the inn, hidden by a hedgerow. That was fortunate, as it was such an eyesore it would have kept customers away from the inn.

Outside, two little boys were playing. As always, when I saw male children, pain and (yes, admit it) anger rushed through me. I turned away, making my eyes leave them.

I pushed open the loose, flapping door. Instantly I recognized the characteristic heavy odour of metal. A black-robed figure was moving about inside, stirring up the concentrated smell that was the very essence of war.

“Wolsey!”

He almost jumped—the only time I have ever seen him truly taken by surprise.

“Your Grace!” So abruptly did he turn, the folds of his gown swirled like foam.

“What are you doing here?” My voice was sharper than I had intended. Letting the door swing all the way inward, I saw piles and piles of shields, helmets, lances, mail shirts, swords, and handguns on the dirt floor.

“Testing equipment, Your Grace, I have here a sample of each type available to us, along with its cost and delivery time”—he grabbed a sheaf of papers and began thumbing through them—“speed of manufacture, and accessibility. Before we can place orders, first-hand knowledge of the quality is required. For example, the foundry at Nuremberg ... its shields seem decidedly flimsy to me, Your Grace.” He plucked an oval-shaped one from the pile. “Press here. You see? It indents too easily. However, one must take into account the speed of delivery, as opposed to Milan, from which shipments could take a year to reach us.” The facts came spurting out; his voice vibrated with excitement.

“How have you ... obtained all this?” I had given him his assignment on Tuesday; it was just now only Friday.

“Your Grace! I consider it my privilege to carry out any task with thoroughness and speed.”

Thoroughness and speed scarcely described his actions here. Monomania came closer.

“Yes. I see. Well, I have ... convinced him.” I almost said “silenced.”

“A relief for us all.” He smiled.

“Pope Julius lies ill. What think you? Is he like to die? And if so, what does this do to our war?”

“My sources say he is not seriously ill, merely diplomatically ill. He will recover. He means to push France out of Italy. Louis’s latest victories there—they come too close to home. No, the Holy League will stand.”

“England, Spain, the Holy Roman Empire, Venice, the Pope—everyone against France!” I said ecstatically.

“And England the only oak,” he said. “The only oak in a sea of reeds.”
I was startled that Wolsey should speak so derogatorily about my allies. This man who collected and tested all equipment must surely have a reason. “Pray explain yourself.”

He made a show of demurring. Then he spoke. “Ferdinand, the Spanish King—how reliable is he? He lured England into that sham of an expedition against the Infidels, which came to nothing.”

True. My archers had sat and rotted in Guienne, while Ferdinand decided to attack Navarre instead.

“It is Queen Katherine who inclines you toward her father. But is a son-in-law’s duty compatible with a King’s?”

The words hung on the air between us. “And Maximilian, the Emperor—he is known as a liar. He prides himself on his lies. Why, when Louis accused him of deceiving him twice, he cackled, ‘He lies. I deceived him three times!’ As for Venice, she has no army. Now, what a rabble—with you as the only true knight!”

“But when an honest knight pursues the course of truth, what matter if his allies are false? God will direct him!” I believed that; truth to tell, I believe it still.

“It is our duty to use our resources wisely against Satan,” he agreed. “But this alliance ... how can you conquer, without unfeigned assistance? A false ally is worse than an enemy.”

But I still believed in my allies. Nor did I realize that Wolsey inclined so toward the French. The French were civilised, masters of style, as was Wolsey, the butcher’s son. We are surprises to our parents.

I changed the subject. “There is danger from the Scots. They obey no laws of honour or chivalry. They are like to attack whilst we are occupied in France.”

“They are French allies. The ‘auld alliance,’ they call it. Although two more unlikely partners I am hard put to imagine!” The brawling Scots with the mincing French. Laughable. “Leaf an able soldier behind to contain them.”

“Howard,” I said. “Thomas Howard, Earl of Surrey. He is from the North, he knows it well.”

Just then, two dancing shadows came into the building.

“Father! Father!” they called.

How sweet. The little lads had an affectionate relationship with the visiting priest.

“Mother does not feel well,” they whined.

“I am busy.” Wolsey’s voice was hard.

“She was sick lastre false?Hight="2em" align="left">
mud. I rode round the camp at three in the morning, in my armour, to hearten and encourage my men. “Well, comrades, now that we have suffered in the beginning, fortune promises us better things, God willing.”

Suddenly there was a knock at my door. A Scots herald stood outside, come to declare war on England! He concluded, “My King summons Your Grace to be at home in your realm, on the defence.” He was wearing his clan badge and hat, and seemed oblivious to the fact that his King, James IV, was acting in a base manner in choosing this time to attack.

“You have come a far way to deliver your cowardly summons,” I said at length. “It ill becomes a Scot to summon a King of England. Tell him that never shall a Scot cause us to return! We see your master for what he is. For we Z’d.

“Scotland, and its King, have perished,” I said, to inform the waiting men-at-arms around me, companions, my fealty-sworn soldiers: Brandon, Neville, Carew, Bryan, Seymour, Boleyn, Courtenay.

They let out a great cheer. “A glorious day!” yelled Brandon.

“Our King is mighty, he destroys his enemies!” cried young Courtenay.

I stepped to the door of my “house” and looked out across the flat plains of France, feeling the wind in my face. Whenever I want to recall that moment, that high moment of military triumph, I have only to close my eyes and open a window and let the wind blow steady and a little cold across my cheeks and lips. I do it sometimes, in moments of uncertainty. Then I become young again, and mighty.

WILL:

Katherine thought she was pleasing him by sending him the bloody Scots King’s coat in exchange for the captured Duc de Longueville. As if they were an equal exchange!

Katherine was very devoted to Henry; Katherine was very competent and loyal; Katherine was very stupid in crucial ways.

HENRY VIII:

We landed at Dover, almost four months to the day since we had set sail for France. Then, there had been all the excitement of seeing France—I, who had never seen any of England, save the parts around London—and fighting there, against great odds. France had proved fair; and I had proved a warrior. Now part of fair France was my booty.

All along the Dover-London road, my subjects were waiting. They wished to see us, touch us, call their greetings. We had done well; we had touched a nerve in Englishmen, and aroused a longing in them. And next year we would further satisfy that longing, for we would invade France yet again, this time well coordinated with Ferdinand and Maximilian. This season’s campaign had been but the beginning.

WILL:

It was here that I once again saw Henry VIII. I was one of the throng along the selfsame Dover-London road, and I was eager to glimpse him, the Boy-King. I stood for hours, so it seemed, waiting for a hint of movement on the road stretching away on either side. The King is coming. No, the King will be an hour yet. It was interminable, yet I dared not leave. At length—it was almost noon, and we had been waiting, standing, since dawn—he came into view,
sitting proudly on a great white horse. He was dressed all in gold, and he himself was gold: his hair, his eyes, his glowing skin. He looked fresh, and as full of grace as any knight new-blessed at Jerusalem. My—whatever it is within the breast that expands into life at such moments—pride, for want of a better word, was touched, and I felt ecstatic beholding him, both as if I were King myself, and at the same time awed that we had such a King.

HENRY VIII:

Katherine wange my travel-stained clothes, in which I had lived since boarding my warship at Calais. Instead, I changed horses, so that I might gallop to her on the fastest steed in the royal stables. I had been faithful to her all the time I had been away, even during that time in Lille, between the besieging of Thérouanne and Tournai, when we celebrated our first victory and there were many Belgian ladies eager to “comfort” a warrior-king...

I had never been unfaithful to Katherine. I did not believe it was right. I had pledged myself to her, and I would keep that pledge. My father had never been unfaithful to my mother. I could not have borne it if he had insulted her so.

The towers of Richmond Palace, rising pale and beseeching against the blanched autumn skies. Inside, inside, was my wife. Mother-to-be, victor at Flodden Field ... oh, truly I was blessed.

Down the walkways (people on all sides pushing, claiming me) I flew toward the royal apartments. And there she was, at the entrance, like any schoolchild, not a royal daughter of Spain. Her hair glinted gold in the murky light. Then it was embrace, embrace; and I felt her warmth in my arms.

"O Henry," she whispered, close by my ear.

"The keys to Tournai." I had carried them on my person. Now I presented them to her, kneeling.

She took them, clasped them. “I knew you would win a city. So many times, as a child, I saw my mother or father return with such keys, keys wrested from the Moors—”

So. She compared the memories. Ferdinand and Isabella driving the Moors from Spain, pushing them back, city by city. Could her husband measure up?

We were traversing the royal apartments. We would go to hers, as the King’s were dark and silent and not yet in order. “The Moors are back in Africa, where they belong,” I said.

“Yes.” Her face was shining. “And the Scots are back in the mountains, where they belong.”

In her withdrawing room, we stood still a long moment and kissed. Her lips, how sweet!

“You put Moorish honey on your lips,” I murmured.

“I do nothing Moorish!” she said, pulling away.

“Surely the Moors had good things to give Spain—”

“No. Nothing.” Now her lips, so soft, were set in a hard little line. “There is nothing good from the soft beds of the East.”

“Yet you spent your girlhood in the ‘soft Moorish East,’ ” I teased. “Watching the fountains play in the Caliph’s Palace in Granada. Come, teach me.” I reached out for her belly.

Which was flat. Entirely flat, and hard as her mouth had been when dismissing the Moors.

“He died,” she said softly. “Our son. He was born the night after I received word that the Scots were massing. In between midnight and dawn. Warham christened him,” she added. “His soul was saved.”

“But not his body,” I said rotely. “You say—‘he?’”

“A son,” she said. “A little son, not formed enough to survive. But enough to be baptized! His soul has gone to Paradise.”

My son. Dead.

“It was the Scots,” I said. “They killed him. Had it not been for them, and their dastardly attack, you would not have delivered before your time.” I broke away from her. “They stand punished. Their King is dead.”

A present King for a future King. Had they truly been punished?

I came back to her and enfolded her in my arms. “We will make another King.”

I led her into her sleep-chamber. But it was not duty that called me, but desire, as Katherine was at her ripest and most beautiful: a queen who defended her realm, a mother who mourned a son, a daughter of the East who could give exotic pleasures, no matter how her Catholic conscience denounced them.
In recognition of their services on the battlefield, I restored Thomas Howard to his lost dukedom of Norfolk; and I made Charles Brandon the new Duke of Suffolk.

WILL:
A title recently vacated by Edmund de la Pole, as it were.

HENRY VIII:

Wolsey, too, must be recognized. God had opened many Church positions in the last few months, as though anticipating our needs. I gathered them up, making a bouquet of them, and presented them to Wolsey: Bishop of Lincoln, Bishop of Tournai, and Archbishop of York. In one brief ceremony he catapulted himself (like one of the cannonballs from the war machines he had helped supply) from simple priest to powerful prelate. “For a man only lately a mere priest, you aim high.” I smiled. “I like that.”

“What else could I aspire to?” He attempted a look of innocence.

“What else, indeed? And for what do you intend this palace you are planning?”

Wolsey had just acquired the lease of a tract of land far upstream on the Thames from the Knights Hospitalers. He had consulted masons and builders and had twice already braved icy riding paths to inspect the grounds.

“Hampton? ‘Tis not a palace, ‘tis but a manor house. An archbishop, after all, must have quarters befitting his office.”

“There’s York Place for that.”

“It’s old and damp.”

“So are my palaces. So, my friend and minister, you aim at something grand. How would you like a ... cardinal’s hat?”

“Yes.” No disclaimers, no hesitation. “Cardinal Wolsey. That’s higher than Canterbury. A cardinal would be a worthy representative and minister for you. As King, you deserve no less a man to serve you.”

His flattery was so ready. “Oh, yes. I owe it to myself to make you Cardinal. Let’s see, now. There is a new Pope. What is he like? How best should we approach him for this little favour?” I paused. “We’ll flatter Leo. He’ll send the cardinal’s hat, never fear. By King of France, and you’ll be Cardinal Wolsey!”

And I would be a father, pray God. The Queen was pregnant again, and surely this fourth time we would have what we—and England—so deeply desired. And urgently needed.

The plans were drawn up. My world was ordered, like a chessboard freshly laid out with new ivory pieces. How the board—the squares and duchies of Europe—gleamed before me! On my side were Ferdinand, Maximilian, the new Pope, Leo. We were to launch our attack on France on many fronts simultaneously, coordinating them by means of the fastest messengers in Christendom (albeit mounted on Arab horses). Katherine and I spent hours imagining the battles Ferdinand and I would fight as comrades-in-arms; she longed to cross the sea with me and fight alongside us. Only the coming child prevented her.
“With the Scots vanquished, I could come,” she said wistfully. “Only I would not endanger the child for anything in this world.” She patted her stomach tenderly.

“Nor I, my love.”

“I am so deeply happy that you and my father will meet at last.” True, I had never seen Ferdinand, except through Katherine’s devoted eyes. “And that you have chosen—or rather, allowed me to choose—a name from my family: Philip Charles.”

The men in her family seemed blessed with vigour and longevity; perhaps I had become superstitious about the doomed Henrys, Richards, and Edwards in mine. In any case, it seemed a small enough concession at the time. Anything to keep Katherine happy so that the child might grow in peace.

“Aye, yes.”

Her devotion to both Ferdinand and Jesus often interfered with her devotion to her husband’s earthly needs. More and more I had found those needs taking on a life of their own, pulsating within me and demanding a hearing. They cared little for Katherine’s scruples, or for mine, either. I was twenty-three years old and a man, that was all they knew. Katherine’s maids of honour, her ladies-in-waiting, particularly the Duke of Buckingham’s married sister, seemed to rouse that imp within me. Satin pulled taut over breasts roused it in me.

The sound of a lute in Katherine’s outer chamber called it forth like a cobra rising to a snake charmer’s flute. Out there would be the ladies, the maids, playing tunes, passing time, all arrayed in satin and velvet. Like a sleepwalker, I was drawn away. Like a sleepwalker, I was an onlooker only; all that ever happened was in my own head.

The foul letter lay there like a dead fish, stinking with corruption, slime, and roteness. Ferdinand had played me false, had betrayed me all along. At the very hour when I was entering Tournai in conquest, he was signing a secret peace treaty with the French. His toady and minion, Maximilian, had followed suit.

This whole long winter, whilst plans were being meticulously formulated, munitions ordered, supplies replenished (the precise image of these things danced across my brain!), and my flagship taking shape, board by board, beam by beam, at great cost and rush, so as to be ready for launching in June ...

And I had even called a Parliament, humbled myself to approacs. It was always the Pharisees, wasn’t it? But then there was an exception, a sort of condition that permitted divorce. It was something Saint Paul had mentioned. I made up my mind to ask Wolsey when I met with him the next morning. He was a priest, even if he was no theologian.

After Mass, I went directly to Wolsey’s apartments in the Palace, where I found the Archbishop already at work at his desk. The Archbishop, I noted, had not attended Mass himself.

“Read this.” I dropped the offensive Spanish letter on his heaped desk. It rolled down a pile of ledgers likeception, and entertainments he now frequented. “Surely you aren’t thinking of—youself? You cannot divorce the Queen because of her father’s deceit. Although, God knows, I think you deserve a French princess on your arm and in your court.”

His burst of candour shocked me as much as my proposed turnabout shocked him.

“Why, Wolsey. You don’t like the Queen?”

He was all explanations. “No, Your Grace, I do like and admire her, I only meant ... that a graceful French girl would be such an ornament to the court, such a jewel on your arm. Someone who dances and masques, someone who—”

“Yes. I understand.” Katherine had become so much more serious in the past year or so. Still, Wolsey had no way of knowing that hidden Moorish side.... “France, and its curious combination of elegance and decadence ... I’d like to sample that in a woman.” I had never sampled any woman but Katherine. “But I am married and do not qualify for a divorce. You are correct: Ferdinand’s treason does not transfer onto his daughter. Her only ‘treason’ is in failing to follow the Biblical command to ‘leave your mother and your father.’ Her heart’s in Spain still. But her body’s here, and has been technically faithful.”
“Besides, she carries a child.”
“Yes.” But even that seemed tainted.
“However, there are other means of coming, close to France.” He steered me back onto that subject. He seemed eager; his eyes shone.
“Indeed there are. And other marriages. My sister Mary—to the King of France!”
His face registered the jolt that passed through his whole body. “Your Grace!” He licked his lips. “A thought of genius!”
“It came to me, just on the instant. God sent it.” I truly believed that.
“We will break Mary’s betrothal to Charles of Burgundy,” he said.
That would delight her. She had hated the idea of marrying the Habsburg boy, Katherine’s nephew, who was four years younger than she. But later she had gotten into the spirit of it and carried his portrait about and attempted to sigh over it. She would be pleased to abandon the effort and go be Queen of France.

“Queen of France? By marrying that decaying roué with the false teeth? No, no, no!” She kicked His Highness’s gift: a statue of Venus, with Cupid hovering over one shoulder. “No!” The statue toppled over, smashing the marble Cupid’s nose.
“My dear sister,” I explained, “he is a King.”
“He is repulsive!”
“Queen of France! Think on it, my dear, think on it well. You will be celebrated in song and verse, will be First Lady of Europe. You will be able to do as you please, wear exquisite clothes, be heaped with jewels.”
“And at night?” Her eyes narrowed. “At night I will pay
“When did you become so hard?” she asked quietly. “This is not my brother speaking, not the Henry I have known, but some other man.”
She touched on a delicate point. Of late I had felt that hard part growing, taking shape and rising within me like a rock rising from a lake, displacing all the sweet and placid water around it. It had first gathered itself when the word divorce had sprung unbidden to my lips, when I had turned against Katherine, if only for a short while. I had not known I harboured such an alien presence within me; but by now it no longer seemed alien, rather an integral part of myself. It was necessary for a King to be hard—at times.
“Yes, the soft-hearted child you knew has gone. In his place is a King,” I said. “A child looks only at what he wants, at what he wishes were true. A King looks at what is, and how to drive the best bargain.”
“And the best bargain for you is that your sister be Queen of France.”
“ ’Tis the best bargain for you, as well. You’ll see. Besides”—I blurted this out—“argain—unlike our other sister.”
Poor Margaret, late the Scots Queen, now a coarsening woman with decreasing market value, and frantic for a man. As soon as she had given birth to James IV’s posthumous son, she had taken swaggering Archibald Douglas, the Earl of Angus, as her lover.
Mary drew herself up, slender and golden. A most valuable piece on the chessboard. “I shall marry King Louis,” she said, each word enunciated as though she were carefully choosing it from a tray of others. “I will take a large number of ladies with me, to form my court. And when Louis dies, I will retain the jewels he has given me.” She paused. “From you, I require one thing.”
“Name it.” Naturally I would grant her anything, any wedding present she might wish. I would even name my new flagship after her, rather than myself.
“When Louis dies, I shall be free to marry whom I will. You may marry me this once. Hereafter I will marry myself.”
No. She was too valuable to me, and to England. “No.”
“Then I shall not wed Louis. I shall enter a convent instead.”
“You would do that, rather than submit entirely?” She was a Tudor—stubborn and ruthless. “I would never let you do that to yourself. Very well, then, I grant you your wish.” By the time she was widowed, she’d be more sensible. We all became more sensible in time. Then I had a sudden suspicion. “There isn’t someone now that you fancy?”
She smiled a faraway smile. “There are many that I fancy,” she said. “As any young girl might.”
After we had parted, I could not help reflecting on what she had said. It was true, the company I sought had
changed. Instead of Erasmus and Dean John Colet, I wanted Edward Guildford and Edward Poyntz, bluff courtiers. Instead of Katherine, I had Wolsey for my political confidant. I did not want to be alone to pray, or reflect, or compose music. I wanted noise and gaiety and distractions; I wanted power rather than chivalry.

Yet not all of me did. The first Henry, the one who wanted to be a “true knight”—he existed alongside the second one, keeping uneasy watch over him.
Mary and King Louis were to be married by proxy in England, so that she would arrive in France already its Queen. The elegant Louis d’Orleans, Duc de Longueville, taken prisoner in France during the war campaign, was to stand in for Louis and recite his vows for him. Although technically a hostage, de Longueville in fact behaved as a French diplomat, and it was to him that King Louis sent his wedding gift for Mary: a pendant necklace made of a gigantic, pear-shaped pearl so singular that it had a name of its own—the Mirror of Naples. I made a promise to myself to have it appraised by honest English jewellers before Mary left for France.

The ceremony was to take place at Greenwich, with Archbishop Warham presiding, in the presence of the peers of the realm. I had transformed the gathering-room of the royal apartments with cloth-of-gold and silk, so that it glittered like a cave of gold, a treasure-hoard of legend.

“Come, Katherine,” I said, turning to my wife. “It is time.” I offered my arm. Katherine took it, wordlessly and stiffly; that was the way things were between us now.

In my outer chamber, Wolsey was waiting, resplendent in gleaming brocade vestments. As part of the ceremony he was to be recognized by Louis as furthering the cause of France. Katherine nodded stiffly to him. That was how things stood between them, as well.

Mary made a lovely bride. One would never suspect, hearing her lilting voice pronouncing the hastily learned French vows to de Longueville, pledging her love and fidelity, that she had ever desired anything else. The rings were exchanged, the bridal kiss conferred, the papers signed. And now the marriage must be “consummated” by proxy.

This had been my inspiration. A proxy marriage might be repudiated, like a precontract or betrothal. But a proxy consummation—that was another matter.

“An absurd idea,” Katherine had sniffed. “Verbal agreements, properly witnessed, or signed documents, are all that honourable men require.”

“Like my father and your father? We made verbal agreements and went through a public betrothal. Was it honoured? Why did you have to sell your dower-plate for food, then? You still continue to believe in honour, my duck?”

“I believe in your honour,” she said.

Wolsey, on the other hand, had appreciated the genius of it. “The very uniqueness, the novelty of it, will seal it in the eyes of the world,” he said. “It will be, in its own way, even more of a consummation than the ordinary kind.”

“Quite.”

I had had a great state bed set up in the middle of the Assembly Chamber. It was canopied, but no bed-curtains were hung to obscure the view, and no coverlets of fur or wool were arranged there to veil the required actions.

The entire company gathered about the bed, while Mary retired to change into a nightdress. Katherine and her attendants waited until Mary emerged, clad in her magnificent dishabille, then escorted her with stately steps up to the bed, laying her out on her back upon the satin bedcloth, smoothing her hair.

Then the Duc de Longueville approached the foot of the bed, wearing red hose and boots, which he ceremoniously removed, placing them neatly side by side. Assisted by Wolsey and Brandon, he mounted the side of the bed, lay down beside Mary, and touched her bare foot with his naked leg. He remained in that position whilst the onlookers gazed intently and Archbishop Warham peered over them and solemnly pronounced, “The marriage has been consummated!” The witnesses then broke into cheers and showered Mary and de Longueville with flowers.

De Longueville sat up and began making jokes. “‘Twas over in less time than a fifteen-year-old, and here I am of an age with His Highness! Were this all one felt, a man would scarcely hurry home from the fields for it!”

Mary, blushing (as befitted a modest bride), rose from the nuptial bed to change into yet a third costume, her ballgown, for the banquet and ball were to follow. The guests flocked to the Banquet Hall while Wolsey, Katherine, de Longueville, and I lingered, waiting for Mary.

“Well done,” I said. “You assisted in the making of a Queen. This was—that of England and France,” I said, hoping to cajole Katherine. I had pointedly excluded the Spanish ambassador from all these ceremonies, to her anger.

“If only your other sister were here, there would be three Queens,” she answered, irrelevantly. She was determined to be aloof; so be it. I turned to de Longueville.

“You are a free man now. King Louis has paid your ransom.” A fat one it was, too, and I had put it right into my private account. “Although I must say you passed your ‘captivity’ in French style.”
He smiled, and answered my implied question. “Yes. Mistress Popincourt is going with me. I shall install her in my apartments in the Louvre.” De Longueville had, naturally, acquired a mistress during his brief stay with us. I resolved that it was high time I acquired one, too.

Mary joined us, dazzling in a gown of royal blue silk.

Wolsey bowed low. “You shine like the angels painted by the Italian masters,” he murmured. “All blue and gold you are.”

“My Queen.” De Longueville made obeisance.

Mary looked startled. The transformation from Tudor Princess to French Queen had been so swift, and so absolute.

Katherine moved over to kiss her cheek. “Now we are sister Queens,” she said.

Together the five of us entered the Banquet Hall, where all the company awaited us: glowing spots of colour against the creamy stone of the Hall; the candlelight reflecting and magnifying from the gold plate that was displayed everywhere.

Mary was feted again and again, and I led out the first dance with her, Brother King and Sister Queen. I knew we were a stunning sight, our youth and strength and colour making us seem more than mortal. Indeed, I felt myself, that night, to be something beyond an ordinary being, certainly beyond my ordinary self, with all his confines and sensitivities.

Katherine danced only the sedate basse-dances and the pavane, that introductory measure in which all the company paraded their wardrobes. She was now in her eighth month, and all was well. I made sure her thronelike chair was fitted with extra velvet pillows, and that she had a footstool for her swollen feet.

That left me free to dance with whomsoever I pleased, and there were many pleasing women. Katherine’s attendants, particularly her maids of honour, were young and unmarried. Yes, it was time I found a mistress. I had been too laggard in availing myself of a sovereign’s prerogative. Sovereign’s? I looked over at Brandon, smiling at his partner, looking like Bacchus. It was a man’s prerogative. One did not need to justify it on the grounds of rank.

There was winsome little Kate, from Kent, a niece of Edward Baynton’s. She was light as gauze, bright as a butterfly, and as insubstantial. There was Margery, a raven-haired Howard girl, some relation to the Duke of Norfolk, with a big bosom and pudgy fingers. There was Jocelyn, a distant cousin of mine, through my Bourchier relations in Essex. But she was a thin, intense sort, and it was not good to meddle with one’s relatives, besides.

There was a Persephone, standing near Lord Mountjoy.

My heart felt a hush as I beheld her. I swear my first thought was of Persephone’s manhood, hair, tore out its bindings so that it fell free over her shoulders and even covered her face, all but her parted lips, which I devoured. In a fever-fit of excitement, I undressed her, perplexed by the fastenings of her clothes (for I had never undressed Katherine; her maids of honour did that), trying not to harm them. She had to show me, else I would have ripped them.

When we lay side by side on the musicians’ daybed, she turned toward the torch so that the amber-coloured light bathed her body and sweet face. “Bessie—Bessie—” I wanted to master my need, at least draw it out a little, but it mastered me, and I pulled her under me in the ancient act of submission, crushed her beneath me, plunged into her body—O God, she was a virgin!—and in a frenzy, sweat exploding from my whole body, I drove myself into her again and again (hearing dimly her cries in my ear) until I burst open inside her.

I spiralled down into a great darkness, turning, turning, landing softly.

She was crying, fighting for breath, clawing at my shoulders.

“Jesu, Bessie ...” I released her, pulled her up, embraced her. She gasped for air, crying all the while. “I am sorry, forgive me, forgive me—” The mad beast had gone, leaving a conscience-stricken man to repair the damage. I comforted her, hating myself. Eventually she stopped crying and became calm. I began my apologies again. She put up a shaking finger against my lips.

“It is done,” she said slowly. “And I am glad of it.”

Now I truly comprehended how ignorant I was of women. “I behaved as a beast, and injured your ... your honour.” I had not even thought of the virginity beforehand.

“If it was this difficult with someone whose body I craved, think how much more difficult it would have been with someone to whom I was indifferent.”

“But you would not have found yourself ... thus ... with someone you ... didn’t want.”

She shook her head. “What do you think marriage is, for a woman?”

Mary. Mary and Louis. God, how could the Mirror of Naples compensate for that?

“But now ... when you come to your marriage-bed ... I’ve robbed you.”

“I’ll pretend.”
“But you can’t pretend—if it is not so!”
“I have heard ... that it is easy to pretend, and men are content with that.”

I was covered with sweat, the daybed was made rank with her deflowering, I was thoroughly shamed—and yet (O, most shameful of all!) with her words, and the thought of her later in another man’s bed, my lust began to flame once more.

Just then she reached over and touched my cheek. “We must go. But oh—let us spend another few moments....” She did not wish to flee? She did not despise me? Truly, I knew nothing of women—or of my own nature, either.

It was dawn when we finally left the musicians’ chamber, creeping down the stone stairs and stealing across the silent Banquet Hall, where the flowers still lay scatter it curb my tendency to escalate the stakes. None of the ordinary things seemed to matter.

Mary had embarked for France with a full court of her own, gloriously dowered and attended. Even children were appointed as pages and maids of honour. The two Seymour lads, aged nine and six, and Thomas Boleyn’s two daughters, aged ten and seven, were on board one of the fourteen “great ships” of Mary’s flotilla.

It was late one evening in Wolsey’s quarters where I first read the name. That name. I had been checking the list in a cursory fashion.

Nan de Boleine.

“Who’s this?” I mumbled. I was exhausted from Bessie that afternoon, and needed sleep.

“The Boleyn girl,” Wolsey said.

“Why the devil do they affect this spelling? I’d not recognized the name.

“It’s ‘Boleyn’ that’s the affected spelling,” said Wolsey. “The family name is originally ‘Bullen. ’But ‘Boleyn’ or ‘Boleine’ looks more prestigious.”

“Like Wolsey for ‘Wulcy’?” I grunted. “All this name-changing is frivolous. I like it not. So both of Boleyn’s daughters have gone? And both of Seymour’s sons? There’ll not be any young ones left to grow up and attend at our court.”

“The parents were anxious for their children to acquire French manners.”

By God, that rankled! For how long would the world look to France for its standard of elegance and style? I was determined that my court would usurp it. “The court of King Louis is as lively as a grasshopper in November,” I snorted. “They’ll learn little there.”

“They’ll learn from the shadow court, the one headed by Francis Valois, Duc d’Angoulême. Unless Mary gives Louis an heir, Francis will be the next King of France. Already he holds court and practises. The little Boleyns and Seymours will learn from him, not from Louis.”

“Francis’s wife, Louis’s daughter Claude, is as holy as Katherine, so they say.” My tongue was becoming unguarded with fatigue. “It can hardly be stylish there.”

“Madame Claude is ignored. Francis’s mistress sets the tone.”

Openly? His mistress presided openly? “What sort of fellow is this Francis, of the house of Valois?”
“Much like yourself, Your Majesty.” Of late Wolsey had introduced this title for me, saying that “Your Grace” was shared alike with Dukes and Archbishops and bishops, and that a monarch needed his own title. I liked it. “Athletic, well educated, a man of culture.” He paused. “It is also said he enjoys a blemished reputation as an insatiable lecher.”

“Already? How old is he?”

“Twenty, Your Majesty.”

“Are his ... attentions always welcome?”

“Not universally, Your Majesty. He is most persistent, so it is said, and will not desist once he has his sights set on a prey. When the mayor and prayed just as intently. My prayers began in proper, stiff sentences. O Lord, Mighty God, grant, I beseech you, a son, for my realm. But as hours wore on, and Linacre appeared, shaking his head, they became frantic, silent cries. Help her, help me, give us a child, I beg you, please, I will do anything, perform any feat, I will go on a crusade, I will dedicate this child to you, like Samuel, here am I, Lord, send me ...”

“It is over.” Linacre flung the door wide. I leapt to my feet.

“A son,” he said. “Living.” He beckoned for me to follow him.

Katherine lay back, like a corpse upon a pallet. She did not stir. Was she—had she—?

De la Sa was massaging her abdomen, which was still distended and puffy. Great spurts of blackish blood shot out from between her legs each time he pushed, where it was caught in a silver basin. The blood was lumpy with clots. Katherine moaned and stirred.

“The child,” Linacre indicated, turning my eyes from the grotesque horror on the bed that was my pain-wracked
and damaged wife. Maria de Salinas Willoughby was bathing the babe, washing blood and mucus off him.

He was so tiny. Tiny as a kitten. Too small to live, I knew it on the instant.

“We thought it best that he be baptized immediately,” said Linacre. “So we sent for a priest.”

I nodded, aware of what he was admitting. Baptize him quickly, before he dies. No ceremony. Any priest will do.

A young priest appeared from the outer chamber, having been hurried from the Chapel Royal, where he served with minor duties. He was still adjusting his vestments and carried a container of holy water.

“Proceed,” I ordered him. Maria had the babe dried and wrapped in a blanket by now.

“His ... robe,” protested Katherine weakly.

“She means the christening robe she fashioned for him,” explained Maria.

“We haven’t time.” I said the words, feeling nothing. Numb as a hand held against cold metal.

“The robe ...”

“It is right here, Your Grace, I’ll see to it,” Maria reassured Katherine tenderly. She pulled the dainty thing over his head, not even straightening it, just so she could comply.

“Godparents?” asked the priest.

“You, Maria, and you, Brandon.” What difference? Anyone would do. There would be no duties as the child grew.

“Name?”

“William,” I said. A good English name.

“I baptize thee, William, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.” A trickle of water on his soft forehead.

Quick, now: wrap him warmly, hold him near the brazier, give him heated milk. A miracle if he lives. Lord Jesu, I ask you for a miracle.

Prince William died seven hours later. By the time Katherine’s milk came in, the babe had been buried for two days, wearing his little christening robe as a shroud.

As Brandon made his way to Dover, preparing to take ship and cross the wintry Channel, a messenger arrived carrying a letter smuggled out of the convent. Mary was being assaulted and harassed by Francis, who visited her daily on the pretext of consoling her, but propositioned her, grabbed her, and attempted to woo her. He ordered the nuns to leave them alone and lock the doors, then he tried to seduce her, and failing that, to force her to lie with him.

I shook with rage at the picture of this libertine putting his hands on my sister—his stepmother! The very heavens themselves condemned this ancient abomination. The First Gentleman of France, as he called himself, was a perverted beast. Let Mary be found with child, so that France would be delivered from his evil reign! And let Brandon act as her champion to free her from the prison that Francis had put her in.

“Pray God, Katherine,” I said, when I recounted Mary’s plight to her. “I know he hears your prayers.”

“Not always,” she said. “But I will pray nonetheless.”

God answered her prayers, but in a disastrous way. For Brandon rescued Mary by marrying her himself, with Francis’s connivance.

“Traitor!” I screamed, when I read his letter. “Traitor!”

For the tenth time I reread the words:

My Lord, so it is that when I came to Paris I heard many things which put me in great fear, and so did the Queen both; and the Queen would never let me be in rest till I had granted her to be married. And so to be plain with you, I have married her heartily and have lain with her, insomuch that I fear me lest she be with child.

Now I knew them all by heart. No need to keep this foul document. I flung it into the fire, where it quickly writhed, blackened, and withered.

“He’s robbed me of a sister!”

“I think it was rather ... noble of him to do what he did,” said Katherine timidly, for she had learned not to contradict me in my rages.

“In Spain such things may pass for noble. In England they are regarded as foolhardy and dangerous.”

“He rescued a princess in distress, whose honour was being threatened.”

“He robbed me of a valuable property to be used in marriage negotiations! Now I have no one to use as bait for treaties, no one, as we are childless, and—”
“Can you not rejoice for them, and their happiness? Henry, once you would have. Oh, remember the boy who wrote,

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{‘But love is a thing given by God,} \\
\text{In that therefore can be none odd,} \\
\text{But perfect in deed and between two;} \\
\text{Wherefore then should we it eschew?’}
\end{align*}
\]

“That boy is dead.” When had he died? In my learning to be King?

“He rescued me. When I “1em
Passion—almost equally impersonal—I delivered into Bessie.

Mary was arriving back in England, and there was to be a ceremony at Dover to greet her. I made certain I was not there; for to be there was to confer approval on her actions, and that I would never do. Brandon, the (created by me!) Duke of Suffolk, was her protector now. Let him see to her needs.

All communication between us passed through Wolsey. Brandon could not approach me without Wolsey’s leave; neither could Mary. Mary I wished to see, therefore I made arrangements for us to meet in London on the royal barge. Together we would be rowed up and down upon the Thames, where we could speak one last time before I relinquished her to Brandon forever.

The woman who approached the landing-ramp was taller, more beautiful, than I remembered. She wore a cloak of deepest blue velvet, gathered about the neck and shoulders, that floated outward like the Virgin’s. But she was no virgin. Her very step was changed.

The oarsmen saluted her. “Your Majesty.”

I welcomed her, but said pointedly, “Queen no longer, my men. She is Duchess.”

“I remain a Princess, regardless of my husband’s title,” she said, a smile masking her determination.

“Shall we go below?” I took her hand, leading her belowdecks, where the royal stateroom, with all appointments for our comforts, awaited—not the least of which was that we would be insulated from the ears above.

We settled ourselves on the silken cushions: strangers.

“So you have followed your heart,” I finally said, for want of anything else to say. “As you threatened to do.”

“I love him!” she cried. “I love him, I love him, I have loved him since I was a child!”

The oars outside the windows made slurping noises as they dipped in and out of the water.

“Can you not see him for what he is? A womanizer, someone who knows all the tricks, all the things to win an unsophisticated heart.”

“Is that so?” Her face took on a transcendent, triumphal look. “And what did he win by marrying me? Banishment from court, and from your favour.”

“He won England’s fairest jewel.”

“And your best playing card. Who is the calculating one, Brother?”

I stood accused. Yes, I was worse than Brandon. He had seen Mary and loved her, risking my wrath and banishment from court. I had seen only the loss of a playing card. When had this happened to me? I hated myself, hated that thing I had become: ugly, base, experimenting with my own body as if it were a thing apart from myself.

But a realist. A king who was not a realist cheated his people. That was the truth of it.

A bright arc of foam, spray: the Thames was rising past us. I saw York Place on our port side. Wolsey’s residence had gaily fluttering banners planted by the water-stairs, inviting dignng and muscular, weak and weedy, fat and soft? Is it as good as mine?

“I did not avail myself of it,” she said.

“But surely you could tell—”

“Jewelled raiment and well-tailored clothes disguise bodily defects,” she said. “That is what they are designed to do.”

They were throwing out the landing ropes. There was not time for an answer, an honest answer.

“Was he a man?” I cried.

She looked puzzled.

The barge bumped against the padded piles. We were there.
“All men are men,” she answered. “More or less.”
With the departure of the Duke and Duchess of Suffolk came the arrival of Wolsey’s cardinal’s hat. The hat, conferred by Leo X, along with a blessed golden rose for me for my fidelity and orthodoxy, arrived at Dover, encased in a regal box. Wolsey arranged that it be conveyed to London with all proper reverence, there to be welcomed by the Abbot of Westminster Abbey. Afterward it was placed upon the high altar of St. Paul’s, and then, in a drama designed to dazzle the eye, it was placed upon Wolsey’s head, creating a scarlet presence against the ancient grey stones. The chanting of the choristers framed the moment in divine approbation.

“You see what a serpent you have nurtured in your bosom,” muttered Katherine, standing stiffly beside me. “He glistens and gleams like the very creature in the Garden of Eden.”

A splendid metaphor. Wolsey’s satin indeed gleamed by the fluttering candlelight. But he was too plump to pass for a serpent. I said as much, while the chanting covered my low voice.

“A demon, then,” said Katherine. “Although Satan himself is sleek, some of his lesser demons must be gluttonous, just as their counterparts on earth.”

“Oh, Katherine.” She hated Wolsey with such an unreasoning hate, held him responsible for all the changes in me, when in fact he merely facilitated them; they originated within myself.

“How long will you wait before appointing him Lord Chancellor? Will it be a Christmas gift?”

Damn her for her insight! In truth, I had planned a December ceremony, separating the cardinalship from the chancellorship by a decent interval of two months. Archbishop Warham was old and ready to retire. But more to the point, I no longer listened to him on political affairs or considered any of his opinions, so he was useless in his office.

“It is no gift. He has earned it.”

Katherine did not reply, merely gave me a withering look of disdain. I did not care to argue. I was keeping my promise to myself, never to fight or hurt or upset her again. Her new pregnancy must be undisturbed, even if it meant coddling and cossetting the bitter and illogically resentful vessel it rested within.

My new Lord Chancellor and I had much to discuss, in February of 1516. The Christmas festivities were over and done with. Archbishop Warham had gn his spiritual duties, and Wolsey had assumed the mantle of the highest political office in the realm, along with the highest ecclesiastical rank, as England’s only Cardinal.

Did he ever regret the lost Joan Lark and his sons? Or had the sacrifice been well worth it? It had taken only three years to go from the Lark’s Morning Inn to this, once the decision had been made. Tactfully, he never referred to it. He was a man of the present. The Welsh longing for unnamable things was not a part of his makeup. I envied him that.

“King Francis has proved himself,” he said bluntly, that raw February morning as we settled ourselves before his gigantic Italian work desk.

I knew what he meant. He meant that Queen Claude was pregnant. Francis had proved himself alarmingly, then, both as a warrior and as a getter of children. Within only a few months of his accession, he had taken the field, leading his troops into battle at Marignano in Italy, winning a stunning victory against the Papal forces. Francis meant for northern Italy to become French, and he was well on his way to achieving it.

“Perhaps it will die.” I cursed it, then.

“Nothing Francis does seems to die, or not thrive. Truly, he seems to have extraordinary luck on his side.” Wolsey was annoyed by this. One could counter stratagems, not luck.

“And all anyone talks of is his wretched court! His styles, his ballet de cour, his plans to build châteaux.”

“A novelty, Your Majesty.” Wolsey sniffed daintily at the silver pomander he had affected carrying. “He is the newest king in Europe. ‘Twill pass.”

“Ah, but he is not the newest King!” I produced the telling letter that had arrived only that morning, and handed it to Wolsey.

His eyes attacked it. “Ferdinand is dead.” He crossed himself, by rote. “Charles of Burgundy is King of Spain.”

“Yes. A sixteen-year-old Habsburg is now the newest—and youngest—King in Europe.”

“And that makes you the old fox among them.” Wolsey smiled. “We’re well rid of Ferdinand. He was useless to
us; useless to everyone, in fact. A new king in Spain, a boy-king ... what possibilities this offers!"

“For manipulation?”

“How well we understand one another.”

“That is why you are where you are.” And let him understand that it was I who had put him there, not he himself. Without me, he could do nothing, was nothing. “Not all boy-kings can be manipulated. Age is not necessarily a measure of innocence.”

“I understand this one is unworldly, peculiar.”

“The truth is that he is unknown. As I myself was when first I came to the throne.”

“We will make it our business to know his nature, gather information. I have several connections in the Burgundian court, reliable witnesses ... if paid enough.”

In retrospect I cannot help but laugh at Wolsey’s primitive methods of spying; at the time they gns.

This treaty, of course, would be signed in London, under my auspices, with Wolsey himself acting as Papal legate.

The proposal was eagerly accepted by Pope Leo, and, using the bait of Tournai, we enticed the French into coming to England to sign the treaty. Not only would we unite in peace, but we would plan and execute a mighty Crusade against the Turk.

The world stood still while the legates, ambassadors, lords, and prelates of all Christendom—England, France, the Empire, the Papacy, Spain, Denmark, Scotland, Portugal, Hungary, the Italian states, the Swiss Confederation, and the Hanseatic towns—gathered in London and signed the treaty. Before the High Altar of St. Paul’s, a Pontifical Mass was celebrated by Wolsey, and a general peace within Christendom was proclaimed. Cardinal Wolsey, Lord Chancellor of England, Papal legate, was recognized as “the Architect of Universal Peace.” His face shone with triumphant glory.

There were a few private matters to be worked out between England and France. One concerned Tournai. My plans to retain it as a part of England had not fared well. It had proved a dreadful expense, and the attempts to convert its inhabitants from their French perverseness had met with utter failure. I agreed to sell Tournai back to France for six hundred thousand crowns—less than it had taken me to capture and garrison it, but I never begrudge money spent on an idea that seems promising at the time.

The other concerned Francis and myself. Evidently the French King had as burning a curiosity to behold me as I had to behold him. It was a curiosity that we agreed to satisfy. We would meet, with our full courts in attendance, at a place called the Valley of Gold, near Calais, the following summer.

As the last of the diplomats took leave and the ships plied their way across the Channel in the strengthening autumn gales, I was faced with a personal dilemma of a most delicate nature.

Bessie was pregnant.

She had waited until after the treaties were concluded to tell me. I had not seen her throughout the festivities; I had decorously kept Katherine by my side, as good taste, protocol, and respect demanded. There had been no lying with Katherine, however, as she had just begun another pregnancy.

I had looked forward to enjoying Bessie and her incomparable favours again; had found myself thinking on them during the long and tedious banquet that Wolsey gave at York Place, described by flattering chroniclers as “surpassing anything given by either Cleopatra or Caligula,” when in truth the spirit of those two lusty goats was to be found within my head, not at Wolsey’s table. How Bessie and I used one another, in fantasy, while the Venetian ambassador droned on in my ear about Adriatic trade routes!

And now, as I was in the very act of reaching for her, my pre-formed desire in the ascendant—

“Your Majesty, I am with child.” How calmly those four shattering words came from her lips.

I dropped her arm.

“Yes,” she said. “It will be in June.”

Seven months. She waited expectantly (in both senses of the word), waited to hear my happy words. How wonderful. I will make you Duchess of X. What joyooked forwurs. You must have your own estates, honours, be
recognized as Maitresse en Titre, *my love, my desire, my pretty one.*

“You must leave court,” I said.

“Yes.” And?

“I will—I will find you a place to go. Nearby, so I can watch over you until the child is born. Perhaps a priory in Essex.”

Her face changed. “But—”

“You must leave the Queen’s service immediately. It would be a scandal for you to continue as her maid of honour. It would dishonour all three of us.

“And my father?” she cried. “Surely he should leave your service as well? Does it not dishonour him to continue to minister to a—a man who has seduced his daughter?”

“So now you turn sanctimonious? This was not your tune in the beginning. Oh, no, then you dismissed my qualms as overscrupulous, old-fashioned.”

“I have honour, too! It is not only you and the Queen who are entitled to it! I have honour, and my father has honour, and now to be treated so lightly—”

How tedious this was, how unpleasant. Why did all pleasure have this rancid aftertaste?

“Come now, Bessie. It was sport, we agreed it was, we’ve enjoyed one another, but now it is time to observe the proprieties, lest we cause a scandal, and thereby harm ourselves. And the child.”

“I loved you! I loved you, and now you treat me as a burden, a problem to be solved.”

There it was, the dreaded word: *love.* I did not want to be loved; that was the burden. Unwanted love was the greatest burden of all.

“It is not you that is the burden ...” I began, but it was too difficult and complicated to explain, and in the end I could not say the only words she truly wished to hear, anyway.

“And after the child comes, what then?”

“Wolsey will find you a husband. Never fear, you will be well married.”

“Wolsey!”

“So you see, you will not have been ‘dishonoured.’ You will be as marriageable as if you had remained chaste the entire time at court.”

“You let Wolsey attend to even this ... personal thing?”

“It is not personal, Bessie.”

That was the tragedy of it for her, and the embarrassment of it for me.

There could be no resistance on her part. I would give orders, and in the morning she would be gone.

That night, as I lay alone in bed, I wondered, in horror and fear of what lay within me, why I felt nothing for her. For three years we had joined our bodies, laughed, sung, and exchanged affectionate words. Yet her actions had been real, and mine, evidently, had not.

Toward midnight I fell into a restless sleep. I dreamed that I was passing through a field of poppies in which each flower, if one looked deep within its red center, had a woman’s face. The faces were different, yet all the flowers were alike. If they withered up during the night. Their scent was beguiling but not addicting. This puzzled me because Arabs used poppy seeds for medicine, which was said to be strongly addicting.

The morning sun dispelled the shreds of this strange dream, but the coming day felt stale already.
Katherine wished for our child to be born at Greenwich. Mary had been born there, and Katherine wanted the same chamber, the same attendants, the same everything. A good Christian is not supposed to be superstitious, but I overlooked Katherine’s “failing,” if it can be called that, because I shared it. I would propitiate anything, because I knew not from which quarter the hostility came.

“I was born here,” I told little Mary, as we passed a late April morning walking about the palace gardens. She and I were in front of Katherine, who needed the pathway entirely to herself, so bulky was she. And not just because of the infant. She herself had become very bulky.

Mary looked up at me. She loved hearing my voice; I could tell. “Yes, I was born here, and you were born here. Your mother and I were married here! It is a special place.”

Overhead the skies were piercingly blue, and I could smell the coming spring in the air: a peculiar sort of blending of sweetness and death. We walked near the water-wall, where the Thames caressed the stones.

Mary pointed up at the gulls. “Birds!”

How well she spoke! How alert she was! “Yes, sea birds,” I said. “You find them wherever there is great water.” I looked out at the boats bobbing all about, and especially at the royal wharf where my long-awaited flagship was tied up. “The water is England’s greatness,” I said. “It surrounds us on all sides and protects us from enemies, but at the same time it allows us to master it and make it our servant. With ships to ride it, as people ride horses, we shall go far.”

Mary pointed at Henri, Grace à Dieu. “Go see.”

“No.” Katherine shook her head.

“Let the child indulge herself,” I said. “You mean, let yourself.” Yet she was amenable.

I showed our daughter about the great ship, nicknamed Great Harry. Every odour of her planks, every creak of the ropes made something within me sing. I longed to be away, gone, upon open seas....

Mary began fingerising the captain’s knot-cords. “Those are to measure how fast a ship is moving,” I said, opening her fat little fists and making her drop the rope. “But we mustn’t mess them.”

She began to whine, then to cry. Katherine, waiting upon the docks, looked up. Through a mother’s ears, she had heard Mary’s faraway cries.

She took the child in hand as we alighted off the gangplank, and forced her to walk obediently along the water-wall separating the palace grounds from the marshy area surrounding it and from the river itself—for Greenwich was a sea-palace, but protected from the ravages of water.

Katherine went to her lying-in chamber inurroundn my hand, only to find it being opened from the other side. I shot into the room.

Linacre awaited me. His face told me nothing. It was as bland as old snow in February.

I was relieved. It meant Katherine lived; for if she did not, he would hardly have looked so blank.

“You Majesty.” He gestured. “The Queen wishes you to be with her.”

I followed him down the connecting suite of rooms (all muffled with hangings, to keep toxic airs out, and therefore black and stuffy) to the last, darkest one of all: the birth chamber.

Katherine lay in the great bed, her attendants sponging her and combing out her sweat-soaked hair. Physicians were still scurrying about, clicking instruments and gathering bowls and blood-drenched linens. It was as busy as a banquet in there.

“Henry.” Katherine gestured to me. I came and took her hand. It was so limp, damp, and hot it felt like a wadded washcloth.

“What has happened?” I had to know. Whatever it was, I had to know. Katherine lived; at least I could be sure of that.

“Dead.” There was no need for more than that. The one word said everything.

“A son?”

She shook her head. “A daughter.”
Then that was not quite so bad, not an unequivocal sign.

“I am grieved.” But relieved. The heavens were yet ambiguous. A clear sign was what I dreaded above all. “May I see her?”

Katherine tried to stop me, but I did not heed her feebly gesturing hands as I turned to the little bundle lying at the foot of the bed, its face covered, denoting death.

Gently I pulled the blanket aside, just to see her face once, to make her mine, before consigning her to the earth forever.

It was no human face that I uncovered, but that of a monster. It had but a single eye; no nose, just a gaping great hole; and mushroomlike, puffy lips, over a mouth with teeth.

“Jesu!” I recoiled.

Katherine reached out for me, clutching. So that was why she had screamed upon first beholding it.

“What have you brought forth?” I am ashamed that those were my words to her, as if the monster were her handiwork.

She closed her eyes. “It is not I. I knew not what I harboured.”

“I know. Forgive me.” When I remembered all the times we had looked fondly at the swelling of her belly ... while inside, this horror had been taking shape. “I spoke in sorrow, and stupidly.” I looked at the lump. “Thank God it is out of you, and born dead.” It must be buried somewhere away from consecrated ground. Deep in the earth, where it could decay and never rise.

I motioned to William Butts, Linacre’s young assistant physician. “Call for a priest.” I wanted only a priest to handle the thing. Butts nodded, then started to pick up the bundle.

“Stop!” I cried. “Do not touch it!” Let it lie there on the bedcovers, which afterward must be burnt. And instead of a churching ceremony, Katherine and I must be ritually cleadiwocame and, after muttering a few words, gingerly picked up the dead deformity and put it in a sack. He would know what to do with it. I did not presume to tell him; nor did I want to know where it would lie.

I insisted that a second priest come in to bless and purify Katherine and myself immediately. He did so, whilst the bed was being stripped of its contaminated coverings, and I had to hold Katherine in my arms. But I dared not issue forth from the chamber until it was done. I was trembling with fear—revulsion—premonition.

I carried the limp Katherine all the way through the long wing of the palace to her own apartments, where fresh bleached linens would be laid upon her own bed, where windows were open and healthy summer air could enter. Out of that fetid chamber of contagion and death, and into the daylight of normalcy. She did not protest, merely let me carry her, like a sleepy child past its bedtime.

As I was leaving her quarters, one of the novices from the Priory of St. Lawrence was waiting for me in the guard room. His gentle eyes above his black-hooded robe searched mine.

“The Prior sent me to tell you ... Mistress Blount is brought to bed. Her delivery is imminent.” He waited, not knowing how I would receive the news.

“Then I must come.” Like a man in a dream, I heard myself speaking. It had all taken on the features of a dream now. I was being tested, and I no longer knew what God required of me. But I knew that I must see all that was ordained for me to see. I must be at Bessie’s side, even if something worse awaited me there. The human requirement was that I bear it with Bessie.

“Lead me,” I said.

The young novice—his name was Richard, he told me—and I crossed the Thames directly from Greenwich to the Tower. There I got us fresh horses from the royal stables, and from thence we would ride through the night to the Priory, which lay some thirty miles outside London.

First we had to make our way through the city, sleeping now in the bluish midsummer darkness. Did anyone now follow those ancient midsummer rituals used for foretelling the future? Make a cake, scatter certain flowers about the bed, then walk backwards in silence.... The houses seemed quiet. The people therein—my charges—rested secure. O God, if only I could provide them with the one security they needed above all—an undisputed heir to the Throne.

We passed out through the Bishopsgate of the city walls, and directly into the countryside. It was still in that darkest time of night, even at midsummer. I could not see what lay before me. Only Richard, motioning me on, guided me. He knew this road well. It was well worn between the Priory of St. Lawrence and the house of Wolsey,
its protector and patron.

Dawn came up early in the eastern skies to our right as we rode. I had tried, all the way and in silence, to banish the picture in my mind of the malevolent child my true wife had borne me. The darkness could not lend itself to this. I could bear to think about it in daylight, no other time. The curse was buried now, safely.

Up came the sun. The countryside about us was fresh. The sun licked all the growing furrows of the fields, encouraging them as children. The intense greenness seemed a promise of explosion into fertility and, beyond that, ripeness. A green goddess r," he said. His very words made me sure that they disapproved. "They think it will be soon."

Very well. I turned my back, indicating that he should depart from me. I looked out over the grounds of St. Lawrence's, delighting in the order, the simplicity, the production. That was what I longed for in my realm.

I thought of going to the church, which I could see blocked out before me, a great grey building. But I was afraid of missing the end of Bessie’s time, and also ... I was too confused, I cannot write it clearly. But I felt that even cleansed as I was, it was presumptuous to visit the altar of the Lord....

"Your Majesty!" A young novice came to the chamber doors. "Mistress Blount has a fair son!"

A son.

"She calls for you." He smiled. No condemnation there. (Was he too young? Too close to the source of temptation?)

"I come."

I followed the young man through the doors of the waiting room, through the Prior’s receiving room, and into the inner guest chamber. I noted, even in my distracted state, that it was lavishly appointed.

A midwife, accompanied by a nurse, came toward me, like a priest elevating a Host.

"Your son," they said, almost in unison. They presented a bundle to me. I peered into it.

It was his face. Prince Henry’s. Exactly the same.

Jesu! I wanted to cross myself. The dead child brought back to life again, in another child, one who could never inherit the throne—whilst the child of the Queen was born a thing accursed.


"Henry!" they cried, all the onlookers.

The wrapped bundle felt as heavy and vigorous as the other one. God had returned him to me. But not by Katherine.

Now I shook. I could not think on it. I knew not what it meant.

The midwife indicated that I should follow her. "In this chamber, Your Majesty, she awaits." How delicately she phrased it.

I passed through an adjoining room to find Bessie all bathed, perfumed, coiffed, and awaiting my attendance. Curiously, I did not find her beautiful, but false. Women after childbirth should not resemble perfumed courtesans.

"Bessie," I said, coming to her side. The morning light was streaming in through windows on the right side of the room. Motes danced in the sunlight. The casements were cranked wide open, and the mixed, heady smell of the infirmarians’ herb garden below was rolling into the chamber. I fancied that the odour made me drowsy. For I was suddenly and overwhelmingly sleepy.

"We have a son," she said.

"Yes. We have a son. I have seen him." My head was swirling, muddled. "He is ... perfect." Such a stupid word. Such a word that said everything.

"He looks like you." She smiled, touched e droe gently nudged.

"Fitzroy. A traditional way of saying ‘son of a King.’ " She smiled. "For this has happened before." She stopped smiling.

The infant had been bathed, swathed, and put in his cradle. I stood looking over him for a long while. His resemblance to my lost Prince Henry was unsettling.

My wife had had a monster. My mistress had had a healthy son.

Clearly, God was giving me a message. One too blatant for even me to ignore.

I spent the remainder of the long summer’s day at the Priory. Bessie fell asleep, sleeping the sleep of the young and healthy, undisturbed by conscience, worn out by natural physicality.

The Priory was a neat little community. It nestled in the slightly rolling foothills of Essex, which looked like green knolls. Everything seemed ordered and elevated into more than the everyday. I walked through the stables, the kitchen garden of herbs, the greater vegetable garden. Everything was kept in the most transcendent order, as though
the Lord might appear at any moment and puto’s just to placate him and entice him to France. Ha! Now he was out his money, out of Leonardo’s services, and stuck with the dark painting of the half-smiling woman that everyone agreed was ugly.

“And I am showing my good intentions on my face,” I said, fingering my new beard. Francis had proposed that neither of us shave until the meeting, as a token of good faith. I was not sure I liked myself with a beard. Certainly it changed my face.

WILL:

As it turned out, Katherine hated the beard and begged him to cut it, “for her sake.” Still trying not to cross her, still half hoping for an heir, Henry succumbed and shaved the beard. This provoked a diplomatic crisis, as Francis was thereby offended, and Henry’s ambassadors had to explain the circumstances. Francis’s “dear mother” Louise hastened to assure them that “men’s love is shown not in their beards but in their hearts,” and the incident was smoothed over.

Then, belatedly, Henry started growing the beard again just prior to his departure. Thereby it was not long enough to offend Katherine, but could serve as a token of goodwill toward Francis. Such are the weighty considerations that diplomats must deal with.

HENRY VIII:

June, 1520. I stood on the castle deck of Great Harry in the fairest winds God ever sent mortal man. We skimmed across the Channel—nay, we flew. The great sails, painted to look like cloth-of-gold (trompe-l’oeil, the French say—oh, they have a word for everything!), billowed out and did their duty. We were bound for Calais, to undertake the great meeting between the French and English courts. It had all come about, despite the deep reservations of everyone on both sides.

Including—perhaps most of all?—Katherine, who mounted the steps up to the forecastle to stand, now, by my side. Part of me noted how slowly, how painfully she moved. Her arthritis had made stair-climbing difficult for her in the past two years. The other part of me welcomed her presence as a companion.

“Look, see! There is Calais!” I had sighted it only once before, but took an authority’s pleasure in pointing it out to her.

Before us was France and the cupped, fine landing beaches of her northern coast. Behind us, equally visible, were the high white cliffs of England.

“It looks so harmless,” she said.

“It is harmless. For the land you see is England, the Pale of Calais.”

Why did even my wife, the Queen, forget that I was King of part of France?

The plans had been settled to the last detail. I, and all my company, were to land in the Pale of Calais, and thereafter, Francis and I would meet—and all our courts with us—just at the border of the two jurisdictions. Afterwards, each would entertain the other on his own land, and on his own territory. Special cities—temporary, splendid, as those can be only when permanency is not a factor—had been could not resist asking. I was young, remember.

“The Kings move?” He looked bewildered.

I felt a rough hand on my shoulder, and turned to see the angry face of the building master. He gave me a shove. “Stop talking to my workmen!” He suddenly moved and grabbed the other man by the shoulder. “What was he asking you? Dimensions, designs, secrets?”

“He wanted to know about the hill,” the man said slowly.
“Cursed Frenchman!” The master builder looked around wildly for something to throw at me, and found a large dirt clod. He heaved it in my direction. “Go tell Francis he has no hope of bettering us! Go tell your master that!”

I would learn no more, and I had seen enough. So I left and continued walking in the direction of Ardres, the first town outside the Pale of Calais. From a hill nearby I watched an identical swarm of workmen building similar structures for the French King. I opened my square of cloth and took out my bread and cheese and last year’s softening apple, and ate. I started to laugh at them, but somehow could not. As a child I had promised myself always to answer my own questions and to hold nothing back from myself. Are they not fools? Are they not simpletons? The French King will come, and the English King will come, and then they will go. In ten years they will not even remember the glass in the palace windows. But why should that disturb me?

Because it is wasteful, I answered myself. Because no man should be happy to serve another with no hope of recognition. Because all is temporary, and this reminder of the passing nature of things saddens me.

A blacksmith in my village, reputedly stupid, had once speculated as to why Father’s mare had lost her new shoe so unexpectedly. (I had been sent to complain, as Father suspected shoddy work.) “Well now,” the smith said slowly, “there’s always the reason. And then there’s the real reason.”

I found many reasons for my peevishness and sense of outrage about the royal enclaves being built, but the real one was this: I wanted to be there, and there I could not be.

It would be simplistic to say that my detachment from such things began that day, but certainly I began to distance myself from that world. Everyone wants to feel special in some small way, and mine was to see myself as an aloof observer perched on a wall, watching the parade of human folly—royal and common—passing beneath me. Eventually I convinced myself that I had freely elected that stance.

The day came, in June. The King was arriving, and we must welcome him, every last resident of Calais.

I was there, upon the docks, as my master had directed me. I had dutifully helped him tidy the shop and festoon it properly with Tudor green and white, and flags, and mottoes for the royal visit. For three days street-sweepers had been busy gathering up the trash and offal from the main thoroughfares (it was hoped the King would not take it into his head to go down any others). The populace was anxious to see its King again and to see its Queen for the first time. Deep in everyone’s mind was the (futile) hope that if the French and English Kings met in friendship, the peculiar status of Calais would be resolved and the contradictions of our everyday life disappear.

Henry’s ship came into harbour—a huge bulwark with golden sails. We all gaped at it. A nKing himself appeared on the decks.

It was my third sighting of him. I had seen him twice before, once returning from his French wars, and before that, riding to the Tower.

He is not the same, was my first thought. The figure on deck, heavy in majesty, was not that of the boyish soldier-King I had seen on horseback seven years earlier. He was stolid in a way the other never could have been—fixed, as in a carved figure.

But he is thirty now, I told myself. Thirty and almost fifteen years a king. Time changes men....

He stepped down and strode across the gangplank to the docks. He was wearing clothes that tore one’s heart in envy—beautiful, costly things of gold and velvet and satin. He was robust and handsome as mortal men seldom are. I stood in awe of him, at a moment in time when I beheld human perfection—perfection that must, perforce, decay. He raised his arms, and everyone fell silent. He spoke to us, telling us of the forthcoming meeting of monarchs. It was the first time I had ever heard him speak. He had a superb voice, smooth and yet able to carry quite a distance. What a man, I thought.

Then Queen Katherine appeared on the decks. She was wearing so many jewels the sun glistened off them and kept her face hidden. She raised her hand and made a gesture to the onlookers. Then she turned and slowly descended the ramp to join her husband.

She was squat and old, and there was a stifled gasp from the crowd. They had expected a beautiful young Queen, someone like Henry’s own sister Mary, and instead there was this ... Spanish warship. Indeed, she did resemble a man-o’-war, with her stiff brocaded skirts and strange, boxlike headdress (standard in the Spain of her youth, some thirty years earlier) and slow, deliberate movements. One almost expected a gust of wind to puff out her skirts and blow her along.

Standing beside her husband, she did not turn toward him or acknowledge him in any way. Instead, she raised her hand in stately fashion (to which we were expected to respond by cheering) and turned her head into the sun.

Which was a mistake. The sunlight on her aged face, in combination with the ugly headdress, reduced the onlookers to silence. She is so old, we all thought. (Later it was reported that Francis had observed, “The King of England is young and handsome, but his wife is old and deformed”—a remark for which Henry never forgave his “dear royal brother.”) But one can understand Francis’s bewilderment, as we were all struck by the contrast. On the
one side, Henry, handsome and bursting with physical power; on the other, a woman riddled with gout and troubles.

HENRY VIII:

Katherine and I walked through the streets to a joyous welcome. It was dusk when we set out, and the individual faces in the crowd could be seen by natural light, but by the time we ended the procession, torches had been lit.

We retired to a town house owned by a wealthy wool merchant, on loan for our royal use. We began to settle ourselves for sleep. But then Wolsey appeared. I left Katherine (doubtless she welcomed the privacy to make her personal devotions) and went downstairs to confer with the Cardinal.

He was wearing lesser ceremonial clothes—designed to impress the onlooker, but still permitting some ease of movement and com the widowed Queen’s hurried departure ... ah, they dance as if it were their profession!”

Some few unimportant people had remained in France after Mary had eloped with Brandon. But what of them? They were negligible.

“What dance measures do you prefer?” he pressed me. “I will instruct my musicians.”
“I dance anything. It is of no matter which begins.”
“A monarch without modesty!” he exclaimed. “How refreshing!”

As the tables were cleared away, the musicians began to assemble in the far end of the hall. There were not as many of them as in an English ensemble, but I trusted they would make decent music.

Katherine and I would lead out the first measure, an Alhambra-rhythm, as danced in Spain. She could still do a turn and execute a measure to those melodies, recalling her girlhood.

The company applauded dutifully. Then Francis and his Queen did a slow, dignified dance.

Now both Claude and Katherine could be retired, while Francis and I danced with others, having honoured our spouses.

Francis brought a woman over to me. I had seen her in the French company and at once began speaking French to her, when Francis corrected me.

“She is one of yours, mon frère.” He touched her bare shoulders lightly. “An Englishwoman. Mary Boleyn.”

The lady bowed. She was wearing a May-green gown, as I recall, that wrapt round her shoulders and breasts. Her hair was that honey colour which always aroused me, whether in fabric or hair or just the sun streaming into a room. It was my weakness. How did Francis know?

I took her as my partner. “An Englishwoman, harboured in the very French court?” I murmured. She followed my every movement, as no Englishwoman ever had. It was both maddening and seductive. “How many of you were there?”

“Not many,” she replied. “My sister Anne, for one.”

I looked about to indicate curiosity. In France, I already felt, everything was indirect, including questions.

“She is too young to be here. She does not yet put up her hair. A wild creature, so our father says.”

“That is his hope. In truth, France does not tame, but refines, boldness.”

The message was clear. I took it. “When we return to England, we would take comfort from your presence,” I said.

One sentence. So much simpler than the untutored business with Bessie.

“As you wish,” she replied, looking at me. She did not touch me.

That inflamed me more. She was a clever courtesan.

For courtesan she was. I could recognize one by now. This one had been polished by Francis to a high sheen. Had he enjoyed her? What had he taught her?

I had resolved not to involve myself with women, after the business with Bessie. But a practised courtesan? Surely that was different.

And the njoer advice, and closeted himself with her until noon every day for “consultations.” She in turn called him, “Mon roi, mon seigneur, mon César, et mon fils.”

For an instant his smug face altered. Then he smiled. “Indeed,” he said. “I shall name her after my beloved mother. I can think of no greater honour.”
Evidently, I thought. Pity you cannot marry mère yourself. He was truly disgusting.

WILL:

And would Henry not have been closeted with his own mother, had she lived? How closely linked are jealousy and disgust? Why have no learned men studied this? I myself find the question more absorbing than the dreary debates raging today about the true nature of the Eucharist.

HENRY VIII:

Penny being through, I raised myself out of the leather chair and removed the towel. “I have business to attend to,” I said pointedly.

Still, Francis continued to stand before me, smiling absurdly. Must I make a banner and wave it before his hooded eyes? “I thank you for your assistance,” I said. “But now duties call us in separate directions.”

He bowed. “Indeed. Yet we shall meet later—in the afternoon, for the first joust.”

Protocol dictated that I accompany him through my private apartments. Reluctantly I joined him and together we left my bedchamber, traversed the inner chamber, and opened the door into the large Privy Chamber. At least a dozen attendants looked expectantly toward us.

“Bon jour,” said Francis, lifting his plumed bonnet.

The chamber was some twenty feet wide. Before we had crossed ten, Francis abruptly paused. He put one finger against his cheek and raised his left eyebrow. Then he plucked off his head-covering and tossed it into one corner.

“Wrestle with me, brother!” he cried.

He caught me off guard. Before I could even alter my stance, he came at me, hitting me unfairly, throwing me on my back.

A row of surprised courtiers stared down at my shame. I knew now why Francis had selected a tightly fitting costume for me—it hampered my movements quite effectively.

He stood back, a false look of consternation on his face. “O! Sacre bleu!” He uttered a string of similar French inanities.

But he did not offer me his hand or help me to my feet. Instead, he stood well back, trying to appear surprised.

I rose to my feet. “In France, do you not customarily give an opponent the chance to prepare for a contest?”

“One must always be prepared for the unexpected, cher frère.” He rolled his eyes toward the painted ceiling and shrugged. “Life seldom warns us when she is ready to strike a blow. I merely imitate life.”

I stripped off the confining surcoat. Let us fight, then, away from pubons) they applied equally to all of life as well, to the very fact of being born a human creature. His last point, that rain and hail and “strange skyward happenings” had wrecked the pretty pretend-palaces, summarized the whole meeting: the entente cordiale was insubstantial and immediately destroyed by the first breath of real politics.

That did not stop me from being annoyed with Bishop Fisher, that nattering busybody. He had always been irritating and interfering. My grandmother Beaufort and he had been “thick as thieves,” as the saying goes. On her deathbed she had ordered me to “obey Bishop Fisher in all things.” Ha! My days of obedience had ended, although she could have no inkling of that. I paid little heed to the cantankerous old theologian, and certainly never sought his advice. But this public preaching on my foreign policy ... it had to stop. I gave orders.

Everywhere the clergy were publicly debating, denouncing, and pronouncing. The German monk, Martin Luther, had even gone into print with three theological tracts: On the Liberty of a Christian Man; Address to the Nobility of the German Nation; On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church of God. The last one was a direct attack on the Church in general and the Pope in particular, claiming that the prophecies in Revelation, Chapter 17, had come true at last. (“And there came one of the seven angels which had the seven vials, and talked with me, saying unto me, Come hither; I will show unto thee the judgment of the great whore that sitteth upon many waters.... And upon her
forehead was a name written, MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND
ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH. And I saw the woman drunken with the blood of the saints, and with the
blood of the martyrs of Jesus.... And the angel said unto me ... I will tell thee of the mystery of the woman.... The
seven heads are seven mountains, on which the woman sitteth.... And the woman which thou sawest is that great
city, which reigneth over the kings of the earth." It was obviously the city of Rome, on its seven hills, and the Pope,
t’s beliefs to be heretical and dangerous. Taken as a whole, they led to anarchy. They also rebelled against Christ
Himself, Who plainly set up the Church.

I believed the Church should be purified, not dismantled. And that is what I have done with the Church in
England. It is simple! Why do people make the simple so complicated?

As for my support of the Papacy: my eyes had not yet been opened by my own Great Matter. When I wrote in
1521, I wrote in sincerity and to the extent of my spiritual knowledge at the time. That is all God asks of any man.
That he later grows spiritually should not be held against him.

One of Luther’s heresies was in claiming that there were not seven Sacraments; that the Church (for mysterious,
self-serving reasons of its own) had invented five of them. These five were Matrimony, Holy Orders, Penance,
Extreme Unction, and Confirmation. Only Baptism and Communion remained. Under Luther’s interpretation,
marriage was a legal contract; Holy Orders was unnecessary, for priests had no special powers; confession was
something one did directly to God, not to a priest; Extreme Unction was a silly superstition; and Confirmation was a
redundant version of Baptism. Christ had not performed any of them, therefore He could not have felt they aided in
salvation.

I believed—no, I knew—that Luther was absolutely wrong. Each of these Sacraments conferred grace; I had felt it
come upon me when receiving them. I also felt called to refute him, on paper, lest he lead more souls to their
damnation.

I would find all Christ’s teachings on the matter, and those of every one of the doctors and fathers of the Church,
from the very beginning up until today.

It proved to be a formidable task. For upwards of four hours a day I laboured on the work. It required a staggering
knowledge of theology, I was soon to discover. I had prided myself on my knowledge of the Churchmen and early
Fathers, but culling the exact text for a minute philosophical point was an Herculean labour. I began to feel I lived
among the dead, concerned only with the obscure opinions of those long since gone to dust, whilst ignoring the
living and their distressingly selfish concerns about wages and room allotments. What was real? I began not to
know, and as I shuttled back and forth between two disparate worlds, I became disoriented.

In many ways I felt comfortable and soothed in the world of the mind, albeit the minds of dead men, for their
thoughts, purified and preserved, were eternal. It would have been so easy to lose oneself here forever; a temptation,
a siren call....

These were my labours by day. By night they were of another nature entirely.

As I have said, I brought Sir Thomas Boleyn’s daughter Mary back from France, where she had evidently served
under Francis—in a minor capacity, for he had a regular mistress already, Jeanne le Coq, a lawyer’s wife. In
Richmond Palace I established a French suite of rooms (where Father had kept his wardrobe!). “I would explore
France further,” I said, “and experience those aspects of living in which France is said to excel.” Mary must have the
accoutrements necessary to duplicate her feats with Francis. She would duplicate, I would surpass. Yes, I carried my
rivalry with him even this far....

The walls of the rooms were hung with tapestries depicting not Biblical scenes, but classical ones. French
furniture was copied by my cabinetmakers, and the mirroite was like crossing the Channel.

Mary awaited me on Tuesday and Thursday evenings, our assigned time. That in itself was French. The
assignation. For the French prided themselves on their logic and rationality, and confined their lovemaking to
prearranged trysts. One would think that would diminish the pleasure, but by divorcing pleasure from passion, it
both heightened it and lightened it.

All their positions had been catalogued and named, like their ballet steps. How pastel, how artistic they sounded;
how far removed from anything to do with sweat, groaning, or fear.

In France, so it seemed, the ancient, natural way of copulation had been entirely abandoned. Everything was from
the rear or from the side. The moment of culmination they turned to poetry: la petite mort, the little death. Not, as in
English, the moment of truth, the great anguish.

Mary led me trippingly through these exercises. “The position for a King who has had a tiring day of Council
meetings,” she whispered as she demonstrated one method.

“Was it Francis’s favourite?” Sharing this woman with him, engaging in exactly the same acts in exactly the same
body, was quiveringly arousing. “Did he do this—and this—and this—after his meetings?”
Expertly Mary swam under me, bringing herself to *la petite mort* several times in succession, as if to avoid answering. That was another French fashion—no *amoureuse* worthy of the name was satisfied with only *one petite mort*. No, there must be a series, the more of them the better.

“What of Francis?” I kept whispering.

“It was never—he was never—” she murmured obligingly. “He was smaller than you.”

Such exercises and flattery were only the beginning of her artful repertoire. There were many other things that decency does not permit me to record, even here.

But in carrying pleasure to its furthest bounds, I exhausted pleasure. It grew to a surfeit. (As Bishop Fisher had predicted in his famous sermon: “First, the joys and pleasures of this life, be they never so great, yet they have a weariness and disgust adjoined to them. There is no meat or drink so delicate, so pleasant, so delectable, but if a man or woman be long accustomed therewith, he shall have at length a weariness of them.....”)

All this while I was labouring in the theological thickets to complete my *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum*. I found a curious similarity between my two endeavours, in that preciousness ultimately kills all vitality in its subject. Theological hair-splitting and over-refined lovemaking techniques are cousins, bleeding their respective victims dry.
At length the book was finished. It was two hundred and fifty pages, all in Latin. I was pleased with it. Only then did I show it to anyone else, so that I was in effect presenting them with a fait accompli. (See how very French I had become; I thought in French phrases even beyond the bounds of pleasure.) It was to Thomas More and Wolsey and John Longland, Bishop of Linck. He held it three weeks past the time the others kept it. I knew then that he was actually reading it, and finding fault with it.

More had lately been lured from his private life as a London lawyer. In Court of Star Chamber he had defended a Papal ship seized as forfeit under maritime law. His defence was so brilliant that Wolsey, who had represented the Crown in the matter, immediately set about to harness More’s talents for himself. He induced More to begin serving as Master of Requests—which meant that he must receive petitions presented to me, both at court and on progresses. From there I had named him to the Privy Council and had made it clear that he was to be part of the English party at the Field of Cloth of Gold. Little by little he had been sucked into court life.

More requested to speak with me upon returning the manuscript. I could have received him in the audience chamber, seated upon my throne. But I preferred to speak with him man to man, not King to subject. He should come to my “counting room” and I would have warm, friendly firelight there, not the torches of ceremony.

He was older now. But of course it should be so. A number of years had passed since I had, boyishly, given him the astrolabe to prove a point. He had been a grown man when my mother died. Now we were both men, and things were ordered differently. I did not have to send presents to prove that I was King and master.

He bore the manuscript in a box.

“I hope there are no changes,” I said, “as the presentation copies for His Holiness are already being prepared—by monks, of course. They have expertise at these things, at calligraphy.”

“Not so much, anymore,” he murmured. He handed me the box. “I find only one fault in it. You stress the Pope’s authority too strongly. Perhaps it should be more slenderly stated.”

Was that all? Relief came in waves.

“You overstate the gravity of the office,” he said. “Pope Leo will buckle under the weight of it when he reads it. He is not meet to carry it. Nor, I think, is any other man on earth, the way you have presented it.”

“But what did you think of the thing as a whole?” The question burst out.

“I thought”—he paused—“it was an admirable work of scholarship. You have clearly shown much diligence in pursuing the references—”

“The thinking! I mean the thinking, the analysis, the deductions! What of them?”

More drew back, as if from a physical assault. “I find only one fault in it. You stress the Pope’s authority too strongly. Perhaps it should be more slenderly stated.”

Grudging compliments. Not the highest accolades. What he meant was competent, not stirring.

He had seen no genius there.

“Well, what of it? Was he competent (that word again) to judge?

“I thank you for your time in reading it,” I said. “I will take your suggestions into account.”

In my head, not in the manuscript, which was even now being copied out on the finest vellum by the obedient monks.

“We were glad of your company in France this summer past,” I said. “And of your willingness to undertake the diplomatic mission to Calais, regarding the return of Tournai.”

He smiled. Or did he? His face seemed to have no provision for smiling. All its lines were sombre and downward.

“You find yourself in our midst at last,” I said.

“Yes. A surprise to myself,” he said.

“You will learn to feel at home here,” I said. “For it is truly where you belong. The most brilliant minds in the realm should serve their sovereign, as thinking is a higher tribute than rubies. And one that a loyal subject should gladly present his King.”

More bowed silently.

I had not meant it to be presented thus. I had meant us to sit before the fire, exchange confidences, gain confidences, foster camaraderie. But he was not warm, despite his amiable manner. Amiability can function as an effective disguise for absolute coldness. I felt his coldness, stronger than I felt the heat of the fire.

“My mind is yours to command,” he said.
That was not what I meant, not what I intended at all. It was he who had interpreted it so, twisted my well-meaning into something sullen and sinister.

Oh, let him go! Why did I care so very much what he thought and felt?
He was just a man, like all the rest.

WILL:
The book—a great presentation copy bound in gold, with inner leaves of parchment—was dispatched to Leo X. Reportedly the Pope immediately read five pages and said he “would not have thought such a book should have come from the King’s grace, who hath been occupied necessarily in other feats, seeing that other men which hath occupied themselves in study all their lives cannot bring forth the like.”

The Pope, grateful for the unabashed support of a king, conferred on Henry a long-coveted title: Defensor Fidei—Defender of the Faith. Now Henry would no longer feel naked beside his theologically bedecked fellow monarchs.

The little book was an astounding success. Many translations were printed, in Rome, Frankfurt, Cologne, Paris, and Würzburg, among other places, and they sold as quickly as they came from the printing presses. A total of twenty editions was produced before the Continental appetite for it was sated. It was at that point that Luther entered the fray, hurling insults at its royal author. Henry, disdainful of replying, directed More to defend the work.

HENRY VIII:

My theological darts had struck home. I knew that by the vehemence with which the stung Luther responded. The “spiritual” monk unleashed a volley of low-born insults against me in his pamphlet Martin Luther’s Answer in German to King Henry of England’s Book. He called me “by God’s ungrace King of England” and said that sind sadly.

“Scurrilous, Your Majesty,” said Wolsey, glancing at the Answer to Luther on my working desk.
“Indeed. I am somewhat embarrassed to have such a fellow as my defender—whomever he may be.”
Wolsey sniffed his pomander.
“The stench of literary shit is not blocked by cinnamon and cloves,” I said. “Pity.”
“Yes, there is almost as much of that about as the common sort, now that every man has a pen and, it seems, access to a printing press.” He sniffed again. “I am thankful that you presented your work to Pope Leo rather than to the—Dutchman. And that good Pope Leo did not live to see the pamphlet wars and shit-fights.”
I bit my lip to suppress a smile. “You do not care for Pope Adrian?”
The truth was that Wolsey had entertained serious hopes of being elected Pope after Leo’s sudden demise. He had attempted to buy the Emperor’s votes in the Curia. But instead they had elected Adrian, Bishop of Tortosa, Charles’s boyhood tutor. From all reports the man was holy, scholarly, and slow as a “tortosa.”
“I do not know him.”
He had not told me of his bribery in the Conclave. Splying had become an adjunct to our dealings with one another. Did he know that I had commissioned More to write Answer to Luther? I hoped not.

Now to the matter at hand: the Parliament I had been forced to call to raise money for a possible war.
Yes, Francis had broken the Treaty of Universal Peace by invading Navarre, wresting it from the Emperor. Now the Emperor prepared for war and called on all those who had signed the Universal Treaty of Peace in 1518 to punish the aggressor, France, as the treaty stipulated.
“What taxes do you plan to ask?”
“Four shillings to the pound, Your Majesty.”
“That is a twenty-percent tax! They will never agree!”
“The honour of the realm demands it.”
Was he that cut off from what was possible and reasonable? “It is unreasonable. Never ask for something that can
be so easily refused. It sets a bad precedent.”
He shook his head. His jowls moved along with it. “They will not refuse,” he intoned, in a voice suitable for the
Masses he never said anymore.
Was it then that I began to entertain doubts about the sanctity, the wisdom, of the office of the Pope? If Wolsey
could be seriously considered as a candidate—O, it was good that I had written my book when my faith was as yet
untroubled.

The business with Parliament went badly. Wolsey presented the case for the tax, and the noble calling of war
against King Francis, the treaty-breaker. He spoke eloquently, as ever. He could have persuaded the birds to come
down off the topmost branches of a tree. Any argument offered, he could have countered.
But More, the Speaker of the House, offered the one thing Wolsey could not refute: silence. He claimed that it
was an ancient privilege of Co as my Lord Cardinal lately laid to our charge the lightness of our tongues.”
It was a stunning device. Wolsey had no recourse but to leave the Parliament chamber in defeat. In the next
session one of his own household members, also in the House of Commons, spoke in a low voice about the ill logic
of spending money to fight on the Continent when it could better be spent subduing the Scots at our backs, “and
thereby make our King Lord of Scotland as well.”
In the end I was allowed a tax of one shilling on the pound.
“Who was the fellow who proposed incorporating Scotland into our Crown?” I asked Wolsey, after the fact, when
his pride had stopped smarting.
“Thomas Cromwell,” he replied. “A youngling from my household. He speaks when he should keep silent.” Thus
Wolsey apologized for him.
“I would think you would never hereafter commend silence as a virtue!” The wounds were still open and salt was
at hand. “His suggestion had ... merit.” More was a different matter. Did he seek to prove his integrity by this
contrariness?
“Cromwell is a man who thinks only in terms of the attainable, not the permissible or the conventional. King of
Scotland ... I'll wager he sees the crown on your head even now.”
“As I could be persuaded to, myself.” I felt the corners of my mouth go up in the facsimile of a smile. It was a
trick I had learned lately to mask impatience or boredom.

In the end we had to go to war, and Parliament had to finance it. Unfortunately for us, Parliament would finance it
only so far, and that was not far enough. The war turned out to be a three years’ affair, and Parliament would
sanction only a year’s participation. The result was that we paid our money, suffered tosses—but were excluded
from the final victory and its glories. For Francis fell in the Battle of Pavia, and was taken prisoner by Charles, in the
end. The French army was destroyed. Fighting alongside his patron and master, Richard de la Pole, Edmund’s
younger brother, the self-styled “White Rose of York” and Francis-styled “King of England,” was killed on the
battlefield.
“Now we are free of all pretenders!” I cried, when the news was brought me. I rejoiced. But it was a secondhand
victory.
In the opening volley of the war, we made great impact. I had recalled Brandon from his estates in Suffolk, where
he languished, and put him in charge of the invading army. He and his men came within forty miles of taking Paris
itself. But then the money, and the season, ran out. Snow fell and enveloped them, followed by ice. They could not
winter over; it would be impossible to sustain an army of twenty-five thousand in the field in winter conditions. (To
think that war must obey the trumpet-sound of the seasons!) I beseeched Parliament for the funds to enable them to
take up in spring where they had left off. Parliament refused.
So the opportunity to conquer France was thrown away on the smug vote of a few self-satisfied Yorkshire sheep-
herders and Kentish beer-brewers!
All English citizens had been ordered to return before the outbreak of the war. That included the few still in Francis’s court, such as the Seymour lads and Anne, Mary Boleyn’s sister. It was not meet that e imprisoned or held for ransom. Even the Bordeaux wine procurers hurried home, bringing their provisioning ships along with them.

WILL:
And thus Anne Boleyn—“Black Nan,” as she was known already—came to England. The Witch returned home....

HENRY VIII:

Going to Parliament had been demeaning in itself (but necessary, as I did not want to exhaust the Royal Treasury completely), but being refused by them was doubly so. Having to call my citizens home, admitting that I was unable to protect them abroad, was tantamount to impotence.

Although I did not suffer from that grave disorder, other aspects of my life concerned with that delicate element were all at odds. I continued on. How could I have overlooked him?

Because he was illegitimate. I had recognized him as mine; but he was not born in wedlock, which barred him from the succession.

I paced my chamber. I remember the sun was streaming in, making patterns on the floor which I disrupted as I passed through the hot golden shafts again and again. Did this truly prevent his becoming King, I wondered. Was there no precedent?

Margaret Beaufort had been the descendant of John of Gaunt’s bastard. There was talk that Owen Tudor had never properly married Queen Catherine. I disliked these examples, however, as they undermined my own claim to the throne. There had been William the Conqueror, of course, known as the Bastard. There was also doubt that Edward III was the son of Edward II. Most assumed he was the child of Queen Isabella’s lover, Mortimer. Richard III claimed that his brother Edward IV had been the son of a lover, sired while the good Duke of York was away fighting in France.

These were unsatisfactory examples, not apropos to my case. No, this would not do.

My son was my son! All knew him to be such. I could not confer legitimacy upon him. But I could confer titles upon him, make him noble, educate and prepare him for the throne and name him heir in my will. He was but six years old, and there was time to let the people know him and learn to love him, so that when the time came ...

I stopped stock-still. The answer had been before me all the time. Not a perfect answer, but an answer. I would make him Duke of Richmond, a semi-royal title. I would bring the boy to court. He must be hidden away in the country no longer.

Katherine would be unhappy. But she must recognize that only in this way could Mary be protected against self-seekers lusting after her throne. Our daughter deserved a better fate.

WILL:
One which she did not receive, alas. What Henry most feared has come to pass. The Spanish King Philip II saw Mary only as an opportunity to make England an appendage of Spain. He married her, pretending love; when she refused to put the entire English treasury and navy at his disposal, he left her and returned to Spain. She weeps and pines daily for him. She is the most unhappy of women.
HENRY VIII:

There would be a formal investiture ceremony. Along with my son, I would elevate others: my cousin Henry Courtenay would become Marquis of Exeter; my nephew Henry Brandon, Charles and Mary’s nine-year-old son, would become Earl of Lincoln. I would make Henry, Lord Clifford, Earl of Cumberland; Sir Robert Radcliffe would become Viscount Fitzwalter, and Sir Thomas Boleyn, Viscount Rochford. (There are those who snicker at this last appointment, assuming it was made on Mary Boleyn’s merit. This is blatantly untrue—Sir Thomas had served me faithfully on many delicate diplomatic missions.)

WILL:

However skilled a diplomat he may have been, he cou, astanding example. The man was quite clearly a sycophant, willing to sell his children for the highest title.

HENRY VIII:

It was held in June, 1525, at Wolsey’s magnificent palace, Hampton Court. Yes, it was finished at last, sitting on its banks of the river twenty miles upstream—a good six hours’ row—from London. Here the Thames had shrunk to a friendly, smaller stream, with only a slight rising and falling due to the tide. All around was green: green meadows, trees, flowering shrubs. The air seemed clear and purified ... like Eden itself?

HENRY VIII:

He dismounted, sliding off his beast like an ungainly sack of meal, and walked—waddled—slowly toward me. “Your Majesty,” he said, bending as low as his girth would permit, “Hampton Court is yours.” He straightened and smiled, and I smiled back. All was proceeding according to form. I motioned to my men. But before I could do anything further, Wolsey held up his hands—great white things, like a fish’s underbelly.

“No, Your Majesty. What I said, I said truly. Hampton Court is yours.” He fumbled in his bosom, and all the while the morning sun glinted off the folds of his satin. At length he stopped and pulled out a scroll.

“It is yours, Your Majesty.” He came up to me and put it into my outstretched hand, making a great arc out of the motion.

It was a deed to Hampton Court. Affixed to it was an affidavit, signed and witnessed by two lawyers, that he was offering it as a gift to his sovereign.

I looked about me. All this—a gift? The strengthening sun hit the new red bricks, and already a heat was growing on them. They flamed against the clear June sky. Inside the compound were more apartments, two stories high, circling two inner courtyards. Wolsey’s triumph-piece. How could he give it away?
I was embarrassed. To refuse was an insult, to accept was to cause Wolsey great pain.

I lifted my head and tried to look at the throbbingly blue sky overhead, tried to think. But I got no further in my head-lifting than the row of elaborately decorated chimneys I glimpsed, tantalizingly, just beyond the outer courtyard. I wanted this place!

“Thank you, Wolsey,” I heard myself saying. “We accept your gift, with great thanks.”

His face did not change, nor betray any emotion: in that instant, my admiration of him leapt tenfold. A consummate master of dissimulation!

WILL:

A very bad example for Henry, and worse yet that he admired it. At that time, when Henry was presented with Hampton Court, his face was a looking-glass; all men could read by its reflection what passed in his mind. Within a few years he became the man who said, “Three may keep counsel, if two be away. And if I thought my cap knew my thinking, I would cast it into the fire.” By the end of his life, he could pass a pleasant evening with his wife, knowing he had just signed a warrant for her arrest the next day. Wolsey gave him his first instructions in the art of subterfuge, deceit, and acting—and as always, Henry soon surpassed his teacher.

HENRY VIII:

I tuife, reached out her hand to the boy and laid it on his little shoulder. She was still beautiful, and had that contented look one wears when one is cherished and in turn cherishes the cherisher. So she was happy with Brandon. Good.

In the front row of court personages I glimpsed Bessie Blount Tailboys, witnessing her son’s—our son’s—triumph. She was still pretty, and her masses of blonde curls accentuated her healthy complexion. I looked at her and smiled. She returned the smile. There was nothing between us, nothing. How had we gotten this son? A miracle!

Now the others must come. Henry Brandon, my nine-year-old nephew, to be made Earl of Lincoln. He was big and boisterous and clumsy, like his father. I glanced once again at my son, standing so still and apart from the others, his face so grave ... no, Henry Brandon was different, cousins though they might be.

Then came Henry Courtenay, my first cousin. I elevated him from Earl of Devon to Marquis of Exeter. True, there had been suspicion of his family’s loyalty, at one time. But he had been guileless and eager for friendship. I remember his clear blue eyes; they looked straight into mine as I pronounced the words that changed his status. They were the color of a faded blue gown, and utterly without malice. I was to remember them years later, they were to haunt my sleep, when he was found to be a traitor. In my dreams they were always looking at me, and at the same time the sun beating down on my head, making rivulets of sweat trickle down my face. His face was clear and one would have thought him at Ultima Thule, so cool was he.

I wanted this over now. I was hot, uncomfortable, and hungry. I must confess I also looked forward to the sumptuous banquet I knew Wolsey would have prepared. His banquets were legendary, and each time he tried to surpass his last effort. Most important, it would be cool inside. The sun was a torch overhead.

There were only a few more. Henry, Lord Clifford, became Earl of Cumberland. Sir Thomas Manners, Lord Roos, became Earl of Rutland. The lowest-ranking ones were last: Robert Radcliffe, to become Viscount Fitzwalter, and Sir Thomas Boleyn, to become Viscount Rochford. As Sir Thomas came forward, I was conscious only of a deep relief that the ceremony was ending. As he approached, I glanced briefly toward his family assembled on the platform.

And then I saw her. I saw Anne.

She was standing a little apart from her mother and her sister Mary. She wore a gown of yellow satin and her black hair fell down over her bodice—thick and lustrous and (I somehow knew) with a perfume of its own. Her face was long, with a pale cast, and her body slender.

She was not beautiful. All the official ambassadorial dispatches, all the puzzled letters later written describing her,
agree on that. She had nothing of the beauty I had come to expect of court women, none of the light, plump prettiness that honeyed one’s hours. She was wild and dark and strange, and my first awareness of her was that she was staring at me. As I looked back at her, sternly, she did not drop her eyes, as all good subjects are taught to do. Instead she continued staring, and there was odd malice in her eyes. I felt unreasoning fear, and then something else.

I was forced to attend to the ceremonious words and procedure transforming her father Thomas into a viscount, and then it was over, and we could retire to Wolsey’s Great Hall for the celebratory banquet.

Katherine said nothing and kept her eyes averted. It had been humiliating for her, I realized—v

“Clear the tables, Wolsey. More food will only make us stuporous when we once again face the heat.” I hoped that sounded reasonably logical.

“Yes, yes, of course.” He scurried away to do my bidding.

Now the hall was cleared and the guests began to mill about and talk—not the least about the King’s strange behaviour, first in elevating his bastard son, and then in cutting short the celebratory banquet.

There was no sign of her. No sign of a bright yellow dress among all those revellers, and I searched for yellow; I could see a yellow purse or sash or neckband from a hundred feet away. Yellow danced before my eyes like a mocking field of butterflies. But no one with long black hair in a yellow gown.

I was angry; I was bored; I wanted to be gone. I also felt stifled in the Great Hall. It was too low-ceilinged, and thereby oppressive. The windows did not admit enough light. This was not a confessional, it was a place for gaiety!

I must have light and air! What possessed Wolsey to build such a box? Was it to remind him of his priestly past? I shoved my way over to the side doors and pushed them open. Heat, like a living thing, poured in. It was hot as the Holy Land outside. Even the air was heavy, worse than that inside the Great Hall.

Then I saw them in the garden. I saw a yellow dress, and a slim young girl inside it; I saw her holding hands with a tall, gawky youth, and I saw her—her!—lean forward to kiss him. They were standing before the flower garden, and all about them were yellow flowers. Yellow dress, yellow flowers, hot yellow sun, even yellow dandelions at my feet. I slammed the door.

Wolsey came toward me, clutching a yellowed letter. “I thought you might like to read—”

I dashed it from his hands. “No!”

He was stricken. “But it is the history of the land of Hampton Court, when it was still called the Hospitalers’ Preceptory, and owned by the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem—”

Poor Wolsey! He had made a grand offering, and I had trampled on it. I retrieved the letter. “Later, perhaps.” I swung open the door again; once again the sultry air of a foreign land swam in. The flower garden, some fifty feet away, shimmered in the light and heat. The yellow-clad figure was still there, and the tall boy was no longer letting her kiss him; he was embracing her. They stood very still; only the air danced around them.

“Who is that?” I said, as if I had seen them for the first time.

“Anne Boleyn, Your Majesty,” he said. “And Henry Percy. Young Percy is heir to the Earl of Northumberland. A fine lad; he’s in my service. His father sent him to learn under me. He and Boleyn’s—pardon me, Sire, Viscount Rochford’s—daughter are betrothed. Or rather, the betrothal will be announced once Percy’s father comes south. You know how difficult it is for those on the border to travel—”

“I forbid it!” I heard myself saying. Wolsey stared.

“I said I forbid the marriage! It cannot take place!”

“But, Your Majesty, they have already—”

“I do not care! Ah, but years later how I was to wish I had allowed him to complete that particular sentence! “I said I will not permit this marriage! It is ... unsuitable.”

“But, Your Majesty ... what shall I tell Percy?”

They were still in the garden, hugging. Now he was toying with her hair. A grin spread over his silly face. Or was it a grin? The rising heat made it difficult to see.

“You, who have no trouble telling kings and emperors and popes what to do?” I began to laugh again, too loudly. “You cannot speak to a—a”—I thought hard for the image the hateful Percy boy evoked in me—“a silly, long-legged bird—a stork?”

I slammed the door and shut out the vision and the heat. Wolsey was discomfited.

“A boy? You fear to face a boy?” I taunted him. “And yet you would have been Pope?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. I’ll tell him.”

Now I was surrounded by the press of people. Uncomfortable inside, tormented outside. Clearly, I must leave. The banqueting hall was a vise, pressing down upon me. Without thinking, I said, “I’ll have it all pulled down, and
put up a new Great Hall." Wolsey looked even more unhappy. Obviously something had gone wrong in his plans to impress me.

Agitated and not myself at all, I pulled out the deed to Hampton Court. "I thank you for your gift," I said. "But you may stay here as long as you live. It is still yours."

He looked like a stricken calf spared just as he approaches the slaughterhouse. (Why could I think only of animal images that day?) He had made his gesture and it had been duly registered, yet he did not have to pay the price.

"Thank you, Your Majesty." He bowed low.

"Break the betrothal," I said, pushing past him.

As I rode toward the river, where the royal barge waited, I became uncomfortably aware of the yellow marigolds bordering the courtyard. And once I was on board, bankside yellow buttercups mocked me all the way back to London, as they lay bright and open under the new summer sun.

A month passed. I heard nothing of the matter from Wolsey, did not see the new Viscount Rochford or his daughter. It was high summer, my usual time for sport and athletic practise, yet I found myself unable to lose myself in either. Instead I was sunk in self-evaluation and gloom.

I thought: I am now thirty-five years old. At my age my father had fought for, and won, a crown. He had ended the wars. He had produced a son and a daughter. He had put down rebellions, trounced pretenders. What have I done? Nothing that posterity would note. When latter-day historians wrote my history, they would say nothing beyond "he succeeded his father, Henry VII...."

I was a man imprisoned, feeling helpless, borne along against my will. True, I could command banquets and even armies, and order men to transfer from this post to that—it yet remained a fact that I was a prisoner in the truest sense. In my marriage, in my childlessness, in what I could and could not do. Would Father have been ashamed of me? What would he have done under my circumstances? Incredibly, I longed to talk with him, consult him.

Alternating with theory moods were acute longings to see Mistress Boleyn. Over and over I pictured her as she stood on the platform (I did not care to think of her in the garden with Percy), until the actual picture in my mind began to fade like a garment left too long to dry in the sun. I had thought of her so much I could no longer see her in my mind.

Clearly, I must see her again. To what end? That I did not ask myself. For yet another fading picture? No. That I knew. If I saw her again, it would not be for a brief glimpse, but for—what?

I sent for Wolsey. His discreet diplomatic summaries had arrived at my work room in a never-ending stream, but there was no mention of the personal commission I had given him. Had he failed to execute it?

Wolsey arrived promptly on the hour. He was, as usual, perfectly groomed and garbed and perfumed. By the time he reached me in my inner room, he was alone and free of his ever-present attendants, of which he had as many as I.

"Your Majesty," he said, bending low, as always. He straightened and awaited my questions on Francis, Charles, the Pope.

"Henry Percy—" I began, then found myself suddenly embarrassed. I did not want Wolsey to know how important this was to me. "The unfortunate affair between the Earl of Northumberland's son and Viscount Rochford's daughter—I trust it has been terminated. I told you to attend to it."

He moved toward me—surprisingly swift for someone so bulky—and made motions for me to come closer.

"Yes. It is over," he said confidentially. "Although it was quite a stormy end. I called young Percy to me and told him how unseemly it was for him to have entangled himself with a foolish girl like Mistress Boleyn—"

By this time he was at my side, breathing heavily. Did I wince when he referred to Anne as a "foolish girl"? I noted his eye upon me.

"—without permission from his father. In fact, I said”—here he drew himself up to full height, and puffed up like a pig's bladder—"I myself know that your father will be mightily displeased, as he has arranged another and much more suitable betrothal for you.” Then the lad turned pale and looked as awkward as a child.... Your Majesty, are you unwell?” Wolsey solicitously rushed to me as I took a seat in the nearest chair, albeit shakily.

“No,” I said curtly. "Pray continue."

"Ah, then. I had to shame him ere he consented. To threaten him, even. He claimed he and the Lady Boleyn had—what were his words?—in this matter gone so far before so many worthy witnesses I know not how to withdraw myself nor to relieve my conscience." So I said——
Had he possessed her? Is that what he meant? I gripped the carved chair-arms until one sharp piece seemed to cut into my fingers.

“—‘Surely you know the King and I can deal with a matter as inconsequential as this. We who have dealt with the Emperor, and drawn up the treaty of—’”

“Yes, Wolsey. Then what happened?”

He looked frustrated to be denied yet another chance to recite his diplomatic triumphs. But I could comr of God, would the hour of arising never come? I dared not get up, for fear of disturbing Henry Norris, the attendant who slept on a pallet at the foot of my bed. I was a prisoner in my own bed.

At last there was a stirring. The grooms of the chamber arrived to lay the fire, as they always did at six o’clock. Then came the Esquires of the Robe with my clothes for the day, duly warmed. Norris stirred on his pallet and stumbled sleepily to the door. The day had begun.

By eight I had breakfasted and was in the saddle, attended by Compton and two grooms. Even so, it would be mid-afternoon before we reached Hever. And en route I must stop and pretend to hunt, which would slow us even more.

It was July, but the day promised to be relatively cool and clear. The sky showed not a single cloud, and faint breezes rippled the long grass and made the leaves in the great oaks tremble.

How green it was! The abundant rainfall of the past two weeks had freshened and quickened every growing thing, giving us a second spring. All round me was green—underfoot in the thick grass, overhead in the great trees, turning the very sunlight green as it fought its way through layers of leaves. I was submerged in a sea of green murkiness, alternating with cool, clear openness whenever I emerged from the forest.

At length I stood on the hill above Hever Castle and looked down upon it. It was called a castle, but it was not, being but a fortified manor house, and a small one at that. A ten-foot-wide moat surrounded it, fed by a running stream which sparkled in the sunlight. I could see no one about the grounds. Were they away, then? I prayed that would not be so. But as I approached the manor house I felt more and more dispirited. I had come all this way for nothing. Yet a prior announcement of my intended visit would have evoked entertainment, a banquet, and every formality I wished to avoid.

The drawbridge was down. We rode across it into the empty, cobble-stoned courtyard.

I scanned the windows on all three sides of the courtyard. There was no sign of movement behind any of them.

A large grey-and-amber mottled cat appeared from an open side door and sauntered across the courtyard. We stood awkwardly, our horses stamping and moving restlessly back and forth, their hooves making loud noises on the stones. Still no one appeared.

“Compton,” I finally said, “see if Viscount Rochford is at home.” I knew, however, that had he been there, he would long since have appeared in the courtyard, making effusive gestures of welcome. William dismounted and knocked upon the scarred center door. The knocker made a mournful sound, and no one opened the door. He made a gesture of helplessness to me and had started to return to his horse when at length the door creaked open. An old woman looked out. Compton spun around.

“His Majesty the King has come to see Viscount Rochford,” he said, grandly.

The woman looked confused. “But—he did not know—”

I urged my horse forward. “Of course not,” I said. “‘Twas but an impulse. I was hunting nearby and took a fancy to see the Viscount. Is your master in?”

“No. He—he—went to Groombridge to inspect his tenant cottalcotold him so, and meant it. He showed me his instrument, which he said had been made in Italy, and I duly inspected it.

Lady Boleyn then appeared, and other members of the household. They bustled about and laid a fire, as it would soon be growing dark, and nights in old stone manor houses are damp and cold even in July. But where was Anne? Somehow I could not bring myself to ask.

The sun set, but the light lingered on, as it does in high summer. Boleyn talked to me incessantly, trotting after me like a trained puppy. I did not hear him, and gave noncommittal responses. Still no Anne, and soon we must be gone, or suffer through a long, drawn-out supper laid in our honour.

I passed the small leaded windows along one side of the hall overlooking the tidy Boleyn garden and grounds. The stream which fed their moat trickled through the garden, lined by weeping willows. The wind had risen, as it often does in early evening, whipping about the branches. They were so green they almost glowed, and so thin and whiplike they seemed to writhe like living things.

It was then I saw her, standing by a far willow: a thin figure with long hair that tossed and waved like the branches surrounding her. Anne.

She was wearing green, light green, and her gown billowed in the wind, causing her to sway like the stalk of a flower. She reached out to touch a branch with her hand, and it was the most graceful movement I had ever seen.
I became aware that I had stopped and was staring. Thomas cleared his throat beside me.

“My daughter Anne,” he said. “She is back here with us at home, as the Cardinal sent her from court. It was most unfair—”

“I am sure.” I turned and pushed past him. “I will speak to your daughter myself.” Earlier I had seen the door that opened onto the garden. Now I would avail myself of it.

“Pray do not accompany me,” I said to the trailing Thomas. “I will go alone.”

Before he could protest, I was out in the garden, slamming the door behind me. It clanged and made that peculiar noise which tight-fitting doors do when suddenly closed. In another part of my mind I thought that the Viscount must enjoy a draught-free hall in winter.

But that was in a small part of my mind, and went almost unnoticed. The larger part was straining toward the slim figure in the far end of the garden. Resolutely, I made my way toward her.

She must have heard me approaching, yet she did not turn. She kept her back to me until I was a scant two yards away. The wind had risen and was lifting her skirts in great swirls. She wore no covering, no shawl. Was she not cold? Still she stood, motionless, save for the tossing of that extraordinary hair.

“Mistress Boleyn,” I said loudly, and she turned.

What had I expected? I knew she was not like her sister Mary, yet I was ill prepared for this dark wraith.

She looked at me with wide eyes, great black eyes, child’s eyes. “Your Majesty,” she gasped, then swooped to the ground like the brushing of a butterfly’s wing. All I could see for a moment was the top of that black head, a gleaming part in the middle. As she rose, the wind caught her hair and for an instant her face disappeared, like a pale spring moon covered by fast-moving clouds.

Then s’lmn?

But I knew what he had meant. He feared and revered the Cardinal above his King. How many other people in the realm felt likewise?

It was already dark as we mounted for our long ride back to London. We would not reach Westminster until well past midnight. As soon as they were out of eyesight of the Viscount, my companions, having assured him that they were not in the least hungry, dug into the linen-wrapped food parcels the royal cooks had prepared in the morning for them. They ate ravenously as we rode along.

I should have been hungry, but I was not. The moon, in its last quarter, did not rise until we approached the outskirts of London. Even then I was neither hungry nor tired, but strangely filled with energy and purpose. The rising moon illuminated the sleeping city, and from a distance I thought there could be no fairer city, no more fortunate ruler, no more blessed land.

Anne was coming to court!

And once there, she would become my mistress—no, my lover, for “mistress” was too circumscribed, too curtailed. My lover, my confidante, my soul-mate. Yes, my soul-mate. My soul, alone too long, needed this fellow wanderer. Together we would make a whole. And, wandering stars no more, joined, blaze through the sky....

How can I explain it? There was something in her which drew me, as if lying on her breast I would know everything in life I desired to, and the unopened door would open for me....

At base it is inexplicable. Something deep within Anne called to something deep within me. And the calling was powerful; nay, undeniable.
In a fortnight I must go and make my progress about the home shires. And then, when I returned, Anne would be waiting for me, having by that time settled herself at court. Knowing this made each day of the progress (normally so satisfying for me) something that only served to bring me one day closer to my goal, my desire.

But when I returned, and made my customary call on Katherine, I was disappointed to find no hint of Anne’s presence among her attendants.

“I had assigned a new maid of honour to your entourage,” I said when we were at last alone. “Mistress Anne Boleyn.”

Katherine wheeled around and faced me. “Yes. After the other—”

“She is nothing like her sister,” I informed her quickly—too quickly.

Katherine, clad all in black, raised her eyes to heaven. “God be thanked for that.”

“Mistress Anne is chaste, and very concerned with matters of learning.” “You seem well acquainted with the lady. Is she to be your next mistress?” Katherine cried. Her whole body shook in the noonday light. Part of me wished to take her in my arms and comfort her; another part was repelled by her.

“I do not wish to cause you discomfort,” I said. “I merely enquired as to whether she had come to—”

“I will not permit it!” she shrieked, and came at me—slowly, in light of her d

“Of course not!” I pushed her back with one hand, summoning all the outrage I could find within myself. “Wife, you forget yourself. I have no mistresses, nor have had for some three years past. I have no wish for mistresses —and if I had, it would not be Boleyn’s scrawny younger daughter, fresh from the French court!”

Katherine drew herself up. “Of course not,” she agreed.

She is true royalty, I found myself thinking of Katherine in admiration. “Mistress Anne is nothing to excite any man’s imagination,” I sneered.

Yet she excited mine. Even as I exited from the Queen’s inner chambers, I looked for Anne. A flock of young, pretty attendants clustered about, but she was not among them. Wearing an artificial smile, I made my way to the outer doors, wondering all the while whereher

WILL:

That is how I came into King Henry’s employ. It was all happenstance, as the greatest events in our lives are. I can assure you I had no portent that the King himself was hearing my words as I passed the time with some rather dull companions during that audience, nor could I remember my words.

But I do remember seeing the King that day. He seemed burdened, distracted, not at all the young creature I had seen many years ago on his way to Dover, nor even the godlike one I had glimpsed from afar in Calais. This was an older man, one with many cares and envies. I agreed to enter his service for reasons which eluded me at the time. Certainly I had no desire to wear a costume and entertain thick-headed court people. But the King drew me. And needed me, so I sensed. (Vanity?)

He would not permit me to return to Calais with my master, insisting that all my possessions could be sent. In truth, they were not many. I was to become part of court from that moment on.

I quickly perceived that a man could never be free at court. Like a compost heap, this mass of festering humanity was always hot, full of bad humours, and in the midst of colourful decay.

At the top of it all was the King himself, trying to oversee this seething mass. His “household” was also his government, which must be always near at hand. I was surprised at his memory and almost supernatural recall of details. He did not forget me, even amongst the throng, or amid his ever-pressing duties.

HENRY VIII:

Will never learned that expediency, which is why he eventually became my private jester. He and the court were simply not suitable partners, as consequent events proved. Yet his wit and observations were invaluable to me; I
liked to keep him about me.
Wolsey was to have a great banquet and feast for upwards of one hundred guests, to celebrate something or other; I cannot remember what. He surreptitiously circulated the guest list to my chamber. I added several names to it, including Mistress Anne’s, then smuggled it back to him, as I was supposed to be ignorant of the proceedings.

Would she be there? Would Wolsey issue the correct invitation? If he did, would she accept? I had at last ascertained that she had come to court. But perhaps she might be too retiring ... or wonder why she was included amongst the hated Cardinal’s celebrations. God’s blood! Was there no place on earth where I might see her without being dependent on others to bring it about?

Etiquette demanded that I don a disguise for the occasion (as I was ostensibly not among the guests), and I decided upon that of a shepherd. But I could not arrive unaccompanied, I must have fellow shepherds. Thus I chose them: dear Brandon, my cousin Courtenay, William Compton, Edward Neville, and Anne’s father, Thomas.

It was late October, but still mild. A slight row upstream on the Thames would be enjoyable, especially as a fatted moon would soon be rising. My companions and I would row to York Place and wait until the fête was well under way to make our entrance.

The oars dipping in the moon-coated water made reassuring sounds. Water had a soothing effect upon me. Shepec him. “But now I perceive that there is one greater than I present in the company, one who rightly may claim the chair. I beg you, if you know him, to identify him, so that I may do him honour.”

What a silly game this was! I was weary of such. I was weary of much, truth be told.

“Sir,” said Henry Courtenay—ever the eager courtier—“we confess that among us there is such a noble personage; and if you can pick him out, he will be pleased to reveal himself and accept your place.”

Now the clever eyes of Wolsey flicked back and forth. He could immediately eliminate the shorter men in their shepherd’s costumes. That still left me, Edward Neville, and Charles Brandon. Brandon was broader and thicker than I, so Wolsey could make a distinction there. Neville was bareheaded (although masked), holding his headdress in hand. His thick red-gold hair glinted in the torchlight and drew Wolsey’s eye.

The portly Cardinal approached Neville. “It seems to me the gentleman with the black cloak should be even he,” he said, offering his chair to Neville.

Neville hesitated, unsure of what further action to take. I rescued him by laughing and pulling off my visor. The entire company joined suit.

The Cardinal turned, discomfited. “Your Majesty,” he said quietly. “I see I was deceived in you.”

Years later he was to claim that moment as an omen.

But all things are seen in retrospect as omens. I could say Katherine’s initial delay in her sailing to England, my having had the dream of a white-faced woman ... all were omens. Should we think in such fashion, all of life would become one giant omen, and we should fear to stir.

Regardless, the fête must proceed. After the initial embarrassment, Wolsey was able to cover his awkwardness and signal for the festivities to continue.

There was to be masked dancing, and the musicians assembled in the gallery. Twelve of us were to lead partners in an intricate round. We were free to choose unknown ladies.

Where was Mistress Anne? I searched the company and still did not see her. Wolsey had solicitously ordered a number of torches damped. The resulting dim light merely shadowed all faces and turned each person into a trimmed headdress and a gleam of satin. They all stood two and three deep near the walls, and it was impossible to see a single face behind the first row.

Mistress Carew was in front, smiling. She danced well; I supposed she would do as well as any other. I made my way toward her and was on the point of asking her to join me when all at once I saw Anne. At first she was but a row of pearls gleaming like a supernatural halo. Then within that circket I saw her face.

She was standing well back from the others, as if to forestall being chosen as anyone’s partner. There was no torch near her to show her. Nothing betrayed her presence save the luminous pearls encircling her head.

I pushed my way over to her, to everyone’s surprise, not the least her own. She stared at me as I approached.

“Your Majesty.” She lowered her head. I took her hand and together we went to the middle of the dance-floor.

In the brighter light, I could see that the startling crownmine. Her voice was low—unlike the fashionable high voices of our court ladies. Her gown was also different; it had long, full sleeves which almost completely obscured her hands. She had designed it herself. Then I thought it charming. Now I know why she needed to do so—to hide her witch’s mark! But as I took her hand to dance, I did not discern the small sixth finger, so skilfully did she conceal it beneath the others....
She danced well—better, in fact, than any of our Englishwomen. When I praised her for it, she shrugged, and once again gave the credit to France.

“I learned there. Everyone dances well in France. There I was accounted of little accomplishment in the art.”

“France,” I laughed. “Where all is false, where artificiality is elevated to an art form. Because they are hollow at the core, they must celebrate the exterior.”

“You are too harsh with France,” she said. “Too quick to dismiss its very real pleasures—among them, the ability to appreciate the pretend.”

“A polite word for ‘the false.’”

She laughed. “That is the difference between an Englishman and a Frenchman!”

“The French King is a case in point,” I muttered. What had she thought of Francis?

“Exactly! And he is delightful!”

Francis? Delightful?

“At least your sister thought so,” I said censoriously.

She drew back. “Yes, I believe she did,” she paused. “And she was certainly in a position to compare.”

“As you could be,” I said. “Although you must begin on our shores.” There, I had said it. Her presence, her nearness, inflamed me. I must have her! “Unless ... you know already of Francis’s ... ?” I must know now, it was important that I know now. I did not want that, I could not bear it....

“No. I know nothing, save what Mary said.”

She talked? She told? I was thankful, then, that I had not consorted with her after the first year or so of her marriage. A woman who repeated details? Foul, foul!

“I am entirely unschooled in such matters, Your Grace,” she said. “I need a teacher.”

No regret for the lost Percy, to whom she had pledged herself? Even at that moment I was struck by her disloyalty. But as it benefited me, I did not dwell on it. Rather, I made up excuses for it.

“There, I told myself. It proves she never really loved him.”

“I could teach you,” I said boldly.

“When?” Her answer was equally bold.

“Tomorrow. Meet me”—oh, where to meet?—“in the minstrels’ gallery above the Great Hall.” When did Katherine dismiss her? “At four in the afternoon.” A favourite dalliance-time.

Just then the minstrels ended the measure. Anne quickly disengaged her hand from mine, nodded, and was gone.

“I thank Your Grace.”

Tomorrow it would begin. Tomorrow.

All about me the courtiers waited, silver visors in place. We would dance —yea, dance all night. Let Wolsey bring fresh torches!

The minstrels’ gallery, overlooking the Great Hall, was shadowy and entirely private. Light exploded into the Hall from the row of windows along its length, but it left the minstrels’ gallery untouched. Not that Anne should have anything to fear from the boldest daylight. She was young, and entirely flawless.

I had not yet decided what to do with her. I would make her my mistress, yes, of course, I knew that. But after the coupling ... curiously, I thought of the coupling more for her sake than for mine. I did not need the coupling to bind me to her; that had happened the moment I saw her at Hampton Court; the strange bonding had taken place on the instant. The coupling was for her. Women were so literal. Until there was a physical thing, she would not consider herself bound to me.

I waited. The apartments (vacant since Mary Boleyn’s gradual decline in my life) stood at the ready. I had ordered them scrubbed, aired, and freshened, and the bed made up with finest Brussels-laced sheets. I would conduct Anne to them within a half hour ... and within an hour, we would begin our life together. Whatever that meant, whatever that led to....

I waited. I watched the great squares of light from the windows change their shape on the floor of the Great Hall as the sun sank lower. Finally they were long, thin slivers; then they faded and dimness reigned in the Hall.

Anne was not coming. She had broken our tryst.

Perhaps Katherine had detained her. Perhaps Katherine had suddenly needed her presence at some ceremony or other. Perhaps Katherine had even become fond of her and wanted her only to talk, to keep her company.

Anne was so winsome, that was likely.

I was ready to descend, by the little stone steps, when a page approached, hesitantly. “A message,” he said,
thrusting it into my hand. He bowed and then hurried away.

I unfolded the paper.


She feared for her integrity? She feared me? She teased me, rather! She had already admitted she would give herself to the artists in their dens! But not to a King! No! She would give herself to Johnny-paint-a-board, but not to King Henry!

And to have agreed to the time and place, and left me waiting! Sending a page in her stead! As if she would disdain to do her own unpleasant business. And the unpleasant business was—me. The King!

I removed Anne from court within a fortnight, sending her back to Hever. It was easily done: the mere writing out of an order, signed, sanded, sealed. As King, I had power to move people about as I would, transfer them from one post to another. But I seemingly had no power over my wife, my daughter, my fantasized mistresse. Women! They rule us, niter, I missed her. Whatever had called me to her to begin with continued to call me. As yet I knew not what it was....

But it was not to be. Whatever that thing was, perhaps I was never to taste it. And to what purpose, anyway? I was married, and Katherine was my wife.

There were many diplomatic matters to attend to, foremost among them arranging a proper marriage for Princess Mary. A “proper marriage,” of course, meant one that was diplomatically astute.

O God, I had become like my father!

In early 1527, the “proper marriage” for Mary was with a French prince. Certainly we did not want to ally ourselves with the Emperor; he was too strong, after having so soundly defeated Francis. Even now his unruly troops were holding Rome—and the Pope—terrorized as they looted and rampaged in “celebration.” If we allowed him his head, he might become a latter-day Julius Caesar. Julius Caesar belonged in histories, not staring one directly in the face. (And engulfing one. England had been Roman once—and once was enough.)

Gabriel de Grammont, Bishop of Tarbes, came to England to negotiate such a match. Grammont was a great, swelling toad of a man. He began by reading a long proposal to Wolsey and myself, seated as we were outdoors before the fountain in the inner courtyard at Hampton Court. The early-spring sun was making a feeble attempt to warm us, and was doing well, as the encircling courtyards cut off the prevailing winds. I noticed that the grass was green all around the fountain.

“—however, we need to be satisfied as to the Princess Mary’s legitimacy,” he concluded.

Wolsey a-hemmed and demurred. “I pray you, explain your scruples.” He made a face at me, as if to say, “Ah! These legalists!”

“It is this.” The toad drew himself up to his full height, swelling out his chest. “Pope Julius issued a dispensation for the marriage of Prince Henry and his brother’s widow, the Princess Katherine, who had been legally wed to Prince Arthur. Now we have the case of a brother marrying his brother’s widow—expressly forbidden in Scripture! Leviticus, Chapter eighteen, verse sixteen: ‘Thou shalt not uncover the nakedness of thy brother’s wife; it is thy brother’s nakedness.’ Leviticus, Chapter twenty, verse twenty-one: ‘And if a man shall take his brother’s wife, it is an unclean thing; he hath uncovered his brother’s nakedness; they shall be childless.’ ”

He exhaled through his fat lips. “The question is, did the Pope have the right to issue a dispensation? There is only one other instance of such a dispensation being granted, in all Church history. It raises doubts. Is the Princess Mary legitimate? Or is the marriage of her parents—honest and pious—no marriage at all? My master would have these questions resolved, ere he unites himself to such a house.”

The dispensation ... yes, long ago, in that pretend “protestation” I was forced to state was a muddled merger of the two.

“We are pleased that you should have returned to court. We need your presence.

“Is that the royal ‘we’ or a simple plural?”

She was bold beyond all stomaching! I stared for a second. Then I answered honestly. Why not? “The royal. I need your presence. Does that suit you better?”

She chose to disregard the direct question, as the one who loves less is always privileged to do. “What could you need me for, Your Grace?”

The girl—nay, she was no girl, I sensed now, but something else, something I knew not—regarded me not as a
King, but as a man. Someone to answer back to, rebuke, as long ago others had done. It felt familiar—and hurtful.

“I want you to be my wife,” I heard myself saying to this stranger. Yet I had meant to say it all along.

Then came the laughter—high-pitched, ugly. And the turned back: yellow velvet covering the narrow shoulders and waist.

The posturing guard stared balefully at us and clicked his spear manfully upon the floor, as if to remind us that he still existed and was protecting us from harm. The fool!

“Get out!” I yelled. He scurried away.

I turned to Anne and saw that she had now turned to face me, an odd smirk still on her face.

“Your wife?” she said. “You have a wife already. Queen Katherine.”

“She is not my wife! Not lawfully! We sinned....” I found myself pouring out the entire process of my growing guilt, laying myself and my thoughts bare to this peculiar girl who seemed at once both the most sympathetic and derisive of persons.

“... and so,” I finished, “the Pope erred in granting us a dispensation to marry. Therefore we are not married, have never been married in the eyes of God. And the present Pope will acknowledge that.”

She seemed not to have heard. Or, rather, not to believe. Her long face stared back at me, as if I were reciting some obscure law from the time of Henry I, of no relevance or concern to her.

Finally her lips moved, and she spoke. “When?” A simple, devastating word.

“Immediately,” I said. “Within the year, at most. The case is clear. I have simply hesitated because of—because of not knowing your mind.”

“My mind?”

“Yes, mistress! Your mind! You have one, I know!” I heard myself exploding and yet was powerless to stop. “Do not play the simpleton with me!” Suddenly I was so angry I was shaking—at her coyness, her elusiveness, her pretended naivety, her calculating behaviour. I was the King! “All these months”—now it tumbled out, all the things I had vowed not to say, had scarce dared admit even to myself—“I have loved you, have wanted to lie with you. Instead you toyed with me, tortured me, made stupid answers to my requests.” My voice had risen dangerously (could the attendants in the next chamber hear it?), and she was looking at me in that infuriatingly concerned way.

“Well, now I ask you, for the ft seemed to have come of its own accord.

“Your Grace,” she answered slowly, “your wife I cannot be, because you have a Queen already. And your mistress I will not be.”

“I have no wife!” I yelled. “I tell you, I have no wife!”

She made no reply.

“Clearly, you do not believe me! So you think I lie.” I stepped closer to her. I noticed that she not only did not shrink from me, but leaned toward me, as if she wanted my touch. I grabbed her arm, crushing the raised velvet sleeves in order to feel the long, slim arm underneath. “In any case, that is no answer to my question. When the Pope declares me a bachelor—as I am, and as he will—will you or will you not marry me?”

She looked up at me. “Yes. I will marry you. When the Pope allows you to be free.”

I was aware that I was still holding her forearm in a painful grip. I dropped it, and saw that my fingers had left damp pressure marks on the velvet. Ruined. I must send her another gown.

“Within the year,” I said confidently.

“Truly?” she asked. Her voice was doubtful, yet warmer than I had ever heard it.

“Truly,” I assured her. She smiled. There seemed nothing left to say. Therefore I gave her leave to depart—two strangers disengaging.

After she had departed, I found myself shaking. Marry her? But I hated her! Quickly I stamped on that thought.

Within a few hours I was basking in the peculiar warmth that comes only rarely in a lifetime—having attained one’s heart’s desire. The woman I loved was to be mine.

How should I approach the Pope? That he would give me an annulment I had no doubt. He had given others in less certain circumstances. My wayward sister Margaret had even obtained one from her second husband, the Earl of Angus, on the grounds that three years after the Battle of Flodden her first husband might conceivably still have been living.

I knew all the complexities of my case, having spent many sleepless hours considering them. The Biblical texts were clear, and had they not been, the death of my sons was clear enough evidence. God had not meant me to overlook my transgression.

The night was fully as hot as the day had been. I paced my chamber restlessly. Puffs of orchard-warmed air came into the room. Anne. Anne. Where was Anne? To whom was she talking this very instant?

What difference, I told myself sternly. Soon she would be my wife. Next year at this time we would be alone in
this chamber together.

The Pope. He was key to it all. He must grant the annulment straightway. Wolsey. Wolsey would arrange it. I must send for Wolsey.

In the meantime there was this cursed hot, perfumed night to endure.

Wolsey was discomfited; nay, horrified—on him, horror diplomatically registered as mere discomfort.

"Your Grace, the Quave been l>"

"Princess Katherine"—he quickly found an inoffensive and correct title —"is the child of a dead King. More important, she is the aunt of a living Emperor. A devout Emperor who will doubtless take offence at the implication that his aunt is living in sin."

Exactly what I wanted! Wolsey was always practical. No cant about morality, no obfuscating issues. I could trust Wolsey.

"Facts are often unpleasant. He has faced Luther well enough."

"Two unpleasant facts at one time ..." He gestured delicately toward a bowl of fruit. I nodded. He selected a last-year’s apple—soft, but all that was available this time of year. "... are too much for most men to stomach." He bit into the apple, then looked dismayed as he discovered its soft texture. He quickly put it in a bowl.

"Those who would be Emperor must learn to. As you have. As anyone who would be Pope must." At that he lightened. He still had hopes of the Papacy. Ah, if Wolsey had been Pope, then this whole conversation would have been unnecessary. But wishing is futile. An illegitimate Medici cousin of Leo X had succeeded the hapless Adrian as Pope Clement VII in 1523.

"But Popes are men."

"And must die." I smiled.

"And have concerns. Earthly ones," he said sternly.

"Now you sound Lutheran," I mocked. "The Pope, a man? The Pope, swayed by earthly issues?"

Wolsey was in no mood for banter this morning. Oddly, I was; I was in a buoyant, teasing mood. All would be mine. That tends to make a man cheerful.

"Your Grace, this is no matter for humour. To repudiate your wife will be no easy matter. If Your Grace will pardon me, it would have been easier had you done this before Charles become Emperor.... Nay, but then her father... nay, by then he was dead. In 1518—"

"It is now!" I roared. What was wrong with Wolsey? Had it been the Garden of Eden, things would have been different as well, and what of it? "Now! The year 1527! And I have been living in sin for near twenty years! I want to end it, and instead you blather nonsense."

He looked more alarmed than I had ever seen him. Then he did something I felt was clearly deranged: he sank to his knees.

"Your Grace, I beg you—" Tears began to stream down his cheeks. Stage tears; Wolsey could weep on command.

"—do not proceed in this. Thereby lies much tribulation—"

How dare he presume to dissuade me? I looked down at the bulky figure swaying ludicrously on its knees, artificial tears watering my chamber floor.

"Up!"

His tears stopped instantly as he saw that his audience was not touched. Slowly he lumbered to his feet.

"You are Cardinal, and Papal legate," I said. "Well versed in canon law and ecclesiastical procedure. What approach should we use?" I chose to ignore the staged outburst as a mutual embarrassment.

So did he. "Your Grace, I feel that perhaps a small ecclesiastical court here in England should ... examine ... the case in question, then give a quiet report to the Holy Father II be a house matter, so to speak; no need to trouble the Vatican with it."

Even weeping on his knees, he had been thinking. Was his devious mind never disengaged?

"Excellent," I said.

"I myself will preside over the court. We need, for appearance sake, one other. What of Warham? He is the Archbishop of Canterbury."

"Excellent," I repeated. This was my first—and most momentous—stride down the path I had chosen to take. The first is always the hardest. After that it becomes so much easier.
Wolsey arranged a “secret” hearing of my troubled matrimonial case. He and Warham were to examine the facts and declare that my marriage was indeed invalid. This information was then to be sent to Pope Clement, who would issue a routine annulment. So simple, so easy. Why, then, did everything fail to transpire as we had planned it?

The court met in late May, 1527, at Westminster. Wolsey as legatus a latere, Papal representative, and Archbishop Warham as assessor, were chief tribunalers, with Richard Wolman as my counsel. I had high hopes, which came to nothing. Their so-called “findings” were that the circumstances of my marriage were indeed questionable, and must be referred to weightier minds, preferably in Rome. The Pope must examine the entire matter and reach an independent conclusion. In other words, the issue must now be made public.

WILL:
Unknown to Henry, it already was. Rumours of “the King’s Great Matter” (as the annulment was euphemistically called) were rife among the commoners. Every ferryman and tart seemed to know the King wished to be free of his wife. Everyone but the person most affected in the matter—Queen Katherine herself.

HENRY VIII:
When my jester, Will, rather shamefacedly brought me a London broad-face sheet depicting my marriage bed and trials, I was horrified. Then I realized that if the common people knew, Katherine herself must have heard! I would have to discuss this with her—all the more embarrassing because I had not seen Katherine for a fortnight. She increasingly devoted herself to her charities and her private worship, which I of course did not wish to disturb. Also, I must confess, I had been so preoccupied with thinking of Anne I could scarce collect myself.

To tell Katherine that she had never been my wife would be a hurtful thing and, to one of her pious nature, a shock. I fortified myself with a large cup of wine before I walked to her apartments.

The corridor was unnaturally empty. Usually, swarms of serving-men were loitering about, showing off their latest velvet surcoats. Today it was deserted. Were they all off hunting? I felt the back of my neck; sweat was already gathering. I wished I were hunting with them; I wished I were any place but here. The guard admitted me to the Queen’s outer chambers.

There I paced the floor. I wanted to see her. I did not want to see her. At last I was gestured for. I meekly followed Katherine’s gentlewoman-usher. I faced Katherine. She had been at her devotions and was clearly irritated at being disturbed. After the Mass, she customarily spent an hour on her knees on a stone floor, conferring with her Maker.

“Yes, my Lord?” she asked, coming toward me. She gathered her great skirts in her hands. She still wore the fashion of Spain as it had been when she had left. I thought for a fleeting moment of Anne and her modern gowns, then I shoved the image away.

“So now I must seek an appointment with my Katherine?” I laughed. Yet why was I attempting to be jocular?

“You know the hours of my devotions—” she began.

“They are constant, Madam,” I replied.

She stared back at me in anger. I stared at her in wonder. How had we changed so? Two strangers who dreaded to confront one another. She shifted a bit on her feet, looked uneasy. I remembered that she had taken to wearing the coarse habit of a member of the Third Order of St. Francis underneath her everyday clothing. Perhaps it was itching.

“Katherine,” I said, “I have come to discuss with you a question of great importance.” I thought I should begin thus.

She moved toward me slowly. I noticed that she still wore satins by day. “Indeed?”

“Yes.” Then I stopped. How could I broach this subject? She stood in front of me like an army. “The Bishop of Tarbes was, as you know, here recently to consult about the possible betrothal of the Princess Mary to a French prince. He mentioned certain impediments—possible—”
All this time she had been staring at me, her wide eyes already somewhat wider.

“Impediments?”

“Our marriage. As you were married to my brother initially, it seems that many learned figures feel that you and I were never legally married, and therefore there is a question of Mary’s legitimacy——”

Before I could say more, she began shouting and rotating her arms like a windmill. “How dare anyone question the dispensation of the Holy Father? Both your father and mine accepted it in good faith. They both——”

Her father and mine? How long ago that seemed! Once they had been of such great consequence in our world; now they were forgotten by all but Katherine.

“——gave their consent to it! Nay, blessed it! And they were holy men!”

Holy men? Certainly not Ferdinand; and as for my father ... who knew him, truly? They had both been bound by outward obeisance to the Pope, for political show. Was that all?

“Perhaps they were.” Give her that comfort. “But even well-intentioned men make errors. And the fact is that God Himself has long ago passed judgment on our marriage. Painful as it is——”

“God?” She drew herself up at that word.

“Yes. All our children have died. We are without issue. Never before has an English King so needed an heir; never before have all his sons died; never before has a King married his brother’s wife.”

“We have Princess Mary. She lives.”

“A daughter, f the st of decorum, Anne insisted that we outwardly maintain our previous states: I as husband to Katherine, she as unmarried, eligible maiden. This was a happier arrangement for her than for me. As a “disguise,” she was compelled to surround herself with suitors and courtiers, whereas I must take my place beside the staid but seething Katherine.

In the meantime, in her own quarters, Katherine was hard at work writing secret letters to her nephew, the Emperor Charles, beseeching his help—letters which I had intercepted, with instructions for full copies to be made for my own records. Her means of protecting the marriage was foolhardy: appealing to a foreign power to aid her! She pretended to be fully English, but her actions belied it. She assumed that the Emperor could intervene in English affairs, and that I would cower before his dictates.

For my own part, I was also hard on the track of false hares. I was pursuing the Pope for confirmation that my marriage was indeed invalid. Numerous agents were also sent to Rome to procure a special dispensation allowing the case to be tried in England rather than Rome. They all failed. Pope Clement had no intention of delegating his authority. He insisted that the case could be decided only in Rome.

All the while, months passed as I waited, seeing Anne before me like a flame, surrounded by handsome young courtiers ... and one in particular, Thomas Wyatt, her cousin.

I liked young Wyatt, otherwise. He was a poet, and a good one. He was, in addition, talented in diplomacy and music. But he was a married man, and as such had no business suing for anyone’s favors, particularly his cousin’s. They had grown up together in Kent, so Anne assured me. But I liked not the way they acted together and looked upon one another. It was not seemly.

I well remember (well remember? I cannot banish it from my mind!) a fair day in May (a year after Wolsey’s foolish “tribunal,” and I as far from my heart’s desire as ever) when many of the court had gathered for the May bowls. A number of wooden pins were set up on a clipped green, and all men were to compete in tossing a heavy ball to bounce along and knock over the carefully arranged pieces. Katherine was sitting like a chesspiece on a carved chair, to watch us all, and even Brandon and Wolsey had been lured out for the festivities. Brandon had never paid the full fine for his “transgression” and therefore usually avoided Wolsey. Today, however, all was friendly and pleasant. I was especially happy that my sister Mary had ont size="3">I gripped the wooden ball I held in my hand as tightly as possible, then let fly at the targets. My ball smashed right through the center, scattering the pins like ducks. It then rolled on and on down the green, catching up to Wyatt’s.

“Ah! It is mine!” I said, pointing toward the faraway balls with my little finger, upon which was the token ring Anne had given me. Wyatt could not fail to recognize it.

He strolled forward with a smirk. Suddenly I hated the way he walked. “By your leave, Your Grace,” he said, “I must measure to ascertain the distance.” Then he began twirling something on a long chain, so that at first I could not determine what it was. Then I saw it for what it was: a locket of Anne’s. I had seen it often round her neck. He stretched out the chain mockingly and walked slowly to the balls.

I glared at Anne. She looked back at me, and all I could discern on her countenance was embarrassment. Not shame, not apology.

“I see I am deceived.” I turned and began walking back toward the palace. I should not have shown my hurt so nakedly, but I was stunned.
Wyatt continued his walk, his back to me, unaware of my anger. The rest of the gathered ladies and courtiers merely stared, or so I am told. But Katherine heaved herself from her chair and followed me across the newly clipped grass.

“My Lord,” she said.

I turned, surprised to find I had a follower. She stood there in the fresh May sunshine, heavily clad in her preferred costume and old-style headdress—a wooden one that encased her head and was overlaid with decorative material. It was so heavy it had made her sweat from the exertion of running only a dozen yards.

“Yes?”

“Stop it! Stop it now!” She was shaking. I said nothing. I could see the beads of sweat on her forehead. “I cannot bear to see you so shamed before all. And for ...” Her voice trailed off, but with a jerk of her head she indicated Anne, who had not even turned to see me go. “In front of all men. And I must watch.”

Suddenly I lashed out at her, as if she were the cause of it, merely for making the wounds deeper. “Then cease to watch, Madam! Cease following me about!”

She looked stricken and stood mournfully rooted as I stalked away, seeking refuge in my privy chamber.

It was cool there, at least. And empty. All attendants had been dismissed, let out into the warm May sun. At last I could pour my own wine without having to request it of some bumbling fool. Must never hurt a server’s feelings. No, never. So one must wait a good half hour for a service one could perform for oneself in a half-minute.

The wine was good. I poured another cup, then leaned down to pull off my boots. I flung each one forcefully against the farthest wall. One hit a tapestry and raised a great deal of dust. Of what use were the chamber scourers, then? Filth. Negligence. All was disgusting.

“Your Majesty, Margaret of Savoy would be displeased to see her gift treated so.”

I whirled round to face Wolsey’s bulk. He had evidently taken the first opportunity to retreat into the shade. From the way he eyed my wine flagon, I knew he was waiting to be invited to help himself. Inst size="3">“Still—” He sidled up to the wine. Suddenly he disgusted me, too.

“He needed no further invitation. Soon the flagon was empty. He belched —discreetly, he thought. In fact it was not. Then he turned and looked at me with the same mournful expression Katherine had worn.

“You are Cardinal! You are Papal legate! You represent the Pope in England! Do something!”

Still he stood with furrowed brow.

“Or, by God, I shall end it myself! With whatever means I must use! I care not what they are!” As I said it, I knew I meant it.

Later that evening, I waited within my chambers. Would Anne send word to me? Would she make amends, assure me that Wyatt meant nothing to her?

No. She did not.
But things changed from that day forward. Wolsey was at last able to badger His Holiness into granting permission for a trial to be held in England, provided another Papal legate sat alongside him. That legate was to be Cardinal Campeggio, who must travel all the way from Rome. This would take months, especially since he was old and troubled with gout, but at last I had within my grasp that which I desired above all else. My case was so clear that judgment was pre-assured, and I would be released from the bonds that grew daily more irksome.

Katherine had become ever more hovering and solicitous, acting more like a mother than a wife. Anne had continued her wayward ways, always assuring me that they were necessary dissimulations.

"If the Cardinal knew we were betrothed, he would not work so diligently on your behalf," she said. "He intends you to take a French princess, Renée, I believe." Her light voice skipped over the name. "He has long hated the Spanish alliance." For some odd reason, I remember her running her slender fingers over the traced carvings of a chair as she spoke. Her touch was so graceful I watched it as I would a swan gliding on a pool. Beautiful, elegant. Like everything she did.

"So we are to deceive the Cardinal? 'Tis not easily done," I warned her.

She smiled. "More easily than you think."

Her eyes had a peculiar look, and I suddenly felt uneasy. Then the look slid away and she was once again the beautiful girl I loved.

"All will be well," I assured her. "In only a few weeks' time it will be over. At last. And we shall be married." I went over to her and took her hand.

She returned my touch and looked up at me. "I cannot wait, I sometimes think, to become d not wo the crest, and all else a falling off?"

By this time the entire realm knew of my marital dilemma, and awaited the arrival of the Papal legate as eagerly as I. It was early spring, 1529. It had taken nearly two years and countless emissaries and missions to obtain Papal permission to hold this trial in England.

When Campeggio, the Papal legate, arrived in London, he was pleased to tell me that Clement himself had advised Katherine to follow the politically expedient policy of entering a convent, as had the devout Jeanne de Valois, freeing King Louis to remarry for the sake of the succession. His Holiness was bound to release anyone from his or her earthly marriage in order to make a heavenly one.

I was overjoyed. This solution would please all. Katherine was already on the border of the religious life, having taken the vows of the Third Order of St. Francis, and had a great proclivity for it, spending as much time in prayer and devotion as any nun. Clement would be spared a time-consuming and embarrassing trial. I would be spared the possible disapproval of my subjects, who loved Princess Katherine and were already muttering against Anne as a commoner.

In a few days Campeggio, accompanied by Wolsey, dragged himself off to see Katherine, and happily presented his proposal. Katherine refused, saying that she had no "vocation" for the convent life, but that she would agree if I also took monastic vows along with her and went to live as a monk.

The woman baited me! She was determined to mock and thwart me at every turn. It was then I began to hate her. Hate her for her smug Spanish feeling of superiority over me. She was a Spanish princess, I but the scion of an upstart Welsh adventurer. That was how she saw me. And she believed she could serenely command forces that I could not: the Emperor her nephew, the Pope his prisoner. Let little Henry do what he will in his little kingdom, she seemed to be saying with amusement. In the end I will snap my fingers and bring him to heel.

Very well, then. I should meet her in the arena—the arena of the Papal court.

It was the first time such a court had ever been held in England. A reigning King and Queen were to appear on their own soil before the agents of a foreign power, to answer certain charges.

It was to meet at Blackfriars, the Dominican convent, and Wolsey and Campeggio were seated in full array, just below my throne. Ten feet below theirs was Katherine’s. Katherine had vowed not to appear at all, as she held any ruling outside Rome to be invalid, even though the Holy Father himself had given permission for it! She was a foolish and obstinate woman!

Yet upon the opening day, she answered the summons from the crier, “Katherine, Queen of England, come into the court.”

Ah, I thought. Now she sees the justice and gravity of the case. Now at last she understands.
She came slowly into the room and proceeded to her chair. Then, instead of seating herself, she abruptly turned to her right, bypassed the astonished Cardinals, and mounted the steps toward my throne. When she was within five feet of me, she suddenly knelt.

I felt sweat break out all over my face. Was the woman mad?

“Sire,” she began, looking up at me and trying to lock our eyes in an embrace, “I beg you, for all the love that has been between us, let me suspended.

As his quavering voice read this pronouncement, there was a silence, then a stirring, in the room. Clearly the case was closed, without judgment, and given back to Rome.

Then Brandon rose and banged his great hand on the table. “It has never been merry in England since Cardinals came amongst us!” he yelled. The entire gathering broke into discord. I was livid with fury.
WILL:

The poor, indecisive Pope had sent many instructions to England along with Campeggio, but the most important one was: do nothing. Delay the trial as long as possible. Then advoke the case to Rome. Campeggio had merely followed advice, in this case all the more compelling because just the month before, Francis had been soundly defeated in his last desperate attempt to retake northern Italy. The Emperor had decimated his forces at Landriano, and now that all the dust had settled, the Pope and the Emperor had come to terms in the Treaty of Barcelona. The Emperor’s troops released Rome, and set the Pope free. The Curia and its Cardinals came flocking back to Rome, and soon the advocation of Katherine’s case (always Katherine’s, never Henry’s) to Rome had been decided in the Signatura and a few days later by the full Consistory. Campeggio had had no choice.

But Wolsey was stunned. This undercut all his power. The Pope, his spiritual master, had betrayed him. His other master, the King, felt betrayed. Between them both, he would be ground as fine as grain in a mill.

HENRY VIII:

So they thought they had won. They—Katherine, the Emperor, Pope Clement—thought they could chuckle and dismiss the problem of King Henry VIII and his conscience—never a weighty one for them. They were wrong. All wrong. But what to do?

I was finished with the Pope. He had failed me—nay, betrayed me. Never would I consult his court at Rome.

I was finished with Wolsey as well. Wolsey had failed me. Wolsey must have known of all this long ago—after all, he had seen the commissions!

Wolsey—he who was master of all facts, from the herbal remedy used to treat the Papal piles, to who was the Cardinal with the most family connections in the Curia—had proved worthless in this, my greatest concern. He had been nothing but a glorified administrator and procurer after all, not a man of vision or ideas or even insight. He had been meet enough to serve me only in my own green days.

I had outgrown him. I could do better myself.

And I would do better myself. I would rid myself of Wolsey and then proceed ... to wherever the road would take me.

Campeggio was to leave England, and sought permission to take leave of me. At that time I was staying at Grafton, a manor house in the country, and only with great difficulty could I provide lodging for Campeggio. Wolsey accompanied him and was dismayed to find no room for himself. I did not wish to speak with him at this time, but I was compellayed. Betroken an ancient law against asserting Papal jurisdiction in England without prior royal consent. The real reason was that they hated him.

In meeting me, Wolsey was deferential and shaken—a different Wolsey than I had ever seen. He lapped about my hand as a puppy, scampering about, wagging his tail to please. It sickened me and made me sad. I had no wish to witness this degradation.

“Your Majesty ... His Holiness ... I did not know ... I can undo it all....” No, such phrases I did not wish to hear from Wolsey. Not from proud Wolsey.

I gave him permission to retire. Strange it is to think that I never saw him again. When Anne and I returned from our hunt the following day, both he and Campeggio had departed. I knew in what direction Wolsey was bound, so I sent Henry Norris on horseback to overtake him and present him with a ring as token of our continuing friendship.

Evidently the scene was embarrassing. Proud Wolsey leapt off his mule and flung himself upon his knees in the mud, grasping the ring (and Norris’s hand) and kissing it wildly, all the while wallowing knee-deep in the mire. I grieved at the vision.
Yet I could not reinstate Wolsey. He had failed me in my Great Matter, and only my clemency saved him from the enemies clamouiring for his head. He was of no political use to me now. It was my wish, and command, that he retire to his Archdiocese of York and perform his spiritual duties there, for the rest of his life, quietly and without molestation.

This Wolsey proved singularly unable to do. He could not bear to be disconnected from power. The wild moors of Yorkshire did not soothe his spirit or speak to him. He was a creature of civilization and artificiality; he longed for the comforts of court: for satins and silver, for golden goblets and intrigues and spies. He judged himself to be still of worth to those in high places—if not to me, then perhaps to the Emperor or the Pope, who might pay him well for what he knew.

We apprehended his letters selling himself, in precisely those terms. His Italian physician, Agnosisti, had served as message-carrier. A clumsy device, but Wolsey was desperate.

My heart was heavy. There was no choice. Wolsey had delivered himself into the hands of his enemies at court and in Parliament, who had long been crying for his elimination; to them, mere banishment was not enough. He had clearly committed treason. And the penalty for treason is death.

For many months thereafter I staved them off. But finally I had to sign my name to the great parchment ordering his arrest for high treason. There was no other way.

By this time Wolsey was already in the far North, within a day’s walk of York and his diocese there. And York was where the Percys held dominion.

Thus it was that God arranged it so that Henry Percy (Anne’s storklike suitor), as the chief lord in that district, was the only one empowered to arrest Wolsey.

I was not there, of course. But witnesses told me of the heartsick scene: the company coming upon Wolsey in his receiving quarters, his confusion upon seeing them—he is threadbare and almost barefoot. There is no fire in the fireplace, and no wood. Yet he rouses himself as in the old main toes not remember that he made an enemy of this lad, some five years ago.

He comes forward to embrace Percy, as a friend from his entourage of long ago. He apologises profusely to the company for the quality of their surroundings, as he was wont to do in his great palaces. He then gestures to Percy in a spirit of expansiveness. Percy nervously follows him all the while he is chattering. “I plan to do all the Confirmations in York diocese next May,” he says, to the air. “And perform all weddings. There are many in the summer. And to enjoy my simple life, in the country.”

“My Lord,” says Percy, in such a low voice that Wolsey scarce hears him, and continues talking. “My Lord,” repeats Percy, tapping him on the shoulder. “I arrest you for high treason.” The voice is a croak.

Wolsey whirls. They stare at each other—the chastised boy, the fallen Cardinal. Revenge should taste sweet, but it does not. Too late, it is rancid.

They take Wolsey away. Master Kingston from the Tower meets them to help keep Wolsey under safeguard en route to London.

“Ah, Mr. Kingston,” he says. “So you are come at last.” The remark is puzzling to the hearers.

Wolsey never reaches London. Before he leaves his little house at Cahill, he complains of pains in his bowels. (Self-induced? They did not appear before his arrest.) By the end of the first day’s journey he is extremely ill, and his party has to beg leave of the monks at Leicester Abbey for a place to rest.

Once within, he makes a great show, predicting his own death. “At the eighth hour of the eighth day,” he says piously, after announcing, “I have come to lay my bones among you.” This greatly impresses the good brothers. (But how could he know the exact hour, unless he had taken a potion, whose speed of action he knew?)

He is laid upon a simple pallet in a stone cell. He then calls for his gentleman usher, George Cavendish, and a monk. Then he utters his last words: “Had I but served my God with half the zeal I served my King, He would not in mine age have left me naked to mine enemies.” He then (as the saying goes) turned his face to the wall and died.

When I heard it I was happy. Wolsey had cheated the wolves at court. There would be—nay, could be!—no trial for treason. Had he taken poison? The more noble and brave he!

And at the end, he had called on God and died in a stone cell in Leicester Abbey rather than the Prior’s house at St. Lawrence’s. Had he repented in time? Where had his soul flown?
I was alone. Wolsey was gone. My father gone. Katherine gone—as my advisor. I stood alone. And there was much to do.

Before me stood a road leading to Rome. I knew it well. I could travel it, but it would be time-consuming, expensive, and humiliating. And the verdict was uncertain, for all that.

A smaller, sister road branched off. It led away from Rome, from Wolsey, from everything I had ever known. I could not see where it led, but it could be no less time-consuming and uncertain. Yet it beckoned me. There I would go, regardless of who tried to hinder me. It would not end at Rome, but ... where? At myself?
All the candles had been snuffed except one, flickering in a lantern. Anne was in her night-robe—a ruby velvet one—and her black hair was down and streaming over her shoulders. In the eerie light she looked half-supernatural, half-mad.

As I stepped in, she rushed toward me—a black and red wraith. A devil. “Are you finished?” she fairly shrieked. Her black eyes reflected odd jumpings of the firelight.

“Aye,” I said.

“While I sat here, alone! I could hear the music—” She turned away abruptly.

“Music you have heard many times before. And will hear again.” My head hurt, and I was weary. I had looked for comforting, not a harangue.

“When?” She whirled on me. “How many years will I endure Christmas shut up here like a prisoner? You leave me alone—”

My head ached. The bright firelight, once so enticing, now seemed hostile. I drew myself up. “Forgive me, Mistress,” I said. “I did not mean to intrude upon you. I also care not to be berated. Good night.” Before she could protest further, I turned and shut the door behind me.

Without thinking, I sought Katherine’s company. Soothing, kind Katherine.

She was having her hair brushed by a maid of honour when I entered. It was long and, at its ends, still a honey colour. But the rest was the colour of Thames mud.

She smiled to see me, then held out her hand and led me to a padded chair. She sat as near as possible. She leaned forward, and her eyes shone.

“I am so happy that you have come to see me!” she said. I smiled.

A fire was burning steadily. Just as I approached it, I could hear the strange sucking noise of the winter storm outside. The casements rattled. How miraculous to be inside, to be warm.

The fire was a hot one. I could feel it from ten feet away, and held out my hands to be warmed. Katherine came up beside me and held out her hands also—although they could hardly have been cold.

She smiled brightly. In the half-light of the fire I could see the young girl that once was. Then she, too, began to berate me.

“You never come to see me ... you do not eat with me ... you leave me to sit neglected and forsaken, as lonely as in purgatory....

She reached out and grasped my arm, her fingers digging so painfully into my flesh that all I could think was how to disengage them.

She went on and on, about all my shortcomings and injuries to her person, until I thought her tongue must run dry. Still it did not. Then I became angry.

“It is your own fault if you are neglected and uncomfortable!” I yelled, then lowered my voice. “You are mistress of your own household and can go where you like and live as you like!”

“But not without my husband,” she said in mock subservience.

“You have no husband!” I burst out. “Your husband is dead, and has been, almost thirty years! I am not your husband. Learned doctors of the Church have e of that!”

Katherine drew herself up. “Doctors! They are stupid creatures. You yourself know the truth.”

Yes, I did. God had pointed out the truth.

“The Pope will decide,” she said smugly. “He will know God’s will.”

God’s will. What did Clement know of God’s will? Theologians knew better than he. “The learned theologians in every university will study the case and decide it. And if the Pope does not, thereafter, rule in my favour, I shall declare the Pope a heretic and cease to obey him.”

The fire snapped. Had I really meant to say that? Katherine stared. Nonetheless, I had said it. I took my leave and went back to Anne.

I told her of what had just happened, of the frightening words I had just said, and what they meant. But she focused only on Katherine, not on my challenge to the Papacy.

Standing in her velvet nightgown at the door to her inner chambers, she laughed. “You should know better than to argue with Katherine,” she said, once she got her breath. “Never once have you won an argument with her.”

I bridled at that, but she silenced me. She started to say more, but then her face fell and she looked close to tears.

“Someday you will be so convinced by Katherine’s arguments you will return to her,” she said mournfully.

I started to protest, but again she cut me off. Her eyes brimmed with tears; her long, foxlike face was all aquiver.

“I have given up everything for you,” she said. “And now I know eventually you will go back to Katherine. You must. And in the meantime”—she kept the door adroitly half-closed, so I could not force my way inside and take her in my arms—“I have given up any chance I may have had for an honourable marriage, now that I am known as
If I ceased to obey the Pope, who would fill his place in my life? It was the very office itself I was questioning, rather than Clement himself. When had the emphasis shifted?

I had said it to Katherine, and suddenly I meant it: I would not obey the Pope, no matter what he pronounced. I did not believe in his spiritual authority any longer.

When had that happened? I did not know ... only that I was sure, in my deepest self, that the Pope was not the Vicar of Christ; that the entire office of the Papacy was a man-made thing and carried no more weight than one of those papier-mâché pageant-cars we use at Christmas. Pleasing the Pope had been one of my ways of trying so hard to be the “perfect” King.

What a fool I had been! To tremble before the Papacy and seek its approval! A triple-turned fool—but no more, no more!

More pointed out several varieties of roses which he had taken pains in growing, then said simply, “You came about other matters.”

“Yes,” I said. “I wish you to be Lord Chancellor. In Wolsey’s place.” If he was simple and straightforward, why should I not be?

I expected either fluster or incredulity. Instead he laughed, a great, ringing laugh. When he stopped, he said, “I? In Wolsey’s place? But I am no churchman.”

“I do not want a churchman! You are a Christian—more so than most churchmen!”

“Are you entirely positive that you want a Christian, Your Grace?”

Did he mock me? “Yes!”

Instead of replying, he continued walking down the rows of neatly trimmed rosebushes, his hands clasped behind his back. At the end of the row of red roses, he suddenly turned. “I cannot,” he said quietly. “Forgive me.”

The roses round him made a bloody, flowery frame.

“Wherefore not?” I demanded.

“Your Grace’s Great Matter—”

I waved that aside. “The Lord Chancellor is not—”

He cut me off. “The previous Lord Chancellor was deeply involved in this question.”

“Because he was a Cardinal and empowered to preside at the legatine trial. Now it has gone beyond that, to—”

“To become a political matter, which would involve your Chancellor more than ever, be he churchman or layman. I cannot—”

“Thomas,” I suddenly said, “what is your opinion of this entire question?”

He turned and inspected a half-blown rose overmuch. I waited. At length he could delay his answer no longer. “I believe ...” His usually sure voice was low. “I believe that Queen Katherine is your true wife. And if she be not, I believe only the Pope has the power to pronounce that.”

The coldness was receding, dropping down like water flowing from a pipe. I had overcome it.

“Partly.” He smiled. “I cannot be Your Grace’s servant unless I embrace all things wholeheartedly.”

Row after row of pruned and tended trees stretched before me, each about five yards apart from the next. Their branches spread neatly and evenly out, like round tents.


He knew all of Wolsey’s financial matters, down to every farthing in the household. It was in this capacity that I supposedly consulted him. But one does not merely go over figures. One begins to talk. Therein was I won. Master
Cromwell had many interesting tales. In the beginning they were about others; in the end, about himself.

This Cromwell, the son of a Putney blacksmith, had spent hidden years abroad, first as a soldier of fortune in the Italian wars, then as a merchant on the Antwerp market, in the process learning enough common law to qualify for the bar. I received the impression of that rarest of creatures, a totally amoral man, yet ascetic in his wants and needs. Thus he would be singularly resistant to all normal temptations—the satins, the women, the dainty dishes—that had ensnared his master, the Cardinal. Was this the man I sought to help resolve my Great Matter? I hinted of the delicate “problem.” He nodded.

A few days later he sent word that he had some “suggestions” for my Great Matter. Thus one euphemism danced with another.

I called Cromwell to meet with me in person and discuss the details of his plan. This he was only too eager to do.

He appeared in my work room promptly after morning Mass, his dark, straight hair wet and combed, his cap in hand. I had not yet had breakfast, and had hardly expected him so soon. A tray of smoked eel, ale, and cheese sat upon my table, awaiting me. I eyed it hungrily. Nevertheless I turned to Cromwell and bade him welcome.

“Your written suggestions were most intriguing,” I began, picking them up from my work desk and waving them in my hand. “I have given much thought to them.” If I expected an answer, there was none; he stood poised and listening. “I would like a fuller explanation of your plan,” I continued. “It is cumbersome to commit all things to paper.”

He smiled, knowing what I meant. Then he looked round the room questioningly.

“There is no one here, Cromwell,” I said. “You may speak freely.” To prove my point—and because I was in a buoyant mood (of late my moods had varied alarmingly, so that I was often elated after breakfast and sunk in gloom by mid-afternoon, quite unlike myself)—I strode over to an arras and thumped it. Nothing but dust flew out.

I sat on a small stool; Cromwell then allowed himself to sit as well, and edged his stool close to mine.

“It is this, Your Grace. I have made an extensive study of the question. And my humble opinion is that it is a much greater issue than the marriage itself. The marriage was merely God’s way of opening other ideas to you, of leading you to ponder heretofore unthinkable things.”

“What things?” I asked. He was employing flattery, like so many before him. It bored me. The smell of the ale and eel wafted toward me. Let him get on with it!

“That some of Your Grace’s subjects are but half your subjects.” He paused and lifted his eyebrow significantly. This was supposed to intrigue me, but it was merely silly. I frowned, and he continued hastily. “The clergy. They take a vow of obedience to the Pope. How, then, can they be your loyal subjects? ‘No man can serve two masters,’ as Our Lord—”

“Yes, yes,” I cut him off. “But this has been done always. The heavenly kingdom and the earthly are separate.”

“Are they, Your Grace? If, upon pain of death, a subject chooses to obey a foreign ruler over his King—what is heaven about that? Is it not treason?” A pause. “Does not Your Grace have responsibility for all his subjects? Did not God deliver them into your hands for safekeeping? In days of old there were no Popes, but only Christian princes, who were charged with keeping the True Faith—”

He went on with his extraordinary theory: that the head of each realm was empowered by God to protect his subjects both bodily and spiritually; that he was the highest authority in the land in both spheres; and that the clergy owed allegiance to him, not to the Bishop of Rome, who was a mere usurper. To restore his power to myself was merely to reinstate the ancient, correct, and divinely ordained order of things.

“It is as God wills,” finished Cromwell. “He is displeased with the present state. It is a perversion of the truth. That is why prophets like Wycliffe and Hus and Luther have arisen. That is why Rome has been laid low and the Pope reduced to a shivering prisoner by the Emperor. These are all signs. Signs that you must act to restore the rightful order of things. Else the punishments will increase. Remember in Israel, when Ahab—”

“Yes, yes.” I could bear the hunger no longer; I reached for the cup of ale. “An interesting theory,” I finally said.

“Words. Wolsey was also full of words. What of deeds?”

I was curious to know if he had worked this out as well. I was not disappointed. Cromwell leaned forward eagerly, his lizardlike eyes reflecting the morning light.

“The people groan beneath the weight of the monstrous burden,” he said.

I must cure him of this extravagant speech he affected. Could no one save Anne speak plain English to me?

“But they are powerless to extricate themselves. Only one person can break their bonds. The King.”

I grunted. “How?”

“They will follow you, like the children of Israel following Moses.”

This last simile was too much. Why should I not permit myself to indulge in the eel? This would-be orator deserved no deference on my part. I leaned over and selected a tasty-looking piece. “Pray speak plainly,” I finally
He grinned—something no one had done in my presence for years. Throwing aside the grovelling and hyperbole like a heavy cloak, his voice leapt. “The clergy are helpless to release themselves. The people cannot, save through a general rebellion such as has occurred in Germany, and which above all we do not want. No. The rebellion, the break, must be led from above. And this most of all: it must seem no rebellion at all. People—even discarded people—like to feel that the order is eternal. Even while destroying it, we must maintain its outer structure.”

His eyes were dancing. He looked demented, delirious. I reached for more eel, as if something in my mouth would subdue the uneasy feeling in my head.

“The Church must be left intact,” he continued. “It must retain all the outward semblances of the past. No whitewashed walls came visions of the Pope, who was sometimes Wolsey and sometimes Father. When Father wore the Papal tiara, he looked at me accusingly. “How has it all been spent? And what have you done with my realm? Given it an heir? Made new and just laws? Nay, that I doubt—” Even as he spoke, mercifully he faded away from my inner vision.

I awoke—had I ever really been asleep?—in the pale sky before dawn. I reflected on the dreams. Father ... Wolsey... the Pope. All my life I had been a dutiful son to one or the other, entrusting my most cherished longings and ambitions to them. Trying to please them and never succeeding. Always I fell short of the mark, some way or other. Then I would try again, only to be subtly told ... just this or that is not quite right.

Now it would end. Now I would begin, at long last, to be my own man. Down with that persecuting trio of naysayers. I arose determined to do battle with the only surviving member of the three.
I called Convocation to convene immediately. This was important to my plan, as I wanted to take the churchmen by
surprise, with no warning of what awaited them. When all the high-ranking churchmen (Convocation was a body
representing the Church as a whole) were assembled, they were stunned to hear themselves charged with the treason
of praemunire, or bringing Papal bulls into England without prior royal permission. Only the payment of a fine of a
hundred thousand pounds could win them a pardon ... the fine and an innocent document bewailing and
acknowledging their evil transgression, signed by them all, and addressed to the King, incidentally titled Supreme
Head of the Church in England. Such a simple thing, was it not? So much simpler than the endless plots and ploys
of Wolsey’s, devised to wring Clement’s arm. All those envoys, all those courts, meant nothing compared to that piece
of parchment with those seven devastating words.

Convocation balked; it pleaded; it tried to excuse itself. But in the end it capitulated, paid the money, and signed
the document. The highest ecclesiastical body in the land had just proclaimed its King to be its head.

I waited for Pope Clement’s reaction with curiosity. Surely this would galvanize the stubborn yet weak-willed
creature, and let him know I meant to proceed along the course of freeing myself and my country entirely from
Rome. It would be so simple for him to sign a parchment freeing me from Katherine, thereby preserving England
and its sweet income for the Church—almost as simple as Convocation signing its document.

But no. The recalcitrant goat refused. He issued warnings telling me to cease my actions upon pain of
excommunication. He forbade anyone to speak in favour of the annulment until the case had been “decided”—in
Rome, presumably. Did the fool not understand that there would be no decision from Rome that would bind me?
And if he truly wished things to be impartial, as he made believe, he would have put a ban of silence on any
discussion of the case, not just on those in favour of the annulment.

“If the Pope issues ten thousand excommunications, I wouldn’t care a straw for them!” I bellowed when told of
his latest threat.

Cromwell and Anne were present then. Anne looked gleeful; of late she had been questioning my steadfastness to
the cause. She ch Palace. Usually there was a thought-provoking sermon from the pulpit, as well as the ever awe-
inspiring Mass. When we came to Mass one blustery February day, however, I was attacked even from there.

It was cold and damp inside the chapel; the braziers failed to keep the chill from sinking in. I saw Anne shiver a
bit from time to time. She was so thin that even the furs she constantly wore did little to alleviate her constant
shivers and shakes. She had been ill several times since Christmas.

The friar began to speak. But instead of offering an interesting theological premise, he began to shout.

“Do you remember the story of King Ahab?” he screamed. “King Ahab was King of Israel. But he abandoned
God and turned to false gods. Yes, a King of Israel worshipped Baal! Evil as he was, there was one by his side still
more evil: his wife, Jezebel. She urged him on to even greater abominations.

“Elijah the Prophet tried to warn him. But Ahab was a creature of Jezebel, not the Lord! At length he coveted a
vineyard near his palace. It was owned by a man named Naboth. He proposed to buy it from Naboth, but Naboth
refused.

“King Ahab was not used to being refused. He was crossed in nothing. So he went home and sulked. Jezebel
asked what was troubling him, and when he told her, that wicked woman smiled and said, ‘Come, eat and take heart;
I will make you a gift of the vineyard of Naboth.’ ”

Here the friar paused and looked around fiercely, like an owl perched and searching for rodents.

“And what did she do? She arranged a ceremony in which Naboth was given the seat of honour—then paid two
liars to come in and charge him publicly with cursing God and the King. The crowd, believing this, dragged him
outside the city and stoned him to death. Thus did Jezebel make a ‘present’ of the vineyard to her husband.”

The congregation was silent now, hanging on every word.

“But Elijah went to the King and said, ‘This is the word of the Lord: where dogs licked the blood of Naboth, there
dogs shall lick your blood. And Jezebel shall be eaten by dogs by the rampart of Jezreel.’ ”

By now one could hear the wind whistling outside, through the thick stone walls, so silent had it grown in the
chapel.

“Now there is in this land a similar thing. A King who has turned his back on God and God’s true vicar, and has
gone whoring after false gods!

“A King so greedy for money and worldly things that he will rob not only Naboth, but God Himself! A King who
is besotted with his own Jezebel, a woman who is bringing about his ruin, and that of the Church.

“I say unto you, as Elijah said unto Ahab: The dogs shall lick your blood!”
Anne was pale. The congregation broke out into murmurs. The friar stared balefully at me. He expected me to stamp out, guiltily. I intended to disappoint him, and continued to sit calmly in the royal box.

Later, in her apartments, Anne broke down and sobbed. She flung herself against me and begged me to hold her, in a manner I had never seen before.

“Now, now, sweetheart,” I said. “If you are to be Queen, you must learn composure. You must not let every little thing any fool says upset you so. He was but a self-appointed prophet. Someone answer him from the same pulpit; you’ll see. Cheer up, sweetheart. Look. I have brought you—”

“There’s more—more—I did not want to tell you—it would worry you—but I must—”

She was babbling. Clearly the Scriptural references had upset her. Gently I took her hand and led her over to the fireplace, where we seated ourselves. Then I poured out a cup of wine for each of us and handed it to her. She took it with trembling hands.

“Now, what possible stock can you put in what he said? He was a fanatic, wishing to frighten us. Like that absurd ‘Holy Maid of Kent’ with all her ‘prophecies’ who has been wandering round the countryside, proclaiming our doom.”

“They hate me,” she said. “They hate me, they hate me—oh, it was dreadful!”

“No. Not the sermon. The ... incident. They tried to kill me.”

“A mob of women. Last week. I was alone for supper in one of the small royal river-houses near the Tower. Then one of the house-servers came and told me there was a mob of seven or eight thousand women coming, armed with sticks and stones. They meant to set upon me as I left and kill me!

“I looked out the window and saw them approaching. It was true! I rushed to my boatmen and got across the Thames just as they arrived. They set up a great howling and threw stones after me, screaming and cursing me!” She shuddered. “Everyone curses me. With so many curses, how can I hope to escape them all?”

“Why did you not tell me this?”

“Because... I did not wish to add to your worries. And because, in a peculiar way, until I told you, I could believe that it did not truly happen. Now it is real.”

“A mob of demented women, nothing more. The kingdom is full of them. Remember that one out of every ten men is probably half-mad, and there are more than three million men in England. That makes for many madmen. It means nothing,” I assured us both. “It means nothing.”
But of course it did. What she said was true. The people did not like her. This was partly because they were still so loyal to Katherine, and partly because they disliked for a King to marry his subject. My grandfather Edward IV had done so, and there was great resentment over it, even though he had not had to put aside another wife to do so. Yet such was my love and determination that that did not deter me.

Meanwhile, the ménage à trois was growing ever more unbearable. On hunting trips and progresses I must be with Katherine, leaving Anne behind. Yet at York Place—Wolsey’s vacated London palace—Anne and I lived without Katherine, as there were no Queen’s quarters there, it being a former ecclesiastical dwelling. There Anne and I could pretend she was my wife and Queen; she could preside over banquets and entertainments by my side. But by next day, it would be over. There was always some ambassadorial reception for which I must repair to Westminster and the stolid Katherine.

The aggravating situation reached its peak during the summer of 1531. It was nruly happolsey had called his “secret” tribunal to hear my case, and two since the ill-fated legatine court with Campeggio and Wolsey. I had just reached my fortieth birthday and was feeling more than usually melancholy about it. I had begotten my first child at eighteen; yet here I was, forty and without a legitimate heir.

The summer months were to be spent at Windsor. Katherine seemed determined to dog my footsteps. If I went to the garden to walk alone, she followed, a bulky black figure in the bright sunshine. If I walked the gallery during a sudden thundershower, when rain fell like javelins on the hollyhocks and roses beneath the windows, I could be sure that she would appear from a door and walk behind me, like a detached shadow.

Not only did she attempt to attach herself to me like the sticky substance glaziers use to hold glass onto leaded panes, she also tried to keep Anne away from me by forcing her to play cards hour after hour. As long as Anne had to sit and play ruff-and-honours with Katherine, she could not walk with me by the river or in the garden. All the time Katherine maintained an outward sweetness; all the time she was writing treasonous letters to the Pope and Emperor. Only once did she reveal her true feelings toward Anne. During one of their interminable card games, Anne happened to hold a king.

Katherine said, “You have good hap to stop at a king, Lady Anne. But you are not like the others. You will have all, or none.”

This could not go on. I could bear no more. The very sight of Katherine made me shake with suppressed anger. I knew I had to leave, and the only way to do so was simply—to do so.

I told Anne to make herself ready, and that we would leave early in the morning for a hunting expedition and progress.

That night I felt an immense sense of freedom and exhilaration. One by one I was cutting the ties that bound me to a dead past and made me helpless and angry—Wolsey, the Pope, Katherine. Eagerly, I packed for the progress.

WILL:

Henry has been accused of cowardice for his habit of never seeing his so-called victim after he had made up his mind to rid himself of that person. He sneaked out of Windsor Castle at dawn without ever telling Katherine good-bye; he avoided seeing Wolsey at the end; he stalked away from the May Day joust when Anne dropped a handkerchief to someone Henry thought had been her lover, and never saw her again; he refused to see Catherine Howard or Cromwell after he learned of their “crimes.”

But knowing the man as I did, I think it was rather prudence that made him act as he did. Both Katherine and Wolsey repeatedly said that if they could have had just an hour in his presence they could have persuaded him to change his mind. Well, he knew that and chose to absent himself, lest he falter. At bottom, he was rather sentimental and easily moved. Yet he knew what he must do, painful as it might be, and did not want to be dissuaded.
HENRY VIII:

It was July, and even the dawn was warm. I had been dressed for what seemed like hours, and as I stood in the courtyard ready for the horses to be brought out, I waited for the sky to lighten—and for Anne to appear. Eventually she did, wearing a grey habit like me, she had slept well.

The small party—just myself, Anne, her brother George and cousin Francis Bryan, and five grooms—left the cobbled courtyard as the sky began to lighten in the east. The sound of the horses’ hooves seemed unnaturally loud to my ears. I suppose that deep inside I was afraid of Katherine hearing.

After the castle was far in the background, I breathed easier. By this time the sun was coming up and shone with all the promise of a high summer day. Anne rode beside me, as I had been aching for her to do on my summer progresses for the past four years. The others rode discreetly behind.

As we passed under the green boughs, heavy now with their full growth of leaves, I looked over at her, marveling at how well grey became her. There was not one colour that did not suit her—an unusual thing in a woman.

As our horses came close together on one narrow path, I leaned over toward her.

“We are not going back,” I said.

She looked puzzled, then ill at ease. I could tell she was thinking of her possessions, clothes, jewellery, books, all still in her apartments at Windsor.

“We can send for your things later. Certainly I have left more behind than you!” Then my voice changed. “Yes, I have left more behind than you have. I have left Katherine behind. Forever.”

She stared at me in disbelief. Recklessly, I went on. “I shall never see her again! I hate her! She has done everything within her power to bring about my ruin. And yet she still poses as my solicitous wife. Nay, I shall never see her again!”

Anne smiled. “And where are we bound tonight, my love?”

“Deerfield. To the royal hunting lodge there.”

Deerfield was a rather tumble-down, ramshackle building that had been a great favourite of my grandfather Edward’s. I liked it because it was so different from the formal palaces. There were only ten rooms, all of them roughly planked, with low-beamed ceilings. The floors slanted, as the old supporting beams underneath had begun to sag. Downstairs a large room with a stone fireplace functioned as a dining hall, as a warming area, and as a place simply to gather and talk.

It gave me the illusion whenever I was there that I was just an ordinary man, a man who went hunting, walked through the woods, ate a simple supper of venison, and sat before the fire with a cup of wine and his beloved beside him. Tonight I was that man, and more.

Anne was beautiful, with the fire playing upon her face. I sat beside her and merely watched her in amazement that such a creature could exist. I thought of the snug bedroom upstairs and the wide, if hard, bed within it. Could not she give herself to me now? I had cast Katherine aside.

We were alone. I reached out for her and kissed her—at first sweetly, then more urgently. Soon I was so aroused I could hardly restrain myself. I fumbled at the strings of her bodice and was surprised when she passively let me undo them and caress her breasts, then kiss them. The fire made strange shadows on her face and body, but that only enhanced the experience. At length I stumbled to my feet and pulled her up. Without a word, we ascended the ed it.

As I took Anne’s hand to bring her inside, I felt a resistance. She stood planted firmly outside the threshold.

“No—I must not,” she said.

I felt near explosion. “God’s blood! Come inside!”

“No. And if I do, I am lost.” She gently pulled me back out toward her, looking at me imploringly all the while. “I want you so,” she said. “But I cannot. Our child must be lawfully born. Else all this is for nothing, and I am indeed what the people call me—the King’s Great Whore.”

Before I could say anything further, she slipped away from my grasp and ran down the corridor to her own quarters.

I spent another sleepless night.

The days, nonetheless, were pleasant ones. Hunting from sunup to sundown, with a fine huntsman’s supper each night, lute-playing and games by the fire, and camaraderie.
Then came the expected letter from Katherine. It was another of her sickening “all is sweet” ploys. She was sorry she had not been awakened in time to say good-bye to me. She would be happy to know that I was well.

Never better since I was out of her sight! Hateful bitch! I sat down and immediately dashed off a reply—telling her that she cared little for my peace of mind or my health, since she was bent on destroying both. And, in fact, both were greatly improved when I was away from her. I dispatched it without even rereading it. I had had quite enough of her childish games.

The next week passed peacefully, then came another missive. In this one she took me to task, saying that I owed her a face-to-face good-bye.

Why? So she could berate me? I waited until I had left Deerfield and come closer to London, then called a Council meeting. This was no longer a private matter, as far as I was concerned, but a state one. I wanted everyone to know what I was doing, and why. Together the Council and I drafted a formal letter to the Princess Dowager stating that her disobedience had so displeased me that I did not wish to see her again.

When my progress was completed a month later, the Council sent her another letter, telling her that I was returning to Windsor and wished her to move to Wolsey’s old house, The More, before then. While she was there she was then to select a permanent place of residence and thereafter to retire there.

It was done. It was done. I could hardly believe it of myself. Why, then, did I feel such a mixture of euphoria and despair?

The news of my separation from Katherine spread quickly and was not always well received. Unfortunately, it coincided with the beginning of the Parliamentary measures taken to reform the Church. All the old was being dismantled, the people seemed to feel, and there was no secure haven anywhere.

On May fifteenth, 1532, Convocation acknowledged me as Supreme Head of the Church in England. On May sixteenth, More resigned as Chancellor.

He came to me, carrying his Seals of Office, the very ones that Wolsey had been so loth to suont>

I sent a deputation of thirty councillors to give her the following orders: Remove yourself to Ampthill within a fortnight; reduce your household servers by two-thirds; cease to style yourself Queen; acknowledge me as Supreme Head of the Church.

As I expected, she refused the last two orders. She said she would gladly release anyone from her service who would not recognize her as Queen, and that her conscience would never permit her to acknowledge her “husband” as Supreme Head of the Church.

Oh! That woman, that stubborn, hateful woman! To cling to something that did not exist—how revoltingly pathetic!

And Mary ... she proved to be entirely her mother’s daughter and none of mine, in her behaviour toward me. She was contemptuous and rude, continually speaking of her mother and the wrongs I had done her, and of the Church and the wrongs I had done her. In truth, I knew not what to do with my daughter, as I loved her, but knew her now to be totally against me. In sorrow I sent the sixteen-year-old girl to the manor of Beaulieu in Essex, with a household of her own.

I must put a stop to the incipient questioners and sceptics in the realm. What would silence them better than having Warham, the Archbishop of Canterbury, celebrate my wedding to Anne? As highest prelate in the land, he stood as quasi-Pope to the people. In addition, he had “married” me to Katherine. For him now to officiate at my wedding to Anne would say plainer than anything else that the first marriage was indeed void. I would insist that he do so.

But, astoundingly, he refused. More than that, he denounced me and my “concupiscent desires” and took a grave moralistic stand on the issue of separating from the Pope. I stamped out of his presence.

Alone in my chambers, I paced. Things seemed as hopeless as ever. More had left me. The highest ecclesiastical authority in the land did not see fit to marry me to Anne. The Pope continued to fulminate against me. Only Anne and Parliament stood on my side.

But just when it seemed everything must stay as it was forever, everything changed, as suddenly as a summer squall.

God intervened, and Warham died. True, he was an old man, in his eighties, but I had despaired of ever being rid of him. He had been there since my earliest boyhood, and seemed to be less a man than the office itself, God-given and eternal.
It was August of 1532 when Warham died. I could now find a new Archbishop—one more pliant to my wishes. And whom should I select for the honour? I knew the answer already: Thomas Cranmer.

Cranmer was amazed when I informed him of my decision. He was but a simple priest, he protested. Surely a bishop—

I reminded him that Thomas à Becket had been less; had been only a deacon.

“But, Your Grace,” he stammered, “he was truly a holy man, whereas I—I—”

“You also are a holy man. Of that I have no doubt, Thomas. Look! Both your first names are Thomas! Is that not an omen?”

He still stood with a hangdog look. Never had a nominee for Archbishop of Canterbury received the news of his elevation with less enthusiasm.

“I will expedite...” But well acquainted with your duties as Primate of all England!”

Once again he turned his woebegone eyes upon me. I was elated with the decision, and he was downcast!

“Yes, Your Grace,” he finally said. “Thank you, Your Grace.”

Now I knew in what direction my path lay, and it lay clear. With Cranmer as my Archbishop, duly approved by the hectored (and soon to be discarded) Pope, my Church in England would indeed be legitimate. Free from the Pope, yet sanctioned by him, Cranmer, legitimate Archbishop, would marry me to Anne, and also pronounce on my so-called marriage to Katherine.

Anne was jubilant. At long last, after more than five years of waiting, the end seemed in sight. The bulls should not be long in coming. In the meantime, I had another treat for her: Francis and I were going to meet in Calais, and she must accompany me, just as if she were already my Queen. Francis had shown himself of late to be sympathetic to me and my cause—I suspect because it was against the Emperor’s—and was eager to meet and discuss many things.

This would be the first time I had crossed the Channel or beheld Francis since 1520—twelve long years. Since then we had both lost our erstwhile Queens and acquired new ones. We had lost much else, I supposed, and cared not to speculate on it.

Anne was to be my wife and Queen, and it was only fitting that she begin to wear the royal jewels, which were still in Katherine’s possession.

I sent a messenger instructing her to surrender them, and Katherine gave me the reply I should have expected. She demanded a written message in my own hand to that effect, since “nothing less would convince her that her husband had so far taken leave of his sense of what was fitting as to demand them of her.” She would not give up her jewels “for such a wicked purpose as that of ornamenting a person who is the scandal of Christendom, and is bringing vituperation and infamy upon the King.”

Why did she persist in this harassment? Her actions merely annoyed and irritated (but never succeeded in threatening) me. She was petty and pathetic.

There were those who speculated that Anne and I would marry in France. But no. Any marriage must take place on English soil and be conducted by an English priest, thereby making it incontestable.

When I first glimpsed Francis, I thought how he had aged. Then I realized he doubtless thought the same about me. We both stood and stared at one another. This time there was no Field of Cloth of Gold, just a simple royal manor house beyond the Pale of Calais.

Francis was heavier now, and even more gaudily costumed. His youthful gaiety had hardened into a restless sort of cynicism. His stay in the Spanish prison after his defeat by Charles had done little beyond making him more determined to spend himself in hunting and pastimes. Already thirty-eight, he had not yet become a statesman and seemed oblivious to such concerns. I felt a full fifty years older than he. The last five years had seen to that. I had entered them a youth, still under Wolsey’s tutelage, and emerged entirely my own creature, much to my own amazement. In a way, I still stood blinking on the rim of the new world I surveyed, not yet used to it.

Francis had finally offered, lamely, the Duchess of Vendôme, a lady with —how shall I say it?—a rather
tarnished reputation. This insulted Anne more than all the other rebuffs. In the end, Anne met with no one, but remained alone in Calais, bedecked with Katherine’s jewels, while I met privately with Francis outside Calais.

We had much to discuss. Mainly it concerned the Pope and Charles: terrors and scourges of us both. Francis suggested that a Papal council concerning my marriage be held in France. He promised to tell His Holiness that I would abide by any decision this council came to. I myself was sceptical of this, but I could not guarantee, even to myself, how I would feel should the Pope grant me my declaration of nullity at this late date.

We retired to Calais, where I found Anne quiet and dispirited. Being almost in France, where she had passed her early girlhood, and yet unable to pass into the land itself, had told on her. Her sister had gone to the French King’s bed and been warmly received. Anne herself had refused both Francis and me, and her reward was to be labelled the “goggle-eyed whore” and to be met in France by a whore—presumably her social equal?

When I entered the royal apartments in Calais, I found a strange sight. Anne was asleep in a padded chair. Her head was tilted back and her mouth open, a position suggesting great ardour—except that she was obviously unconscious. On her neck were Katherine’s jewels. Coming closer, I saw that she was wearing them all: the earrings, the bracelets, the necklaces. It was as if she had decided to put all on in an attempt to flout the ostracism—to say, in effect, I shall wear the jewels regardless. Even if I must wear them alone.

I stood looking at her. Poor Anne. Asleep, she looked so young, like the girl I had first fallen in love with. She had given up her youth for me; had endured public calumny; had grown into a woman, waiting for me to make a move. Now this humiliating venture into France—meant for her triumph—had ended, once again, as her disgrace. How stubborn, how childlike, to put on the erstwhile Queen’s jewels and then fall asleep.

I approached her, supremely beautiful there in the half-light of the large candle standing on the nearby table. The dancing candlelight flickered off the cut surfaces of the gems round her neck.

“Anne.” I touched her. She did not stir.

“Anne.” This time I shook her, gently. She slowly opened her eyes and looked at me. She seemed confused.

“Oh,” she finally said, then looked down at her finery. She had evidently meant to wear it in privacy and take it off long before I appeared. Now she was embarrassed.

“You are practising for being Queen,” I heard myself saying. “There is no harm in that.”

She shook her head, and tried to reenter the world. “I—I fell asleep....” she mumbled.

“So I see.” I laughed. She did not. Instead, she forced herself up out of her chair and began to walk rhythmically all the while. For a long time she did not speak. She seemed as a madwoman. Finally I interrupted her nervous to-and-fro motions, as one will stop a sleepwalker.

“Anne, what is it?” I asked, as gently as I knew how. Yet she continued to stare at me with blank eyes—open, but uncomprehending.

“Anne,” I persisted, “you must tell me what eats away at you so.”

She looked at me mournfully, as if she knew but were loth to tell. I had seen the same look in Mary’s eyes when she was but seven or eight and had done something wrong.

“It—it is—only that I am sad.” She touched her jewels. “I love to touch them. They are royal. And when I am alone, I can believe in all you promised—that I will be your wife, that I will someday be honoured in France, and that the French King himself, not his whore, will receive me.

She came toward me, took my face in her hands. “Ah, Henry. The King of England is my only friend.”

“And you will be Queen of England,” I assured her. “And then you shall have many friends. So many you will not know which truly are your friends.”

She laughed, a half-stifled laugh. “All those in power say such. But I should imagine I will always know my friends.”

“You think, then, that to be in power is to leave perception behind?”

She spun round. “Indeed it is. For no man will tell you the truth. All seek their own advancement, all come to drink as a horse from the trough. And slobber beforehand.”

I winced. “Anne. Be a little kind.”

“Never! As they were not kind to me!”

“I was.”

“At times.” She resumed her walking. “Yet, like all men, you will have both. Trinkets and love-tokens for me, and ceremonial appearances with Katherine. Two wives. I wonder that you do not turn Turk and acquire two others. The Islamic law permits four, so I believe.”

I felt anger rising in me. “By Our Lady, Anne! You do push me too far!”

She stood still, at last. In the firelight she looked like a statue; the folds of her gown fell in carved lines. Then she spoke again. “Too far? You who have had women for over twenty years? All sorts—from the pious Katherine to my...
honeycombed sister, Mary? And I a virgin?” She then moved, came closer. “You sent away the boy I loved, before I was even twenty. And what have you offered me in return? Nothing. Nothing but waiting—and vituperation.”

“I offer you myself—and the throne.”

“In what order?” Her harsh laughter rang out. I hated her laugh. Then she turned again, and I saw her face by firelight and forgot all else.

“I cannot make you Queen before we are married,” I said. “Cranmer will marry us. But until he is empowered by the Pope, his words and ceremony mean nothing. Worse, they will taint our cause. It is only a little time more. We must be patin advance since I first came to court! And now they are already judged passé! How much longer? How much longer?”

“But a few months, sweetheart.” I hoped to soothe her.

“A few months! A few years! A few decades!” She looked ugly, her mouth twisted abnormally.

“This is unseemly,” I said. “A Queen must not behave so.”

She stopped and pulled herself up. “Yes. A Queen must be patient and long-suffering. Like Katherine. Wait ten years for a betrothal. Wait another seven for a marriage. And then wait another six while the King plays himself out with his paramour ... the latest in a long list.”

“Anne—this is unfair. You know that the others—”

“Were as nothing to you? Why, then, did you bother with them?”

“I cannot—”

“Answer that? Nay, you will not!”

She tossed that long heavy hair and smirked at me. Anger mastered me, made me its slave.

“I will answer what I please!” I reached forward and grasped her shoulders. They were thin things; I could feel the bone right through the flesh. I expected her to wince; she did not.

“I have jeopardized my kingdom for you! Alienated myself from the ruling order of things in this world, made an enemy of the Pope, the Emperor, and my beloved daughter—what else can I do to prove to you that you are supreme in my life?” She still kept that aloof, smug expression on her face, until it finally drove me into a fury. “And yet you will not give me the simplest gift—the gift any milkmaid gives her lover. And all the while you wear the royal jewels!”

I reached over and with one adroit movement ripped the jewels from her neck. I did not bother with a clasp, and the string broke; I heard some stones glancing off the floor. Anne’s hands flew to her neck; a thin red welt was already appearing where I had snapped the cord. She was outraged. Her eyes followed the bouncing, freed jewels onto the carpet. Already she was marking the place where they might have fallen.

“Such wanton destruction betokens immaturity,” she said, gathering up the pearls and rubies hastily. Soon she stood to her full height, her hands brimming with precious stones. I took each of her hands and pried them open, spilling the gems and pearls.

“Such haste betokens greed,” I said.

She looked back at me. She was as beautiful as ever, but somehow I now both hated and wanted her.

“You shall hold me in your hands no longer,” I heard myself saying, and suddenly it was true. I reached out for her and kissed her. She resisted for an instant, but then suddenly flung her arms around me hungrily.

Never had she inflamed me so. I knew that tonight—this bleak October night in France—was the night I had longed for for six years—nay, all my life.

My kisses fell on her face, hair, neck, breasts. I felt her tremble against me. I carried her over to the pillows and the fine furs heaped up against the wall near the fireplace. At once she was entirely mine.

I was not thinking at all; my mind had died and in it waited for her for over half a decade; I knew she was here tonight, and yielding to me. Beyond that I had no thoughts.

She was passive, yet not passive—a yielding sort of presence. She too knew what was coming, and yet could not resist it. She embraced it as she embraced me.

The coming together on the cushions before the fire was like a flame, a shaking of the soul. Even as it happened, in some far-off corner of myself I heard an inner voice saying, You will never be the same. It is all gone. Yet at that moment it felt as though all had just arrived. I burst upward into light, freedom, euphoria.

Afterwards ... there is always an afterwards. Yet this one was surprisingly gentle. I came back to earth to feel Anne next to me, Anne looking into my eyes. Her eyes seemed different from those of only a few minutes past. She stroked my face. Her naked body was half covered with the furs lying near the fireplace. Only her face was as before, with her long hair framing each side of her face and providing a modest cover for her breasts.

“Anne—I did—”

“Shhh.” Gently she laid her fingertips to my lips to silence me, then leaned over to kiss me. “Say naught.”

What a gift, to be allowed to say naught! To keep one’s feelings to oneself.
Together we lay for a long time, wordlessly, until it began to grow chill and the fire was almost down. I roused myself to get another log. She reached out a butterfly-like hand and stopped me.

“No,” she said. “Let it die. It is late.”

Wordlessly I dressed and left. I could not speak, nor were there any words I wished to say, even to myself,
XLVI

The next few days in France were taken up with petty business. I attended to it all, yet I was hardly there. I could not let myself forget the three hours in Anne’s apartment, yet I circled around them in my mind as something too terrifying and sacred to touch upon. Anne herself I saw not at all. Even on our voyage back to Calais she kept to her chambers below decks and sent me no message.

I did not see Anne for several days after our arrival back in England. She repaired to her quarters in the palace and seemed nunlike in her avoidance of company. I assumed she was ashamed and sensitive about her behaviour during our time in France, so I sought her out to reassure her that she had nothing to fear.

She looked more beautiful than ever when she opened the door and stared at me. I had almost forgotten her face, so jumbled up was it with my fantasies. In some demented way I wished I might never see her again. Yet at the same time I longed for her.

She stared at me, as at a stranger. “Yes?” she asked, politely.

“I wish to speak with you alone.”

It was early morning. She knew I meant truly to speak and nothing else.

I walked into her apartments. Here at Richmond they were rather sparsely furnished. She...

“Like yourself and Katherine?” she laughed. Truly, that afternoon she seemed more like a schoolgirl than anything else. She seemed even younger than the Princess Mary.

“Yes. Not slender willows and daffodils like you.”

She threw back her head and laughed. “Then make me one, my love,” she said, first holding my hands and leaning back, so that her fine hair tossed and shone, then pulling me after her into her private chamber.

She was laughing; I was laughing; I had never been happier, nor loved her more. I believe we made Elizabeth on that drowsy, yet heightened afternoon.

New Year’s Day, 1533. My feet ached from standing in full state all day, both receiving and distributing the royal gifts in the new Great Hall of Hampton Court. Outside, the sky was a peculiar flat white, while inside all was red and gold and blue—fire and velvet and wine. I gave many spectacular presents—selected by Cromwell, as I no longer had the interest or the time to involve myself—and received many useless and flattering gifts in return.

Returning to my apartments, I was glad to be done with it. I called for Anne, who came within a moment, or so it seemed.

“Happy New Year, my love.” I gave her her present—yet another jewel. I expected her to be bored by now with jewels. But she received this one, a sapphire from Jerusalem, with hushed delight.

“I did not have it made into any ring or brooch,” I explained. “The stone itself was brought to England by a Crusader who fought alongside Richard the Lionheart. It had lain in the same chest for more than three hundred years, in its wrappings from the Holy Land. Somehow those wrappings seemed something I should not disturb.” Would she understand?

She touched the stiff old cloth gently. “Nothing could become it better than this,” she folded it back along its creases. “It belongs here.” She placed it carefully in its velvet pouch.

Her eyes shone with a peculiar light I had never seen before. “And now I have a gift for you this New Year’s Day. Your jewel from the Holy Land serves to bless it—and I shall treasure it forever.”

She stood in front of me, but her hands were empty.

“What is it?” I asked.

“It is ... I am with child.”

Her voice was low, and the four words, which meant more to me than all the jewels brought back from all the Crusades, hung on the air. I could not speak, for ecstasy. Yes, ecstasy.

“Anne.”

“In the late summer.”

Still I could not speak, beyond saying her name.
It was all to be: it was all to come true.

That night I lay in bed, alternating between giddy exultation and dreary practicality, like a man with the smallpox, first sweating, then shivering. The exultation: Anne was with child, with my child, the heir I had been longing for...

It was late January, the time when cold creeps into the very walls of all dwellings, and Bridewell Palace was no exception. The sun did not even rise until well after eight o’clock, and at five in the morning it was still dark night. A raft of candles fluttered in the draught of a lonely, unfurnished room in the upper regions of the palace. The window was yet a darkened pane against which sleet drove itself. Chaplain Edward Lee stood there, looking bewildered, sleepy, and uncomfortable. The other witnesses were there, looking much the same.

I was dressed in an embroidered moss-green doublet and new fox-furred cape. The rest were in the things nearest to hand when they had received the summons to come to this attic room. No one had been notified ahead of time, for fear of the secret getting out and someone trying to stop the ceremony.

Suddenly Anne appeared. Although undoubtedly as sleepy as the rest, she appeared radiant and was wearing a light blue gown with a furred mantle over it. I reached out my hand and took hers, bringing her gently to my side.

“You may proceed with the Nuptial Mass,” I told Chaplain Lee.

“But, Your Grace, I have no permission nor instructions from His Holiness—”

“They have been received,” I lied. “You may rest assured His Holiness approves.”

Looking discomfited, he began the ancient ceremony. I clasped Anne’s hand. My head was spinning—Anne, my wife at last! No trumpets, no costumes, no eminent churchmen to conduct it. No feast or tournaments afterward. Instead, a great grey secret, with the winter wind singing outside, and the sleet flying, and Anne in no wedding gown. The candles kept flickering in the wind that found its way through the tiny gaps in the mortar. It was deathly cold; by the time we exchanged rings, my hands were numb.

Then, afterward, no fanfare. The onlookers filed silently from the room, like shades, and vanished in the early morning grey.

Anne and I were left alone. We faced one another.

“Well, wife,” I finally said. I meant to be light, jocular, but all of that faded as I looked at her: her youth, beauty, life—all mine. “Oh, Anne.” I clasped her. I was alive at last. It had been a long wait, but all was right, all destined, in that one clasp of flesh against flesh as I held my true wife to my side.

The next few days passed as in a phantasm. I was on earth, yet I was not. By day I signed papers and dressed as a King and behaved as a King. By night I was Anne’s husband, her secret husband.

January ended, February began. Still the Pope delayed. Nothing was forthcoming from Rome. To press further now might betray me. So I must wait—the thing I did least well.

Mid-February. The icicles hung long on eaves, the snow rose over boot-tops. Yet the sunset was coming later now, and I could see by the way the shadows fell that spring was not so far away. Ash Wednesday was almost upon us. And once Lent began...

I gave a small dinner the Sunday before Lent. I would serve venison and wine and all those things forbidden for the next forty days. I invited only those I truly wished to see: Brandon, Carew, Ned Norris knew the contents of the “private” Papal letter.

“Does the Papal messenger know that I know he is here?”

“Of course not!” Cromwell was indignant. “That is the point. With your cooperation, we can make sure he never hands you the directive himself. Then neither he nor you need concern yourselves with its whereabouts thereafter. Clement will be relieved—to have spoken clearly without being heard by anyone.”

“Very neat.”

Cromwell permitted himself a slight smile.

I sent for Anne. I needed her to be my mirror.
Anne came straightway. She was as sweet as honey, yes, as soothing and easy as the melted honey-and-camphor concoctions my childhood nurse had dripped slowly down my throat when it was pained. “How goes the day for my love?” she asked.

“Not well,” I grunted, and told of the happenings thus far. She laughed at Katherine’s letter, especially at the news that she had ordered costumes with our initials entwined with love-knots. Then her laughter abruptly ceased, and pain crossed her face.

“Poor forsaken woman,” she said slowly. “’Tis hard past bearing to continue to love someone who will have none of you.” I looked at her sharply, but she seemed to be talking to herself. “The Irish have a triad. Three things that are worse than sorrow: to wait to die, and to die not; to try to please, and to please not; to wait for someone who comes not.”

“You are the cause of my not coming to her. Can you now pity her?” I wondered.

“Yes, and no. No, in that I would not undo it. Yes, in that I may someday be in her place.”

The idea was absurd. Anne, fat and fifty and spending her days in prayer and calling after a man who ignored her? Never. Anne would rather be dead.

“Enough of this talk,” I said. And I told her about the Papal order.

“So now we play hide-and-seek with him?” she asked gleefully.

“A game at which you excel. Now you shall teach me your tricks, my love.”

I looked forward to seeing her put someone else in the position where she had held me for so many years a prisoner—where I could admire and benefit from her prowess rather than being tortured by it.

Dusk was falling. Soon Norris brought in our supper and fresh wood for the fire. It was cosy and close. Anne smiled at Norris as he discreetly performed his duties. His presence did not intrude, yet he managed to make us aware that he was there, lest we say private things in front of him.

The fire crackled; the heat seeped through my veins. I was warmed inside and out, and discreet and functionary as he doubtlessly was, I was glad when Norris cleared away our dishes, added one or two fragrant logs to the fire, and pointedly retired for the night.

I took Anne to my bed, where yet another thoughtful servant had smoothed the fresh linen for us.

“Ah, wife,” I said, lying back in her ed ins soft as a maid’s breasts? It made no sense. My loins were throbbing, but flaccid.

I wrenched myself away, covering myself in an agony of embarrassment. But Anne knew; of course she did. If she spoke a word, it would hang between us forever.

“Go!” I said. “Go quickly.”

Alone in my chamber, I sat staring at the fire. Its jumping, fragrant flames mocked me.

My glance fell on the letter from Katherine, still lying on the chest-top. I picked it up and tossed it on the fire. As I did so, I could not suppress a bitter laugh. We do not always know for what we long.

The next morning, in bright sunlight, it seemed a singular event, nothing permanent or significant. I whistled as Norris dressed me, and even complimented him on the sweet-smelling fire he had built for us.

“I hope it added to your pleasure,” he said modestly.

I managed a great smile that felt real to me. “Indeed!”

He looked pleased.

“I trust the Papal messenger spent an unproductive night?” I was relieved to have this topic to turn to.

“Aye.”

“What is he now?”

“Breaking his fast with the Duke of Suffolk.”

Ha! I chortled at that. Charles Brandon hated the Pope almost as much as I, though he had far less cause. Rome had most obligingly granted him annulments of two previous marriages, setting an encouraging example for me at the start of my own negotiations.

“I believe Brandon believes—or so he will tell Clement’s envoy—that I am hunting in New Forest, some two or three days hence. He must seek to find me there.”

“I shall so remind him,” Norris said, his face showing no surprise at these instructions. Even then I wondered how
he had taught himself such a trick. He bowed and left to carry my message to Suffolk’s house.

I hoped the Papal pet would enjoy his fruitless hunting trip. Perhaps a wild boar would cooperate and yield him some meat, though not the meat he was seeking.

That meat must now attire itself for another day, I thought, heaving myself up; it must apply the sauces and garnishes to make itself palatable to its onlookers.

Before I had finished this overlong task, Cromwell begged leave to see me. Gladly I sent the barber and perfumier away, particularly the latter. He had been offering several new scents for my pleasure, “to stir the sluggish winter blood.” But they served only to remind me of what had not stirred the night before. Now the offending odours hung in the air, heavy, accusing. Muttering, I turned to greet Cromwell.

“Your Grace!” He had a grin on his face, and it sat so strangely on him that I felt it boded ill.

“What is it?” I tried to keep the alarm out of my voice.

“Your Grace, I have here—our deliverance.” He flung out his arms, and two ancet receive them! Say you were not allowed admittance to my chamber. You fool!”

He shook his head, laughing, and came toward me, striding through the repulsive “winter blood” perfume-cloud like Moses through the Red Sea. “Nay, Your Majesty—all your prayers are answered.” His voice was soft.


“Yes.” He handed them to me reverently. “They just arrived at Dover on a midnight ship. The messenger rode straight here.”

I unrolled them quickly and spread them out. It was true. Pope Clement had approved Thomas Cranmer as Archbishop of Canterbury and accepted his ordination.

“Crum!” The nickname was born in that moment of exhilaration and complicity.

“Congratulations, Your Majesty.” Again the eerie grin. “This means you have won.”

I stared down at the parchment, at the Latin, at the heavy signature. I had won. It had taken six years since the first “enquiry” into my matrimonial case. The coveted parchment now felt so light, so attainable. Six years. Lesser men would have turned back, been intimidated, counted the costs. Lesser men would not now, in March of 1533, be holding the parchment that Henry VIII of England now held.

It would be the last time I ever required approval or permission from another person to do or not to do anything.

“Yes. I have won.”

“And how does it feel?”

“It feels right.”

While the other Papal messenger was slogging his way along muddy March roads toward the New Forest near Winchester, I entertained his more successful compatriot at Greenwich. I toasted Clement with the best wines and enquired solicitously after his health and praised his bravery during his imprisonment, and so on. Then I packed his messenger straight back to the Continent on the first available ship. Cranmer I prepared for his consecration as Archbishop.

“And quickly,” I explained. “Before Clement can change his mind. I see now why he sent the order to separate from Anne and take Katherine back. It was meant to go hand-in-hand with the patent for you to become Archbishop. I was not to get the oseaport size="3">“Nonsense! Of course it is of great concern and importance to the Emperor! I think that you were more involved in your own ‘great matter’ while in Germany. Were you not? Well, you can bid farewell to her. A married Archbishop! Let that be known, and we will be discredited.”

Still, Cranmer looked back at me unblinkingly. Really, there were times when he annoyed me.

“Keep her as a mistress. Mistresses are allowed by the True Church; wives are not.”

“Does that not strike you as hypocritical, Your Grace?” Again, the quiet question.

Now I lost all patience. “God’s blood! Are you a Reformer? Do you intend to turn on me after you are in office? To become a Protestant Becket? Because if you have such intentions, my dear Thomas, I warn you: you will not succeed. I will not tolerate betrayal. So speak now—declare yourself. Do not practise the hypocrisy of which you are so intolerant in others.”

A long pause-too long. Then: “I am your man.”

“Good.” The cloying fragrance was still in the air. I wanted to get away from it. “Come. Let us sit over here, in the morning light.” I led him to a sunny window-seat. “It is complicated,” I began.
“Do not condescend to me, Your Grace.”
He was right; that was what I had been doing. I began again. “Our goal is that you replace the Pope as the highest spiritual authority in England. Thus, a decision made by you cannot be appealed over your head to the Pope. To do that, we must sever certain connections with Rome. Parliament is doing just that.”
“How? By what authority?”
“By its own authority. By what authority, after all, did Rome first assert her jurisdiction here in England? By her own. Yes! This whole intricate structure of the Church that you see in England—the cathedrals, the abbeys, the parish priests, the wandering, preaching friars, the monasteries—all rest on such a flimsy base of authority. Rome’s say-so! Which Parliament will now examine and repudiate.”
“With what specific laws?”
Ah! His mind now quickened to the legal, canonical subtleties of the issue. Good. Let him lose himself there. I smiled. “Two.” He looked surprised. “Only two. The first: the Act Forbidding Appeals to Rome. The second: an act providing for the nomination and consecration of bishops without consulting Rome first. I have not thought of a name for this one yet-something innocuous, I hope.”
“I see. Rome will not have the power to name the clergy in England, nor to pass judgment on its subsequent actions. Rome will be impotent.”
Why must he use that word? “Just so.”
“Why should Parliament agree to pass such laws?” he asked blandly.
“Because I have lulled them into believing the laws are as innocuous as their titles. I have gone to great lengths to paint a picture of myself hand-in-glove with Clement. Would such a loyal son do anything to harm his spiritual father? Of course not. These laws are but trifling mae window-seat and rubbed his forehead. “You are making a mistake,” he said, with great sadness.
Now I must listen to yet another “warning.” I was beginning to accept it as one of the occupational hazards of kingship. I sighed and waited.
“To use Parliament thus is to grant them a power you will regret. If they have the power to confer a right, they also have the power to take it away. Should they decide to do so later, and by your own will the Pope is divested of moral, ecclesiastical, and legal authority in England, to whom will you turn for support? You are making Parliament King in England. I fear that, Your Grace. You are taking away a distant, inconsistent, but morally based ruling partner and replacing it with a nearby secular one.”
Was that all? “I can manage Parliament,” I scoffed. “It is a child in my hands.”
“Children grow up, Your Grace. And when your son is but a child, Parliament will be his elder brother. Who will rule then?”
“I do not intend to let Parliament grow out of bounds. I shall trim it back after the break with Rome is complete.”
“Trimmed hedges grow back fast, as any palace gardener will affirm. And in human beings, a taste for power is seldom lost.” He looked at me oddly, as if about to add something, then thought better of it.
“It is all I have to use at the moment. Would you have me dispense with it entirely and rule by my own decree, like Nero? By heaven, what a lovely thought!” I smiled. “But I fear the people would never tolerate that. And I work and live with what is, not with what would be, should be, or could be.”
I looked out the window at the muddy Thames sliding by, bleak and March-dismal.
“Nevertheless, your warning is well taken.” I reached over and patted his shoulder. “I do believe you have some political instincts after all, Thomas. That’s a relief!”
He smiled wanly.
“Now to more pleasant things. Your consecration. It is a lovely ceremony....”

So it was. But more lovely, to my ears, was the simple one preceding it in a private chamber in Westminster. There Thomas Cranmer, in the presence of myself and discreet witnesses, solemnly protested that he did not intend to keep any oath of obedience to the Pope if it involved going against the law of the land, the will of the King, or the law of God. The first two were my creatures, and the third was certainly open to royal interpretation.
The transition had begun.
Now it was Holy Week, which the new Archbishop prepared to celebrate in grand fashion, under my orders.

“Must we have it all, Your Grace?” Cranmer looked as distressed as he dared. He indeed leaned toward the Reformers, but dared not openly show it.

“Aye.”

“Even ... ?”

“Even creeping to the cross on Good Friday. I myself will lead the procession uldeping to the cross’?” laughed Anne. “That ancient relic! My love, you will rub your knees raw.”

“I intend to. It is necessary that I observe all the old forms, even the ‘ancient relics,’ to reassure the people that the break with Rome does not mean we are abandoning the True Faith. And after Good Friday comes Easter.”

“When your new Queen is paraded out.”

We were standing near a large window in the King’s chamber at Westminster, whence we had come to spend Holy Week. Young priests were going in and out of the Abbey below like a line of ants, carrying sheaves of willows for Palm Sunday on the morrow.

“Yes. It is our own time of rejoicing; we have certainly spent more than forty days in preparation for this day.”

She laughed, and the early April sunlight struck her face—all youth and hope she was, and I felt my heart sing within me. “We shall not wait until the sun rises on Easter. No, you shall come out with me on the first Mass of Easter—Easter Eve at midnight.”

Her eyes danced. “My new gown is cloth-of-silver. It will look best by torchlight!”

“Like a faerie queen,” I said.

The entire court was to celebrate Palm Sunday together. I had made it clear that that was my wish, and although they could not know why it was important to me, they naturally acceded. Some hundred of them assembled in the Great Hall of Westminster Palace just prior to the High Mass in the Abbey adjoining. Colours were drab; they were saving their best and newest for Easter Eve. Oh, what a blaze of colour there would be that night!

Anne was with her ladies; officially she was still but a lady of the court, serving a Queen who was no longer Queen but merely Dowager Princess of Wales; and no longer at court, either. Just so are appearances honoured which are absurd and fool no one, yet we are fond of them.

She stood, Anne the secret Queen, surrounded by her own lady-servers, who were casting flirtatious looks toward the gentlemen of my Privy Chamber. These were generally young and well-favoured men from leading families. Norris, as my personal attendant, was the oldest, near my own age. The others ranged in age as low as Francis Weston, who was twenty-two.

I thought back to the handsome young men who had crowded round my Privy Chamber when I first became King. Where were they now? William Compton, Edward Guildford, Edward Poyntz—all dead. Those remaining, like Carew and Neville, were aging boys, grown stout, with sagging jowls, yet with no more matter in their heads than twenty years ago.

Fleetingly I wondered how Weston would look in twenty years. He was so pretty he looked almost like a she-man, and such did not age well; at forty they resembled over-experienced courtesans whose best experiences were past. He had best marry quickly, and well. Even then I noticed how solicitous Anne was of him. It was one of those things one takes in without being aware of it—like whether a certain tree has lost its leaves.

Now Cranmer appeared before us, all stately in his glittering new robes of episcopal estate. He held up his hands and conferred a blessing upon us.

A priest walked up and down, shaking holy water upon us from a silver vessel. Behind him came two servers, their purple penitential robes gleaming, handing out willow branches to each “pilgrim.” Cranmer blessed them. “As men long ago welcomed Our Lord into Jerusalem by honouring Him with palms, let us do the same in our lives. Keep and use these humble branches to the glory of God, and to aid you upon your spiritual journey.”

Then he turned, slowly and gravely, and led us in measured steps into the Abbey, where he celebrated the Triumphal Procession into Jerusalem with a Mass so grand and so complete that no Papalist, no matter how ardent, could accuse us of leaning toward Lutheranism or abandoning the True Faith.
Spy Wednesday. The day, traditionally, when Judas spied on Jesus, asking him questions, prying to find out where he would be the next day—so he could inform Caiaphas and the others and earn his thirty pieces of silver. All that day, most likely, Judas was asking softly worded questions: “My Lord and my Master—with whom shall you share the Passover meal?” Then must he wait awhile before asking offhandedly, “And on what street is the house where we must gather before sundown?”

Spies. I hated spies. I could not imagine what a man must feel who spies. Nor a man who employs spies. It seemed to me that once a man began relying on spies, he put himself in their power. At first the information they feed him is true, but it is a bait to catch him, and then nothing is as it seems. I preferred to base my actions on what was obvious and could be seen with my own eyes.

Night was falling, and it was time to go to the Spy Wednesday Mass—the public chanting of Tenebrae. In the great Abbey, all candles would be extinguished one by one—to reenact Jesus’ abandonment by everyone, down to the last disciple.

The day itself had been one of gloom, and so the mood of despair and loss was already in the air. But it was intensified by the dirgelike chanting of the priests and the snuffing of all light in the great Abbey nave.

It felt like a tomb—all cold and dark and enclosed by stone. I tried hard to imagine the mind of Our Lord as He found Himself alone on the earth. There was an awesome period stretching between the fellowship of the Last Supper and the glory of the Resurrection; theologians called this time Satan’s Hour. It was a time when Christ experienced all human desolation, felt Himself to be abandoned by God.

I shivered in my cloak. How quickly they ran to abandon Him! How soon the Passover wine and candles and warmth faded away. Our attempts to keep Satan at bay are so weak and pitiful. He always runs us to ground and we must stand and face him-alone.

I looked around me, but saw nothing. I could hear coughs and body movements, but all the men about me were hidden from my sight, and separate one from the other.

This is how Satan rules—by separating us.

Holy Thursday. Following the Last Supper, Christ washed the feet of the disciples, saying, “If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me.” Now, as Kings of England had done time out of mind before me, I must wash the feet of beggars—as many beggars as I am ylonging around them in wonder. They are barefoot, not because they have removed their shoes, but because they have no shoes to remove....

I kneel before the first man, representing the first year of my life. He is old, scrawny like a diseased fowl, and his feet are callused and hard as claws. I pour the warm, rose-scented water over them, dry them gently with a new linen towel.

The next man has festering sores all over his feet. The greenish pus runs into the water, clouding it in its silver basin. I beckon to Norris to bring a clean basin for the next man. It takes over an hour until the last man’s feet are washed.

During all this, I do not feel a thing. Except shame that I feel nothing.

Good Friday. Fasting all day, shut up in our smallest, plainest room. No one at court is allowed to speak to anyone else, to smile, to sing, to eat, to wear anything but black. Even the church bells’ metal clappers are replaced by wooden ones, to make dull, muffled sounds. A single piece of meat is left out on the table to grow maggoty and remind us of the corruption that awaits us all.

Three o’clock—the Hour of Death, the Hour of Satan. The Temple veil is rent in half, and we are given over to the power of darkness.

And then I felt it—felt its cold hand gripping me. And what had been pretence, form, play-acting, became real. I felt the power of the Devil, felt him in my very bowels. And God was far away, and the ceremonies did nothing to recall Him. Powerless, powerless ...

All in the Abbey again, huddled together, a flock of black crows. Now Cranmer unveiled the great crucifix in three stages, chanting sorrowfully, “Behold the wood of the Cross, on which hung the Salvation of the World.”

We knelt and answered, “Come, let us adore!”

The cross was placed reverently upon a cushion on the altar steps. Cranmer crept toward it on his knees, then kissed it and prostrated himself on the flagstones before it.

Now I must follow. I was frightened, frightened at my presumption and arrogance. I had meant to use this ceremony for political show, to reassure people of my innocence of any wrongdoing in appointing Cranmer
Archbishop. Now I trembled at the implications of approaching the altar of God for such reasons. Would He strike me down, as He had done other rulers who had mocked Him in His very house?

I began the crawl up the cold stones to the altar steps. My hands were shaking.

“Mercy,” I heard my voice whispering. “Mercy, 0 God! Forgive me.” Closer and closer I came. My heart was pounding so rapidly I felt myself go dizzy. He would wait until I presumed to touch the sacred cross itself before He struck me.

Now! I reached out and grasped the wood, clinging to it like a rock. I felt strength, power surge through it to me, fill me with peace, dazzling peace.

I breathed out. Peace. I had always thought peace was the absence of fear, the absence of pain or sorrow. Now I knew peace was a thing in itself, a presence that had its own shape, that displaced all other feelings.

I laid my forehead on the holy wood, pressing it hard as if that would...“He is risen!”

The silver trumpets blared, the candles blazed into light all over the Abbey.

“Bestow the kiss of peace!” commanded Cranmer.

Everyone stirred as faces were turned toward neighbours and the cheek-kiss was given.

Then the traditional Mass of the Resurrection began. Nothing was omitted—from the procession of newly baptized Christians in their white robes to the public renunciation of the Devil and all his works and all his ways. Let anyone dare to challenge my Church, I thought smugly, to say everything was not intact!

Now the solemn part began, the sacred mysteries of the Canon: the Offering, the Consecration, and the Communion, followed by the commemoration of the living ... “that it may please Thee to keep and strengthen Thy servant Anne, our most gracious Queen; that it may please Thee to be her defender and keeper, giving her the victory over all her enemies, we beseech Thee—”

There was a scraping and movement in the back, which grew louder and made Cranmer halt in his chanting.

*People were leaving.*

I turned and stared. It could not be. But it was. And not just a few recalcitrants, but row upon row. They turned, looked mournfully up toward the altar where Cranmer stood, then filed out through the great Abbey doors.

They refused to pray for Anne as Queen, or even to remain in a building where others did so!

I stood, stunned, unable to believe what I had just seen—the spontaneous public rejection of Anne. Such a thing I had never even considered. I had seen the Pope and the Emperor and some conservative Northern lords, like the Earl of Derby, Lord Darcy, Lord Hussey, the great Marcher lords, Katherine’s partisans, as Anne’s enemies. But the common people! She was one of them. How could they reject her?

Katherine must have paid these people! Her sneaking little monkey of an ambassador, Chapuys, was behind this insulting display. Well, I would have him brought before me and punished.

In the meantime, there was this interminable Mass to endure—this Mass, so long awaited, now so ruinous. Beside me, Anne was still. I could feel her anger; it had a shape of its own.

Alone in our royal apartments that night, she screamed with fury. It was past two in the morning, and by this time I had thought to be drifting off into a sleep of paradise—in Anne’s arms, feeling her kisses and murmurs of endearments and pretty thanks for all the dangers I had braved to make her Queen, to have brought her to this moment.

But this moment had turned, like so much else in our lives, into an experience of pain and sorrow, of humiliation and frustration.

“I hate them!” she shrieked for the tenth time. “I shall be revenged on them!” Then, to me: “Why did you not stop them? Why did you stand there like a ploughboy?”

“I was as stunned as one,” I muttered.

“You should have rounded them up and had them questioned!”

Rem:*size="3">Was it then that the unbidden thought exploded inside my head, past the barriers of desire and obsession? *This is the behaviour of a commoner, not a Queen. Common she was born, common she remains. She is not the stuff of royalty.* Immediately my love for her intercepted the thought, wrestled it to the ground, and deprived it of its liberty.

“They are long since asleep in their beds. We could not find out who they were, even if we wanted. Forget it.” I myself intended to question Chapuys, but privately. “There is always a stir at a change. Even spring brings sadness of a sort.”

I patted the bed, for which I still had hopes. “Come to bed, sweetheart. Let me make love to my Queen.”

But I was as useless with her as I had been that other time, and I slept not at all the rest of that evil night.

Were we cursed? Side by side we lay, each pretending to sleep, while those words ran like rats through our brains.
It had happened all over the land. In church after church, when the prayer naming Anne as Queen had been read, people either fell silent or left the Mass. They spoke as loudly as the madman who had run about the streets the previous summer, yelling, “We’ll no Nan Bullen!”; as forcibly as the crowd who had pursued Anne and tried to stone her; as angrily as the Ahabpreaching friar.

Now, for the first time, I had doubts about Anne’s Coronation. Anne had coveted it, and I had promised it. But what if the people rejected her as wholeheartedly on that day? How much worse that would be than no Coronation at all.

What could I do to prevent it? I could not physically silence every Londoner; there were more than a hundred thousand of them. Nor could I silence them with money. The Royal Treasury was almost empty, and the Coronation would require every spare pound. Behind the golden garments and sumptuous dinners of state, the Crown was in urgent need of money. Toward the latter end, I conferred with Master Cromwell.

He reminded me of the deplorable moral state of the monasteries, where corruption existed side by side with immense wealth. “The sight of it must surely strike sorrow into the bosom of Our Lord,” he said piously. He asked permission to send a group of commissioners to visit and report on each religious house, and promised to have a summary of their findings in my hands within a year. “Then you may judge for yourself,” he said, “whether they should be allowed to remain open.”

Of course, closing them would mean acquiring their assets for the Crown, since it was now forbidden by Act of Parliament to send ecclesiastical income to Rome.

As for Cranmer, he moved swiftly to fulfil his duties. By mid-May he called and presided over a small ecclesiastical court, discreetly held at Dunstable, some distance from London, but near enough to Katherine that she could have appeared, as she was requested to do. Naturally she did not recognize Cranmer’s authority and so ignored the little hearing that found our prior marriage to be no marriage at all, and also (conveniently) pronounced my present marriage to Anne valid.

Now we could proceed with the Coronation, which would fall on Whitsunday, a holy day in itself. I prayed that that would help sanctify it in the mind of the people. I tried not to betray my own anxiety to Anne, who had awaited this...
“She has always hated me!”

That was true. Mary had begged me not to persist in this “folly” with Anne. She might as well have requested the rain to halt in its falling halfway to earth. “That is not why she is ill,” I stated flatly.

“I insist that she come and pay homage to me as soon as she recovers.”

Her pettiness marred the night, and its glory fled for me. But we walked on in silence for another few moments. Then Anne suddenly wished to go to the little Tower chapel to pray.

“No!” I stopped her. “Not in St. John’s Chapel. It is—is it where the Knights are preparing to keep vigil all night.”

It was also where my mother had lain on her funeral bier, surrounded by thousands of tapers, thirty years ago. I would not have Anne pray there.

“But I must pray!” she insisted. Her face looked strained and eager and more vulnerable than I had ever seen it. It also looked different.


“Is the Sacrament reserved there?”

“Always.”

I guided her to the little stone structure, standing lonely and dark on the far edge of the night’s warm noises and light. She hesitated.

“I will come with you and light a torch,” I said.

I pushed the warped wooden door open into the echoing interior. A single flame flickered on the altar, signifying the sacred Presence of the consecrated Host.

I lighted a large floor-candle near the door, and reached out to touch Anne’s shoulder. “Pray in peace,” I said.

“Thank you,” she said. “Thank you for not smiling at me.” I knew what she meant; to express a genuine urge to piety is to risk ridicule.

“Pray for me,” I asked.

June first. In the middle of the night, enchanted May had given way to high summer and the political reality of Anne’s procession through the streets of London. Would the city welcome her? Yesterday’s show on the water had been pretty, but the string-music and cannonfire and fireworks had masked any jeering, and the malcontents had not bothered to venture out on boats.

The streets were different: freshly widened, gravelled, and lined with scaffolding, with a great “display” at every corner—an open invitation to troublemakers. True, the Lord Mayor had been warned, and he had certainly put on a brave show yesterday, but even he could not control the rabble; he knew that, and so did I, in spite of my threats about “traitors.” The idea that two hundred royal constables could keep any sort of discipline over a hundred thousand Londoners was absurd. Today Anne must ride forth, trusting in their goodwill—and God’s.

I glanced up at the sun, already a bright hot ball in a clean sky. That, at least, was auspicious. Ascending to the highest ramparts of the square White Tower, I could see westward all across London, whence Anne must cross to Westminster Abbey. Already the streets were choked with people, some of whom must have been there all night.

I myself intended to watch the procession from a window in Baynard’s Castle, and it was time I set out, before the crowd thickened.

Cromwell, having no part in the procession, awaited me in the appointed room at Baynard’s Castle, actually not a castle at all but a decrepit old royal dwelling that happened to be situated along Anne’s route. He had arranged for comfortable viewing-chairs, deep cushions, and music to amuse us as we waited.

“We are quite without a part in today’s show,” I commiserated with Cromwell. “Which I find consummately amusing, since we are the ones who arranged it all.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “The Lady Anne—that is, the Queen—also played a part.”

“No as big as and titles, while the true power stays out of sight.”

“It was ever thus,” he shrugged, presenting me with a covered silver bowl. I took it; it was icy cold. Curious, I removed the top.

“Sherbet, Your Majesty. They have it in Persia to cool themselves on hot days like today.” Cromwell nodded. “I can have it made in other flavours, but mint is my personal favourite.”

I tasted it; it was a splendid fillip on the tongue. “Marvellous! Crum, you are marvellous!” How did the man find such ingenious ways of making everything pleasant—and feasible? Not only the coronation of an unthought-of Queen, but the sherbet to please it.

By noon I could hear the trumpets sounding from the Tower, and I knew Anne had set out. It took an entire hour for the front part of the procession to pass by. It was led by twelve Frenchmen, all dressed in blue velvet, both they and their horses, signifying Francis’s goodwill; after them came squires, knights, and judges in ceremonial robes; the
new-made Knights of the Bath in purple gowns; then the peerage: dukes, earls, marquises, barons, abbots, and bishops in crimson velvet. In their steps followed the officers of rank in England-archbishops, ambassadors, the lord mayors of London and other cities, the Garter Knight of Arms....

Finally, Anne. She was borne through the streets like a precious jewel, sitting in an open litter of white cloth-of-gold, borne by two white-caparisoned horses, a canopy of gold shielding her from the rude stare of the sun.

But not from the rude stares and sullen silence of the crowd-nothing could shield her from that, except she bury herself in walls of stone two feet thick.

Her head was held high, the chin lifted insolently, like a swan’s. Around her thin curved neck, like a great collar, was a circlet of unnaturally huge pearls. All in white, dazzling—with that long black hair hanging loose down her back. Pregnant, she was dressed as a virgin, all in white with unbound hair. Scorned, she held her head as proud as Alexander the Great.

My will seemed to me a living thing, as I pitied her and willed the onlookers to welcome her, give her some sign of affection. If desire could have moved them, every person would have cheered.

Anne’s fool, scampering along behind her, attempted to move them to shame and goodwill. “I fear you all have scurvy, and dare not uncover your heads!” he shouted, snatching off his own cap by way of example—an example they did not follow.

As Anne passed on, followed by all her royal household-her Chamberlain, Master of the Horse, ladies in velvet, chariots of peeresses, the gentle-women, and finally the King’s Guard—the people spontaneously began to cheer. The insult could not have been greater.

Beside me, I saw Cromwell’s expressionless eyes upon me. “Pity,” he said, and I saw that to him it was but another political fact, to be used as suited our purposes best. “More sherbet?”

Anne was shaking with anger when I came to her at Westminster Palace that evening. “The crowds were silent! The common people all but spat on me, and the German merchants of the Hanseatic League—oh, they think the Emperor will protect them, just as Katherine I want wit and music and poetry about me. You give me that. Made expressly for our child? You can cover it with pearls. It will become a treasure, to be admired for generations. Instead you covet something old that belongs to another woman.”

Like myself? As Katherine’s husband, I had had value. As her own, was I diminished?

“I want the gown,” she insisted. “And I will have it.”

A few days later a furious letter came from Katherine, refusing to give up the gown with all the moral righteousness at her command.

Anne was irate over her rival’s stubbornness and hauteur. “Make her surrender the gown!” she shrieked at me, snapping the letter up and down and beating the air with it.

“I cannot,” I replied. “The gown is not Crown property, as were the royal jewels. Katherine is within her rights to keep it.” The fact that Katherine treasured it pleased me.

“Her rights? What rights does she have?”

I was shocked. “The same rights as any English subject. Amongst them, the right to own personal property.”

“She deserves no rights! She refuses to acknowledge me as Queen! That makes her a traitor!”

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“She deserves no rights! She refuses to acknowledge me as Queen! That makes her a traitor!”

“Then there is no law saying all citizens must formally acknowledge you as Queen. At this time we rely on the old precedent that ‘silence gives consent.’ ”

“You will have to change that law soon enough,” she taunted. “There are many different kinds of silences, and soon—very soon!—it will be important to differentiate between them. You will be forced to do so, for your son’s sake. Then the executions will begin!” Her eyes narrowed. “Executions. All traitors will be executed, Harry-Katherine and Mary, and that stupid Thomas More. You will have no choice!” Her voice rose to a crescendo.

“Anne!” I grabbed her shoulders and shook her, hard. It was like breaking a demoniac spell. She changed before my eyes, melting from a vituperative fiend to a confused, honest creature.

“You excite yourself,” I said lightly. “It is not good for the child. Come, I shall show you the great bed of which I spoke. It has, as I remember, the most delicate carvings....” I spoke soothingly, thus calming her.

Alone in my bed that night (as the physicians had forbidden Anne and me to come together again as husband and wife until after the child’s birth), I was thankful that I had been able to quell her rising hysteria so quickly. Time
enough later to reflect on her accusations about Katherine and Mary and her predictions about the measures that might be needed to combat their continuing popularity.

Popular they were. Just the previous week the villagers at Buckden had surrounded the little palace and cried out to Katherine, “God save the Queen! We are ready to die for you. How can we serve you? Confusion to your enemies!” Whenever Mary was glimpsed, people shouted similar things to her. It was quite clear where the populace stood.

The next week I had an edict printed and proclaimed as quickly as Crum had presented her with the recipe, with which she was planning to surprise her guests. It was cherry-flavoured, and she had spent hours perfecting the taste. I myself had helped with it; now I must give an offhanded excuse and hurry away. Anne was disturbed, and was not fooled; she sensed that something important had happened.

It took four hours to reach Crowley, a rudely furnished hunting lodge used by my grandfather Edward as a favourite place to relax after a day’s excursion with his brothers, Clarence and Richard. I had always liked it, in spite of its unsettling associations from the wars. It was comfortable there; it was the sort of place where a man could take off his boots and snore by the fire. And it was here, too, that Anne and I had passed those heated days during the progress of 1531, when she almost let me into her chamber time and again, but always barred me at the last moment. Was that truly only two years ago?

Now I came to meet a different challenge, in the person of Clement’s representative. I strode into the lodge, happy to have arrived first, as that gave me a subtle advantage. I looked round. How different it looked by day, when I had no fire in my blood, no desires I sought to have satisfied. Those who compare victories in war with victories in love are fools, and probably have experienced neither.

I had time enough to become bored before a glint of sun on a helmet far down the road to the east signalled the approach of Clement’s proxy.

A foreign power on English soil, trudging along to exert its jurisdiction—this was the last time such an anachronism would be seen, I thought. Never again. I had banished such pretensions from Continental minds and made them unacceptable for any patriotic Englishman.

Even in my own boyhood, things foreign were seen as “better” than things English. Arthur must have a foreign bride; the Tudor dynasty would not be confirmed as “royal” until a European royal family condescended to marry into it. And so Katherine had come, and yokels had cheered the Spaniards and stood in awe of them as they passed along muddy paths. And because of that curious journey more than thirty years ago, another band of foreigners was snaking along another muddy path in another attempt to meddle in English affairs.

I grinned. I could hear the rapid Italian in the distance. This was 1533, not 1501. Their time had passed. I was an English king and my wife was pure English as well, and we ruled a nation proud to be counted “mere English.”

The tittering Popish popinjays drew up to the lodge’s entrance and sat, brown and slight and sly, waiting to be received.

As they were shown in to stand before me, I appraised them. What had begun with antagonism on my part ended in bafflement. Was it these men of whom I had, for so long, stood in awe? What a fool I had been!

Their leader, travel-soiled and tired beyond the point of nervousness, merely handed me the Papal scroll, as unceremoniously as a farmer passing on a sausage. Doubtless he had been instructed otherwise, but the lulling informality of the lodge and the lack of court witnesses made it too easy to skip the ceremonial.

I took it just as carelessly, and made a show of unrolling it and reading it without emotion.

It should not have disturbed me. I knew—or, rather, decreed that I knew—that Clement (born Giulio de’ Medici) was not the Vicar of Christ, but just a misguided bishop. He had no power to pronounce spiritual judgment on me.

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Wherefore in the name of God the All-powerful, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, of the Blessed Peter, Prince of the Apostles, and of all the Saints, in virtue of the power which has been given us of binding and loosing in Heaven and on earth, we deprive Henricus Rex himself and all his accomplices and all his abettors of the Communion of the Body and Blood of Our Lord, we separate him from the society of all Christians, we exclude him from the bosom of our Holy Mother the Church in Heaven and on earth, we declare him excommunicated and we judge him condemned to eternal fire with Satan and his angels and all the reprobate, so long as he will not burst the fetters of the demon, do penance and satisfy the Church; we deliver him to Satan to mortify his body, that his soul may be saved on the day of judgment.

He who dares to despise our decision, let him be damned at the coming of the Lord, may he have his place with Judas Iscariot, he and his companions. Amen.
The words were baleful, ugly, designed to strike terror into the victim. But I knew them to be powerless. I knew. I did not feel cut off from God. Quite the contrary. Instead, I felt closer than ever to the Divine Presence, the Divine approbation.

Clement was a fool. A political fool. That was all.

The ride back from Crowley seemed drearier than the ride out. Carrying the Papal scroll felt a bit like clasping a dead thing to myself. It was harmless—why, then, did it feel so eerily evil?

I had forgotten about Anne’s “entertainment,” and so was puzzled for a moment when I heard all the voices and merriment coming from her apartments. I had no desire to go in and dissemble before guests; what I really most wanted was to go alone to my Privy Chamber. I was exhausted, and not from the ride to and from Crowley. But in only three days Anne would be sealed away, and I would not see her until I held our son in my arms. I owed it to her to join her party. Wearily I walked in.

People had reached that stage at the end of a gathering where they were relaxed and, having fulfilled protocol, could do as they liked. And what they liked, evidently, was to cluster around Anne.

She reclined back in a padded chair, a courtier on each side of her, one in back, one at her feet, and Mark Smeaton a respectful ten feet away, paying homage on his lute. All I could think of was Mount Olympus, surrounded by cherubs and sighing mortals.

She smiled languidly as she saw me come in, but did not move or wave any of her admirers away. Perhaps she felt naked without them; in any case, they seemed a natural part of her.


Tired? Yes, to receive one’s excommunication, to read about one’s present and future damnation in explicit terms, was draining. I grunted and took a seat nearby. But I had no heart for the merriment, and soon excused myself.

When Anne eventually sent them away and came to see me, I was deeply asleep, in a blank, starless world.
Only two days before the change. As always when great events were scheduled, I attempted to honour them in advance.

As always, I failed. The truth was that both Anne and I were on edge with the waiting, and had little to say to one another. So it came as a relief when, on August fifteenth, the prescribed ceremony began, and Anne was conducted to the Chapel Royal for Mass, then served her traditional cup, then, her Chamberlain having prayed fervently for God to send her a good hour, her brother George and her uncle the Duke of Norfolk escorted her to her Privy Chamber door. In she went, followed by her women, and the doors slowly closed behind her, sealing her in.

“We are only lacking a great stone to roll across the door,” observed Norfolk.

“So that the saviour—the heir, that is—can roll it away?” asked Nicholas Carew.

In spite of myself, I was shocked at their blasphemy. How dared they speak this flippantly of Christ in front of me, the Defender of the Faith? Remembering the damning Papal parchment, I felt a spot of darkness spreading out over myself, my court, my kingdom... No, that was nonsense. The secret parchment had nothing to do with it.

“You will answer to a heresy charge if you voice such things!” I snapped.

Norfolk looked startled. “I meant no harm, Your Grace. ’Twas but a jest—”

“A jest in my son’s name! A poor jest indeed!”

The two of them shot each other a look that said, “The King is vexed. Stir him not.” They bowed and took leave.

It was a look I was to see more and more often: a look that managed to be both condescending and fearful at the same time.

The end of August was a glorious burst of fulfilment. The harvests were coming in, heavier than any in recent memory. The fruits were so swollen on every tree that their sun-warmed, dusty skins seemed near to oozing. To sink my teeth into a fresh-plucked pear or plum always sent juice spurting all over my mouth. The sun lay warm and golden on my head, and I took it all as an omen, as the hand of God upon me.

September seventh. The wedding day of Charles Brandon and Katherine Willoughby, if all proceeded as planned. That thought cast a pall over the morning as I proceeded to arise, to say my prayers, to begin the day. I prayed for their happiness, but found that it was words only, words without attachment to my heart. Instead of seeing Katherine in her bridal wreath, I saw Mary in her marble tomb. She had been dead just three months to the day.

Hoping to shake off this sadness, which was spreading like a stain across the day, I called for a horse and took a solitary ride toward Eltham Palace. It lay some three miles from Greenwich, farther back from the river, and up on a windy hill, through ancient forests.

How many times had I ridden here as a Prince! Every hundred yards took me back some five or six years, until I was barely ten years old, and still a second son, by the time I stood on Eltham hilltop. How many times had I stood just here, dreaming of the future, watching the Thames shining far away, like a bright ribbon? That boy seemed very close to me now—that lonely, odd little boy—and I longed to reach out and reassure him, say, “It all came right, my lad!”

“Your Grace. God had utterly deserted me, then. I had so displeased Him that He would not even speak to me. He had abandoned me to the Devil.”

Feeling so drained I could hardly stand, I made my way out of the chapel.

There were people waiting outside. The whole court, indeed, had gathered to see me and study me. I must not reveal my altercation with God just now, must not let anyone know that the Supreme Head of the Church in England had had a falling-out with his Commander.

I held up my hands. “God be praised!” I shouted. (“God be thrashed,” I meant.) “He has sent us this day as fair a Princess as ever came to England!”

They cheered halfheartedly, and their bewilderment showed on their faces. Still, they were relieved to follow my lead, and I was pleased to have kept my head and played a part. More and more, I was coming to realize the immense advantage in keeping one’s true thoughts to oneself. There are no windows into one’s mind; this simple truth had failed to serve me before now.

“Aye!” I grinned. “The Princess Elizabeth will be christened ten days from now—and we trust you will attend the ceremony.”

Lacking any further reason to stay, and thwarted in their desire to see me weep or rage, they dispersed.

All except Cromwell, who followed me to my chambers, at a discreet distance. I motioned him in, where he slid
in like an obedient snake. And stood watching.

"'Tis bad," I began. "Very bad." Crushing, in fact. My heart ached within me, but to Cromwell I would put a mere political colouring on it.

"It looks bad," he agreed. He often began his treading by repeating back what you had just said. That was safe ground.

"I look like a fool!" I burst out, suddenly seeing myself through the common man's eyes—through Francis's and Charles's eyes, as well. "I shall have to—to have 'ss' added to all the proclamations: 'in the deliverance of a fair Prince-ss.'" I barked irrelevantly, thinking of the fair, blemishless parchments selected for those rulers. O, my vanity! How God must have laughed at me, looking down from heaven.

"Yes. You look ... foolish. At this moment, perhaps. But this time next year you will have a son, and what is a year more, after all the years you have already waited?"

"Already wasted, you mean!" I knew what he meant, all right. Anyway, all this was mere noise, against the great question: Why had God allowed this to happen? Why, why?

"Not wasted. Nothing that goes in preparation is ever wasted. You needed the time to prepare England for your Church. Things have proceeded there at great speed. Ten years ago you had scarcely returned from the Field of Cloth of Gold. Think back on what the world was then. Today it is entirely different. Redrawn by your hand, and by your will."

"And God's."

"And God's." He gave due concession to the Deity, then scrambled along to his true target. "However, these gains must be consolidated in law."

"They are," I grunted. "Parliament has seen to that."

"I mean explicit, and comfortable house," I told Anne, feeling as if I were addressing a statue. "It is here in Hertfordshire, only a day's ride away."

She smiled at me, as if doing me a great favour.

"We want her to thrive, do we not? The court is not healthy for her. She might take sick and die. By Christmas, when everyone gathers and exhales foul contagions, she must be safely away."

Anne finally spoke. "Christmas. That is only a few weeks away. I must bestir myself. I must!"

"It is but a holiday. Whatever time you need to be well, please take."

"Christmas is more important. I must be up, and gowned, by Christmas!"

"That you shall, my love. I pray for it daily."

"Elizabeth's household?" she suddenly said. "It will have a full staff of attendants?" She looked more interested than I had seen her in weeks.

"Aye. I am just in the process of appointing them. Perhaps you would like to choose them yourself?" That would be a good sign.

"There is only one I would appoint. The Lady Mary to serve her! To carry her robes and clean up her messes!"

I was taken aback at the suddenness, and the forcefulness, of her request. Could it be granted? Should it be granted? What would such a thing do to Mary's spirit?

"So! You hesitate! On one hand you assure me that I am your true Queen and Elizabeth the only true Princess, yet you balk at this simple request—a natural request, if what you claim is true! What better way to show the people that Mary yields her claim as Princess?"

"Crum and I have devised an Oath to be administered to the people—"

"All very well," she said airily. "But this can serve as Mary's oath." She sounded eminently logical, until she added viciously, "It will break Katherine's heart."

"If Mary comes to serve Elizabeth, it must not be aimed at Katherine," I replied. "Such a thing—"

"Oh, defend her again! I know you long to take Katherine back, that in your heart you either still love her or fear her—" Anne's voice was rising in the familiar tirade, the obsession.

I cut her off. "I will consider appointing Mary. The plan has merits."

She lay back on her daybed, draped in deep soft furs against the coming cold. It was where she spent most of her time now, positioned as it was near the great fireplace, and with a view out toward the Thames. I looked at her nestled down there, the rich sables around her face no richer, darker, or thicker than her own hair, and suddenly I was inflamed with desire for her. It came over me with such dazzling swiftness that I marvelled at it even then. What powers did she possess? Trembling, I took my leave. Behind me in her chamber I heard Mark Smeaton's discreet music start up.

How long had it been since we had lain together as man and wife? How much longer would the physicians keep me away? Seeking to drive the demon of desire from me, I forced myself to consider the idea of sending for Mary to serve Elizabeth.
I had not seen Mary for one and a half years, since she had inately refused even to listen to my side of the story, but had wholeheartedly been Katherine’s partisan in the matter. To be sure, it was natural, as realizing that she was illegitimate must have been painful for her. But perhaps now she would welcome the opportunity to make her peace with me and accept her new position. After all, being an acknowledged and titled royal bastard was no disgrace. Yes, I would write her and tell her that I desired her to come and join the Princess’s household at Hatfield. And I would sweeten it with the hint of Christmas at court....

A fortnight later, as I sat having my freshly scissored beard combed with a rosemary branch, Norris handed me a thick letter from Mary. It was weighted down with seals, including that of Princess of Wales, which she no longer had the right to use. A bad beginning.

The letter was blunt. She refused to come and serve at Hatfield House, and as for the “Princess,” she knew of no Princess save herself in England; but if it pleased me, she would acknowledge Elizabeth as “sister” in the same way she did Henry Fitzroy, Bessie’s bastard, as “brother.” My mention of the Queen drew the “puzzled” response that she would welcome the help of Madam Pembroke in reuniting her with her mother, Queen Katherine.

I flung it down. Stubborn fool! What was I to do with her? I needed her. I needed her to cooperate—

No.

That was not it. The truth was that I needed her; I needed her as a father needs a daughter. I had loved her too long to crush those feelings now, try as I would. I remembered her as a child, as the pretty baby in the jewelled cap, being betrothed to the Dauphin; as the joyful child playing on the virginal for me. How she had laughed, and how we had taken turns on the keyboard ... and then, the changes in her face and form as one day I looked at her and realized, with a jolt, that she was beginning to make the transition into womanhood.

Proudly she had gone to Ludlow Castle to practise for the court life she would lead, out from under my shadow. And at her leaving, I had felt the same pang of coming loss that any parent does. Not so soon, my little one, not so soon.... But I had Anne by then, and my love-madness to blunt what it meant to be losing Mary. And like every parent, I thought, there’s Christmas, she’ll be back for that.... How was I to know that she would never come back? There was an emptiness there that no Anne, no son, and certainly no Elizabeth could ever fill.

I picked up the parchment with the harsh, stilted words of my estranged daughter. Had it hurt her as much to write them as it hurt me to read them?

Anne’s recovery took place overnight. It seemed, even then, unnaturally swift. She informed Cranmer that she was prepared to undergo the ancient ceremony of the “churching of women.”

“Yes, Thomas,” I answered his unspoken question. “We will retain that ceremony. You may proceed with it.”

He looked as if there were a stone in his shoe. “I—I have been studying the origins of this ceremony,” he finally said, “and it appears to me to be pagan. Even its common name, ‘purification of women after childbirth,’ sounds heathen. Would not a ‘thanksgiving of women after childbirth’ be more appropriate to these timations at court by now, and none reflected this change better than the Howards themselves.

The older Howards—Thomas, the Duke of Norfolk, and his mother Agnes, his wife Elizabeth, and all eleven of his siblings—were conservative, stiff, unimaginative Catholics. The men fought and the women served as chatelaines on their great northern estates. That was all they knew, and all they cared to know.

Their offspring, the network of young cousins—Henry, Earl of Surrey, his sister Mary; the Boleyns, and all eight of Edmund Howard’s children—were at best modern and liberal court-creatures, at worst dissolute. The King was left on his own to discover first-hand which were which.

HENRY VIII:

So it was that on the last day of January an odd assortment of pilgrims left Richmond Palace and set out for the shrine of Our Lady of Wrexford.

We turned east, heading into the rising sun, riding along the same route I had taken to London that first morning I had arisen as King of England so long ago. Then the breezes had been scented and I had felt stronger than any man among the thousands lining the path. It was no longer a slender path now, but a wide, well-trodden road, and I had a special pad on the side of my saddle to ease my troublesome leg. Before leaving, I had smeared the leg with ointment and bound it in luxurious thick layers of gauze, knowing they would be undetectable beneath my bulky winter travelling cloak. How much better it felt to be swathed so protectively. Now if no one jostled me—
“Magnificent, Your Grace.” Chapuys came perilously near, his sparkling eyes seeking any idiosyncrasy that might betray a person’s weakness. I reined in a little to the right, keeping him well away from my leg, laughing nonchalantly all the while. “I am impressed by your devoutness. To make a pilgrimage in January is highly unusual—and must betoken a need of some sort.”

I felt anger burst in me like sparks from a dry log. He knew! No, impossible. He merely tried me, probing to see where my weakness lay. “I go to inspect the ‘holy’ site before deciding its fate. I would be loth to condemn anything without a hearing.”

“As you did the Queen? Riding away that July morning and never seeing her in person again?”

I sighed. Our little round-robin concerning “the Queen” was to begin again. It had a number of set lines:

\[ I: \text{I assure you, I left no Queen behind at Windsor.} \\
Chapuys: \text{I assure you, you did. A grieving Queen who loves you sore.} \\
I: \text{I do not understand. Oh—you are referring, perhaps, to the Princess Dowager?} \\
Chapuys: \text{Nay, to the Queen.} \]

And so on. The exchange had once been mildly amusing. Now, like so many other things, it had become tedious and irritating to me. Perhaps we should have the lines copied out on two cards such as actors use, so the next time we met we could merely exchange them and be done with it.

I cut off his amiable baiting. “You will see her in the presence of witnesses. The scroll would not list their reasons, merely their names.

What would I do with those heaps of scrolls? For I did not delude myself that they would be returned to the palace blank.

The sky was clear, the sun small and shrunked, like a withered apple. Nothing was alive on the land; there was no movement anywhere. How easy to believe that this reflected the state of the kingdom: silent and suspended. It did; but by May all would be altered.

Chapuys moved close to me again. “My knee feels a sudden ache,” he said. “There will be a change in the weather, I fear.”

How womanish southerners were! Coming from a land of pomegranates and soft breezes, they could not endure the shift of a breeze. Or was this a trick, an excuse to gallop ahead to Beaulieu House, to speak with Mary in private? How transparent he was.

I patted my silver flask, filled with a blood-warming drink from Ireland called **uisgebeatha**. I handed it to Chapuys. “Drink this. It will stifle your knee.”

He took a draught and wheezed. “’Tis poison!”

“Not to the Irish, so I am told.”

Chapuys shook his head. “My knee—I beg you, it tells the truth. I suggest we seek shelter—”

The sky was ringing clear. “What, in broad daylight? We have another five hours of good riding ahead of us,” I assured him.

On we went, stopping for a brief rest and refreshment, then continuing, to make the most of the short winter day. The sun swung over and behind us, throwing long shadows before us.

And then the shadows faded, although the sun had not set. Exactly when this happened I know not—only that I suddenly became aware that we had been shadowless for some time, heading into a blue twilight. Then I turned and saw it: a great woolly blanket of clouds swathing the sun, and the wind running before it, stinging cold. And hanging from the cloud like a weighty grey curtain was the snow, moving faster than any horse could gallop. It would catch us in less than an hour.

My hands shook, and I felt colder inside than the wind on my face. There was nothing around us—no village, no manor house, not even a peasants’ dwelling. I had exulted in the stark open spaces we had passed through since noon, bare fields lying exposed to the sky, but now they were more threatening than any enemy fortress.

“How far to Thaningsford?” I called, signalling for my men to halt. I kept my voice cheerful.

“Two hours’ ride,” answered Brereton. “I know; my father had tenants—”

“Due north there’s a hamlet, called something ‘Grange,’ ” said Carew. “I think it may be closer.”

“Are you sure of its location?” I shouted. No time now for his bumblings. He had always been slipshod about details.

“Yes—no—” The wind whipped his cap off, and he snatched it back in midair. “I think—”

Obviously he did not know. I looked round at the others. Ct size="3">Only now did I look about. The forest was deep and dark, and the terrain rough with fallen logs and rocks. Dangerous ground for horses. Should we lead them but a little way into the gloom, then stop and make our shelter, or take a chance of riding farther in hopes of finding
better protection or even, possibly, an abandoned shelter? As soon as the choices had presented themselves, I knew
the answer: the one with the greatest risk, but the greatest possible reward. We would ride deeper in.

When I announced this, the men protested. I silenced them, and they had to obey.

With the snow still a distance away from the line of trees, I turned my back on it and urged my horse forward into
the unknown terrain. Within five minutes the overcast sky and high trees made a murkiness so oppressive it seemed
almost to be a living thing. The thick branches overhead moved over us, a writhing roof over an evil, still chamber
strewn with traps.

And all the while there was this otherworldly cold, a cold that seemed a creature in its own right. I looked about.
There was plenty of wood, but it would be so cold it would be difficult to light.Brittle old oak leaves carpeted the
ground; these would serve as tinder, but now they effectively concealed treacherous holes where a horse could easily
break his leg. There was no sign of a ridge or protection of any sort.

“Your Grace! We must stop!” shouted Will—the only one who would have dared to tell me what to do. “It is
about to catch up to us, and we will have no time to construct anything. We must stop now and hold our ground!”

“No, Will! Farther in! Farther in!” My voice, loud and sure, hung in the air between us. The others were all of
Will’s mind, and we were all reduced to animals seeking our own survival.

Then tradition and habit took command, made them disobey their own animal promptings to obey their crowned
and anointed King; and that King, secure in the belief that he obeyed his King, led them on.

WILL:

We thought he was quite mad at this point. It was clearly folly to continue into the forest. But he seemed so
absolutely certain of himself. Is that the secret of commanding unquestioning obedience?

HENRY VIII:

Now the storm caught up to us, hitting us from behind. The trees caught a great deal of it, but there was still
enough blinding, swirling snow filtering through to disorient us. There was no north, north, no east or west,
almost no up or down or sideways. We were lost in an enormous cloud of white butterflies, their millions of wings
beating frantically, soundlessly, icily. I could almost have stood still amidst their swirling, frigid whiteness, and let
them blanket me until death. The temptation was there, the lure of a beautiful, still death....

Shuddering violently, I dismounted and began to lead my horse. Keep moving, keep the blood warm, do not let
the ice-death goddess take hold. ... I could not see more than ten paces before me, and could only hope my men had
not become separated. “Stay close! Each man right behind the next!” I cried.

A ridge ahead: jagg just a glimmer—a slit, a dim opening, a crevice in the cliffside. Perhaps we could squeeze in
there, huddle together? One hand out in front of me, I stumbled toward it, feeling my way along. The rough rocks
tore at my hands, which were so numb I felt nothing and was surprised to see bloodstains on the stones. Suddenly
my arm plunged into darkness. I thrust the other one after it, all the way to my shoulders. But the space around them
was greater still. A cave.

How far back did it go? Its entrance yawned a little farther to one side, and it was wide—about ten feet. “Cave!” I
yelled. “Cave!”

“Hallooo!” came an answer, and figures emerged out of the whiteness, struggling toward me. I bent down and
began to crawl awkwardly along the cave floor, feeling for a back wall. When none appeared, I motioned for the
men to follow me.

“A chamber with bats as ladies-in-waiting,” I said. “Let us make a fire, and quickly.”

Within a few minutes the men had brought in a large pile of wood and several armloads of leaves and dead
matter. Will struck his flint and steel, showering sparks upon the cold, inert stuff. It took a good quarter-hour before
one cooperative leaf began to smoulder, and again as long before its neighbours caught fire. The cold within the
cave was even more intense than without. I had the feeling that this cave harboured cold even on Midsummer’s Eve,
stored it up from successive years like a miser with his gold.

Now the larger branches began to catch fire, sending out a mass of evil-smelling smoke. Choking, the men
crowded closer. But the warmth was so feeble I could scarce feel anything. I rubbed my hands hard, hoping to bring
them to life. They felt like two blocks of wood—wood that dripped blood.

“Courage!” I said. “It will not be much longer now.”

“Well, comrades. Now that we have suffered in the beginning, fortune promises us better things, God willing,” muttered Neville.

Those were my own words on the first miserable night at camp in France in 1513. How had he remembered them
all these years? I was touched. But looking at him, I saw only sullen discomfort on his face. Perhaps that was all he
remembered of the old French campaign—cold discomfort. It hurt me to think that my companions-in-arms did not
 treasure the experiences we had shared, especially those noble war experiences of our youth. “Ah, that was a
 glorious night,” I said.

“In the French mud?” scoffed Carew. “ ‘Twas almost as miserable as this cold.”

“The French campaign was a blessed one,” I insisted. “How I wish you others here had shared it with us.”

“I was scarcely born,” said George Boleyn. “It was my father who accompanied you.”

“And mine,” said William Brereton, unwrapping his cloak from about his eyes, which peered out of his pudgy,
lamblike face.

“My father made me the night beinnhink henceforth he should not stir without a supply of these.” He held up the
vial of pills.

Surely he wouldn’t need more! Those ten were all I had with me, and what if I were stricken with the excruciating
leg pain? With no way to dampen it, I might betray myself and my weakness. I took them back from Cromwell in
what I thought was an offhanded manner. “What is wrong with him?” I asked.

“A bad heart. He will get these ‘attacks’ from exertion from now on.”

“Exertion? Blowing on a fire is exertion?” demanded Neville.

“At his age, yes. After the strain of the journey—”

“Nonsense!” Neville barked. “Age—exertion—” Carew and he were the same age. “Preposterous!”

The neglected fire now burst into full flame, like a contrary child. I turned to it with relief, glad to be done with
this conversation. Where had Cromwell learned so much about medicine? During his “studies” in Italy? I knew so
little about him, really. I wondered if he had detected my leg weakness. And how would I manage to change my
bandage amongst all these men? Perhaps it did not need to be changed; perhaps it could stay on overnight.

Boleyn returned, white as a corpse, dragging several branches inside. He looked relieved to see that there was
warmth at last.

“It was all I could find,” he said, gesturing toward the outside. “Already the snow is so deep it is hard to see
where wood lies. And it is getting dark.”

“Warm yourself,” I said. I detected an edgy defensiveness in his words.

After allowing them enough time to lose the deepest part of their chill, I asked, “What provisions do we have? Let
each man check his saddle-pouch.”

As it turned out, there were nine flasks of wine, two of the fiery uisgebeatha, twelve loaves of bread, five large
cheeses, and several portions of dried, smoked meat. “Enough for a meagre meal for one night,” I said.

The bats rustled overhead. “We will postpone the inevitable bat stew as long as possible,” I promised. “For now,
let us share the bread and cheese.”

We fell on it like robbers. It helped but little. I have often found it so, and wonder why. When one is greatly
hungry, eating only provokes the appetite further.

Bellies teased and quickened rather than quieted, we began to stretch ourselves out before the fire. As I leaned
back on my elbow and extended my legs, I felt the revoltingly familiar trickle of liquid from my sore. So the thing
was festering. When the men settled down, I would attend to it. Later, when we would drift away in the darkness to
relieve ourselves, I could have access to my saddle-pouch with the necessary things. I held up my flask of
uisgebeatha. In the meantime, this would kill the pain and miraculously make time pass. I took a deep draught,
feeling its extraordinary warmth attack the inside of my mouth and then run its hot course to my stomach. Soon it
would spread its mysterious balm through all my veins, bringing peace, delight . . . and the hint of special care
hovering over me. I took a second draught to keep the first company.

“Here.” I passed it to Will. “You know what it is, and what it can do.”
WILL:

Indeed I did. Ever since Anne’s wild Irish cousin-kinsman, the Earl of Ormonde, had sent Henry three barrels of the stuff, he had been sampling it. I did not like what it did to him; but I must confess that night in the cave I liked very much how it felt inside me. And I could not see how it made me behave.

HENRY VIII:

“This is a magic potion, to be sure. Sent to me by the Queen’s Irish cousinage.” I passed it on to the others, and they all took it. Before Brereton, the last of the nine, had finished, the transformation within me had already begun. I felt the delicious, creeping lightness, the divine peace.

Suddenly I loved all the faces around the fire. Save Chapuys. And that was because he had a Spanish face. I hated Spanish faces—ugly yellow things. Thanks to God, Mary did not have such colouring. Lady Mary ... no longer Princess Mary ...

“Have another draught, all!” I said, taking a third myself. The men followed suit, and when Brereton handed it back this time I was floating. “Tincture of ecstasy,” I said.

No more now. I replaced the cap with exaggerated care, as my fingers were hard to manage. “The fire chases the cold from without, and this from within.”

Outside the wind screamed, but it was no longer frightening; instead it seemed purposeful and part of a greater whole. And these men gathered around the fire with me, my preordained companions. Except Chapuys ...

Chapuys’s face glowed so yellow it seemed bathed with sulphurous hell-flames.

“Will you see for yourself how foolish Spanish pride is?” I said. “And how hopeless the Papal cause is in England?” I hectored him.

“He is an intriguer,” said Cromwell bluntly. “He has a web of would-be rebels ready to betray you. The plan is simple: Mary is to be spirited away from her country-house at Beaulieu and taken to the Continent, whilst the discontented people here overthrow you. Is that not so, Chapuys?”

“You know no names, Master Cromwell.”

He laughed. “Indeed I do. In the West, you believe you have Lord Abergavenny, Sir Thomas Arundel, Sir Henry Parker, Sir George Carewe, certain members of the Pole family, and dear old Sir James Griffith ap Howell. In the North, the discontented Lord Hussey and Lord Darcy, Lord Dacre of the North, and the Earl of Derby. In the South—ah!—there’s Lord Edmund Bray, Sir Thomas Burgoyne, Sir Thomas Elyot, and the Earl of Rutland. Did I leave any out? You carry letters from them to the Lady Mary right this moment”.

Chapuys looked up in alarm, and stirred.

“Do not bother, good Ambassador. I have already read them—and had copies made before we even departed. A good plan you have. The only weakness is the disorganization and dependence of the conspirators themselves. They are united only through your ceaseless industry on Katherine’s behalf. By themselves they are unwilling and unable to carry out any plan, even the simplest.”

I listened eagerly. The uisgebeatha had loosened their tonguesyne, the Pope and Emperor,” retorted Chapuys recklessly. “In their hearts they are ashamed of the sham Queen Anne and of the King’s unlawful Acts. In Cardinal Wolsey’s day, England sat on the highest councils of Europe. Now she is a laughingstock, a bastard amongst legitimate nations.”

I pressed more uisgebeatha on him, and he unwittingly took it.

“No. England is now respected for shaking off the shackles of servitude, of minionhood,” I corrected him.

“When my father was ambassador to France and to the Pope, they laughed at us,” put in Boleyn. “They laugh no more. Their day is over, Master Chapuys. The future is not with the Pope or Spain, but with England and Protestantism.”

“Protestantism?” I snapped. “I’ll have no Protestants in my realm. They are heretics.”

“So seemed Our Lord’s disciples to the Pharisees.” It was Henry Howard, the youngling. His voice was thin with lack of years.

Everyone looked at him in surprise. “Fie, Sir Henry,” said Carew. “You, from an ancient and honoured house—you are not one of those ‘new men’ who must needs embrace the latest fad, like Lutheranism and this Zwingli-
madness in Zurich.” His voice was soft, as if he were afraid really to use it for fear of bringing on another “attack.” His face still looked drained.

Henry Howard smiled. He was known even at his age as a fashion-setter. He wore wide-brimmed Italian silk hats, with one sweeping feather; he wrote verse in the new “blank” fashion, which meant that it did not rhyme. (As if poetry should not rhyme!) “The past fascinates me not,” he said. “It is a charnel-house, shut up, encrusted, airless. I want to open wide the doors—"

As I had at his age, when Father died....

“French doors?” asked Weston. “Like the ones you have been installing in Kenninghall?” Weston cocked his head.

I liked Weston not, I admitted freely to myself. He was too pretty. His habit of wearing only blue, to emphasize his pale blue eyes, set off by black spiky eyelashes, seemed to me most effete and un-English.

“Yes, we have heard about your remodelling,” said Cromwell, his eyes steady. “There are many of us who share your interest in remaking our English homes.”

“I think we all yearn to create ourselves anew,” I said. “With ordinary men, it can express itself in installing French windows. For a King, it must be in refining and reshaping the kingdom itself. England has long been in need of a master gardener—a gardener who will weed her, root out poisonous growth, chase away unhealthsome beasts—wolves, vultures, moles, snakes—and make her bloom.”

Now they were staring at me, but I went boldly on. “When a garden is thus planted, there is much initial destruction, and seeming chaos. But out of the upheaval comes order, beauty, peace.” I looked at them deliberately. “Do you understand? I must do cruel things in order to bring forth the glory of England, a glory that has long lain choked by weeds.”

I took another deep, full draught of Irish-water. “The way uneven ground with its treacherous snow cover. We were forced to pick our way along, shaking with exhaustion atop our weakened horses. Beaulieu might as well have been in Scotland, for all the good it would do us. There was no sign of it on the horizon; there was nothing save empty space and a small road, visible only because it was bordered by a stone fence.

The men were silent, each clinging to his saddle and praying to his God. Chapuys’s silver-festooned saddle seemed the epitome of false security, betraying us no less than him, useless in this white wilderness to do anything but wink mockingly.

A blast of wind hit me full in the face. My eyes smarted and watered in protest, and the horizon before me shimmered, swam, then cleared. In the blur, though, I had seen something, or thought I had. I blinked and strained to catch it again. Yes, there was something... and was that a smudge of smoke above it?

“There. Ahead,” I grunted. My lips were cracked and bleeding in spite of the grease I had smeared on them.

Cromwell started, stifled a smile. He knows, I thought. He knows what it is, and is pleased that I have discovered it for myself.

“What is that before us?” I asked.

“St. Osweth’s,” he said, the answer ready.

A small monastery—one that Cromwell’s agents had already visited and pronounced especially corrupt. The papers condemning it to dissolution lay on my inlaid work chamber desk amongst others awaiting my royal stamp.

“How providential,” I said, wheeling my horse around. “A religious house ahead!” I called to the men. “We will go there.

“The good brothers will doubtless be astonished to welcome a royal party,” said Cromwell. “ Doubtless.” Thanking God for their location if not for their morals, I turned toward the monastery. The dull spot in the sky that betokened the sun was already halfway to its setting-slot.

The house was rough and tumble-down. Around it were not the neatly trimmed fences and ordered fields of my imagination, but the neglect of a slattern’s yard.

Cromwell knocked on the door like a wrathful archangel at the Last Judgment. It creaked open, and a face like a vulture’s peered out.

“The King is here,” announced Cromwell.

To his credit, the vulture proudly flung open the door and gestured welcome, as if he had expected us. His thick cowl and gleaming pink point of a head above his tonsure made his resemblance to that bird truly striking.

The odour of decay was so strong upon first stepping into the priory antechamber that I wondered what they fed upon.

“I will fetch the prior,” the vulture-monk said, bowing low.

Gagging, I willed myself to endure the putrid odour. It was warm in here. That was all that mattered.

The vulture returned, bringing one of the fattest men I had ever seen. He swung each leg in a half-circle, propelling himself forward in a series of curious half-turns, rather than walking as ordinary men do.
This disguised pain to God.

I know not how long I remained thus, but it seemed a different sort of time than worldly time. Stumbling to my feet, I felt a fleeting sweetness that promised all would yet be well.

Or did I but deceive myself?

That night in the comical Sultan’s den, my men commented several times that I seemed subdued, softened.

“He grows fond and familiar in his old age,” said Neville.

“’Tis we who grow old,” said Carew. His heart trouble had frightened him. “The King merely grows more regal.”

But Cromwell studied me with narrowed eyes. He was trying to detect something—he who lived by being able to read the secret thoughts of other men.

As early as possible the next morning, we left St. Osweth’s behind, as a man will leave a sickbed. It would be closed as soon as I could sign the orders. In the meantime there was no point in punishing the prior. Let him enjoy his snake-lair a little longer before he was turned out to earn an honest living. Prudently, we had deprived him of the jewels and treasury. My saddle-pouches now bulged with gemstones.

The storm had passed out over the Channel and was now harassing France. I hoped it would ruin Francis’s hunting. Of late it was reported that he spent inordinate amounts of time hunting, restlessly moving from one lodge to another, feverishly chasing game. Feverish ... yes, the rumours said he was suffering from the dread French Disease, and this caused his glittering eyes and unpredictable behaviour.

Rumours. I wondered if any had reached Francis or Charles about my infirmity?
In the morning light, St. Osweth’s, now behind us, seemed as dreamlike as the days that had just passed. They were set apart, outside anything in our regular lives. Therefore it was jarring when Cromwell rode alongside me, murmuring about the monasteries, saying that it was necessary to act now about them, that St. Osweth’s was but a mild example and mirror of what I might find in over eight hundred other such establishments throughout England. He pressed for permission to seize and close them all.

His thirst for their ruin seemed primary, his concern for their morals secondary. His emphasis distressed me.

"Not now, Crum!" I barked, and the cold, clear air seemed to encapsulate my words, to surround each of them with a box. Did the fool not understand that I was about to meet my daughter, whom I had not seen in almost two years? My daughter, whom I loved and with whom I was yet at enmity. Human emotions: these did not reckon in Crum’s scales. Except as something to be used to undo a man.

And I was so nervous, so anxious, my heart was pounding louder than my empty stomach was growling. I felt it not, so filled with joy and dread was I to be approaching Beaulieu. I would see Mary; we would talk; all things would be resolved, for love could overcome any barrier.

Beaulieu: a beautiful red brick royal residence, almost a miniature Hampton C"

I longed to lean down, embrace her, tell her I loved her. But if she could be hard, she would learn that I could be harder still. Ruby must crack against diamond.

"Indeed," I said. "I acknowledge your fealty. Know, then, that you must go straightway to Hatfield House and begin to serve in the Princess’s household."

"Be it unto me according to thy wish," she said.

"Stop echoing Scripture! You shame it, and yourself! You are no Virgin Mary, lass, so do not style yourself thus!" Had she inherited Katherine’s tendency to religious excess?

On the way back to London, my men, well fed now, were eager to know the cause for my stormy and hasty departure. I had stamped into the dining hall, bade them tuck the food straight into their bellies, and leave. I did not seat myself, but grabbed several pieces of meat pie and white manchet bread, and ate them ravenously, all the while standing and directing my party to get their cloaks.

Now the dry-eaten food seemed lodged in a series of little lumps from my mouth to my stomach. That, and my choler, choked me. I longed for Will to ride beside me, but he had departed from Beaulieu to his sister’s house. None of the others would do, not at this moment when I realized that I had lost my daughter; that my Great Matter was not resolved upon my clever juggling of Papal bulls and decretals and consecrations and Parliamentary acts; that treason lurks in hearts and goes unconverted and undetected in most cases. The line must be, would have to be, drawn across families and old loyalties. Even my own.

But to have lost my daughter—no, it was too hard. I could not bear it, I would soften it somehow. Then I was minded that I had tried to soften it, and it was Mary who would not have it so.

So be it.

I motioned for George Boleyn to come forward and ride with me. That he did, looking gratified and puzzled.

"George, I love you well," I began, for the pleasure of confusing him further, "and therefore I will make a present to you. From henceforth Beaulieu is yours."

"Yes, Mary must surrender it to Queen Anne’s brother."

He looked dumbfounded, as all are at receiving utterly undeserved gifts.

"As soon as the Lady Mary has removed herself, and her household has gone, you may take possession of it."

I waved away his stammering, inadequate thanks.
Another few miles farther on the ride, I beckoned Chapuys to take his place beside me. I was holding audience on the road, as surely as if I had a secretary to direct my appointments.

Chapuys rode forward, his entire being as eager as ever for some sparring. I would not disappoint him.

“ Ambassador,” I said, “You must be made privy to the conversation betwixt the Lady Mary and myself. I have forbidden her to continue to style herself ‘Princess,’ and her household has been disbanded. I just her a traitor.”

“Of what does this Oath consist?”

How many times was this question to be asked—this cursed, hateful question?

“That the subscriber recognizes the Princess Elizabeth as the rightful and sole heir to the throne. That is all.”

“And, by implication, that Mary is illegitimate, because your marriage to her mother was no marriage, because it was founded on a dispensation that was false, because the party granting it had not the power to do so, because he had no power at all?”

“The implications—they are not worded! One swears only to the words as stated, not implied!”

“A lawyer’s answer. Well, then, your former Chancellor More should be able to take it readily.”

“More will take it. He is a sensible man, he will not quibble over ‘implications.’ But your ... concerned parties ... will not be able to, as what is stated in the Oath is what is odious to them, not what is implied.”

“God will have to sustain them.” He smiled smugly. “And God’s agents,” he added.

“So you threaten me? Of course. I thank you for your honesty.” I dismissed him as easily as in a palace audience. He understood the rules.

I rode by myself in silence. All around me the February afternoon was piercingly bright and seemingly benign. The same winter that had sought to kill me two days ago now wooed me with all her skill. She displayed the pure blue sky that was her trademark, and all the play of light peculiar to herself: the shadows that were blue, not black; the yellow-red syrup of sun lying in little pools and cups of snow-formed landscape; the dazzling glow of a mound of snow, seemingly pulsating from within. Then London appeared on the horizon.

It was time for yet another audience. I motioned Henry Howard to come to me. He galloped up to my side, his pretty face seeming even more fresh than the snow.

“You are of an age with my son,” I said. Mary was lost to me, but not Henry Fitzroy. I must not neglect one for the heartbreak of the other. “You were born in 1517, am I correct?” I knew I was. I was master of just such minutiae.

“Yes.” He was surprised, then flattered, as we all are when someone remembers a personal fact about us.

“Seventeen. My son, Henry Fitzroy, is two years your junior. I would give him a companion to share tutors and pastimes with. Would you find that to your liking? I would treat you as princes together, at Windsor. What say you?”

“I say—I say yes,” he said. “Oh, yes!”

Two not-quite-princes, but both having princely blood. “Good. My son needs a noble friend. And you, I think, need to be with others of your age and station. Both of you have been too long confined with women and old men.”

His laugh told me I was right. “In the spring you shall come to Windsor,” I said. “Directly after the Order of the Garter ceremony, in which both you and he shall take your places in that noble company.” In one offhanded phrase I had elevated him to the highest order of knighthood in thme tds attention and affection. As does Henry Howard. They are both sorely neglected.”

“Henry the Good Samaritan,” she mocked—or did she? “That is not as others perceive you.”

“If you are to be Queen,” I reminded her, “you must cease to be concerned with how ignorant people perceive you. Only be concerned with how God, who sees all, perceives you.”

We finished our stew—it was delicious, seasoned with herbs I could not identify—in silence. Then I said, “Parliament opens two days from now. They will be enacting the bills concerning our marriage and Elizabeth’s primacy of succession.”

This is the moment, I wanted to say. The moment that makes my love for you a matter of law. And treason. My private passion had become a concern of lawmaking bodies.

“This Oath that will be required . . . it will first be administered in Parliament.”

“And then to everyone.” Her voice was calm.

“All it will require is that . . . that the person swears that Elizabeth is the heir to the throne, excepting any sons we may have.”

“So simple. How many words?”

“Twenty, thirty. But . . . there are meanings behind the words. We know what those meanings are. There will be some, perhaps many”—“how many?”—“who may find it difficult to take the Oath.”

“Because they are not hearing the words of the Oath, but the imaginary words behind it.”

“Yes.”

The dinner was done. The food, the plates, like all meals finished, were repulsive. I could not leave them soon
enough. I stood, and we sought a padded bench on the far side of the chamber. I rang for the leavings to be removed.

“The Oath is my pledge of love to you,” I assured her. “It is the greatest offering I can make you.”

She laid her gentle hand on my shoulder.

Just then the servitor came to clear away the things, so we remained frozen in our words and actions, but not in our thoughts. Those continued to race, change, rearrange themselves. By the time he left, they were of another order entirely.

“You will not flinch?” she said. “Even though perhaps those you care for, consider dear, may refuse the Oath?”

“Flinch?”

“Refuse to punish them? To let them suffer the penalty of treason?”

“I never flinch.”

Who would not sign? Some would; I refused to predict the actions of individuals . . . of those I loved....

Anne was with me, Anne for whom all this had come about. The restorative magic of food was spreading itself all throughout my body, with wine following in its wake. I was floating. . . .

Anne was beautiful, worth all I had had to move to have her. Now I wanted her.

Yes, wanted her! The miracle was here, it had happened after all. My powers were back....

*And Adam knew his wife.* I knew Anne, or felt I did. Knew her to every sinew and bone, so very like mine....

Or so I believed.
At midday, three days after my return, I went to Parliament in state.

The Thames being frozen, I could not be rowed in the royal barge to Westminster, where both houses were meeting for the opening. Instead I had to walk, with a full complement of retainers and advisors, under a canopy of royal estate, carrying the mace of England, along the Strand. I was gratified to see that windows were still opened and people still hung over the sills to glimpse their King, and that their cries were gladsome ones. What would they change to after Parliament had finished making its bills?

Inside the antechamber at Westminster Palace, I fastened on my heavy gold-and-ermine robes and had the crown placed on my head. The King in Parliament was about to take place: my presence, united with Parliament, was the highest law of the land.

Both the Lower House (Commons) and the Upper House (Lords) were gathered together in the Lesser Hall today, a chamber tiled in green and white. In the middle of the room, four ceremonial woolsacks—enormous tasseled bundles saluting England’s foundation of financial greatness, wool—served as seats for judges and record-keeping clerks, as well as for Sir Thomas Audley, the Lord Chancellor, More’s successor.

The House of Lords consisted not only of fifty-seven peers (“Lords temporal”) but of fifty high-ranking clergymen (“Lords spiritual”) as well. Commons were about three hundred strong, elected knights and burgesses from all the shires of the realm.

The Lords sat on benches arranged in a great double rectangle around the room, prelates on my right and peers on my left; the Commons had to stand outside, at the bar, behind their Speaker. I sat upon a throne overlooking them all, under a white embroidered canopy of estate, set up on a dais covered in blue and gold—gold Tudor roses and fleurs-de-lis. Flanking me on the dais were my advisors and councillors, particularly Cromwell.

This was the fifth time this Parliament had sat. It was to last for seven years, and become known as the Long Parliament. Thus far it had enacted many things, but they had been aimed primarily at abuses that had long rankled good Englishmen: the separate privileges of the clergy, the taxes and tithes to Rome. This time was different. This time I would ask them to define treason—according to my terms.

Standing before them, my crown heavy on my head, I spoke.

"Before you are bills which will define the meaning of treason. We had always thought we knew the meaning of treason. It was instantly recognizable, as we recognize toads, snakes, vermin. Who could mistake a toad for a tabby cat?"

Laughter.

“But in these perilous days, it is not so simple to distinguish. Our ancestors had only to be alert for snakes and rats. But in our sad days, alas—even Satan can disguise himself as an angel of light.

“That is a quotation from Scripture,” I continued. “That is just an example of how things have changed. For translated Scriptures abound, and any man might chance to read them—aye, read them, and misunderstand them!”

and1em”>“Parliament has taken the Oath, and all the heads of London guilds,” I said. “When the weather breaks, then we shall send the commissioners to the rest of the realm.”

“It will be June before Northumberland and the Marches are accessible,” he said. “You will have to rely on the Percys to protect the commissioners and smooth their task. The Percys ... a thorn in Your Grace’s palm. Henry can be trusted, but he’s dying, so they say.”

Anne’s Henry, her girlhood love. Dying? He was so young, Anne’s age.

“He was puny.” Crum—as always—answered my unspoken question. “The North did not agree with his delicate constitution—neither the climate nor the manners. He could thrive only in the softness of a court.”

But you made that impossible. Tactfully, he did not say it.

“The French court, more like.”

“Indeed. Where one could be—what was it ‘twas said about Caesar?—’every man’s woman and every woman’s man.’ He evidently could not satisfy his wife. She left him and returned to her father’s home. Wretched creature, Percy. A decrepit boy.”

“So by August the Oaths should have been given, and received, in every reach of the realm.” Enough of Percy, of his dyings and inadequacies.

“Yes. The names of the loyal will be in our hands, also of the dissenters.”

“Then we shall have to decide how to deal with them.”

“Death is the penalty prescribed by law.”
Yes, the law was very clear on that. But executions . . . there had been no executions in England except for heinous, active treason, like the Duke of Buckingham’s, for thirteen years. (The Duke had intended to conceal a knife on his person and assassinate me during an audience.) But automatic executions for refusing to sign a paper?

“The sentences must be carried out, else no one will trust the law or believe Parliament can enforce what it passes,” Crum insisted.

“I pray that all may take it,” he added. “For their sakes, and ours.”

Was I duty-bound to try to warn those who might consider refusing? Those who might not realize that the time for temporizing had run out, that the law would show no mercy? It would be on my conscience if I did not.

Conscience? No, that was my excuse, a high-sounding one. The truth was that love—if I had love for these people—commanded me to do it.

Mary I had already gone to. Katherine I could not, as she was near Cambridgeshire, and travelling was impossible just now betwixt there and London. I could write her, advising her of the danger she was in.

More. Thomas More, in Chelsea, keeping to himself since he had resigned as Lord Chancellor. Writing his everlasting books, his letters, his devotions. The Bishops of Durham, Bath, and Winchester had sent him my twenty pounds to buy proper robes to come to London and attend Anne’s Coronation with them. He had declined the invitation, with an impertinent “parablesisteda little way into the water. Not only had it not been enlarged to accommodate larger vessels, but it had declined sadly from what it was. The planks were gamely mended, but still warped and sagging; the entire thing swayed under my weight.

Down at the watergate More was waiting, leaning against the wicket. He was as brown and plain as a wren, weathered like the planks of his decaying pier.

“Thomas!” I said, hoping not to betray my surprise at his appearance. “I have so looked forward to this time!” I motioned to my servitors, carrying the fitted box with its precious set of one-of-a-kind lenses, and the astrolabe swathed in velvet. “Now we shall catch her out—Dame Luna.”

He reached out his hand and grasped mine. “You are heartily welcome, Your Grace.” He opened the gate and bowed low. I strode in and encircled his shoulders with my arm, hugging him close to me. He did not resist. Together we walked toward the house.

In the fragile, cold twilight it was quiet. Unlike that happy, lazy summer afternoon (the only other time I had visited him), there were no servants scurrying, no children romping on the grass. The beehives were dormant, and even the goats were nowhere to be seen.

“My children are married,” he said, seeming to read my very thoughts. “Grown up, gone away. Elizabeth married William Dauncey, and Cecily, Giles Heron. My father died recently. Even my little ward, Margaret Gigs, has married my former page, John Clement. Dame Alice and I are left quite alone. It happens much sooner than you think.”

“And Margaret?” I remembered his bright, shining daughter.

“She married her Will Roper,” he said. “Another lawyer. Our family is beset with them. We need a farmer or a goldsmith to give us diversity.”

“You had a Lord Chancellor and a Parliamentarian.” I could not help saying it.

“Three generations of lawyers,” he said, ignoring my gibe. “But the house will not be entirely empty and sedate tonight. I have asked Margaret and Will to join us. Ah!” He gestured toward a glowering, dumpy figure standing in the doorway. “Here is Alice.”

If More looked like a wren, she looked like a buzzard. Thickened and soured since our last meeting, she was a pudding gone bad.

“Your Grace.” (Such venom in the words!)

I passed into the winter parlour, and was shocked. Much of the furniture was gone, the tapestries taken down, the fireplace cold.

*We have you to thank for this,* Lady Alice seemed to be saying, in everything but words. But which “you” did she mean? Me, for my Great Matter? Or her husband, for not bending himself to it, for absenting himself from power and court? They went hand in hand: my Great Matter was his as well.

More never sought to explain or to apologize for his reduced state. He seemed to accept it as natural, as he accepted the coming of spring. “We will kill the fatted logs,” he joked, “for we have a great and honoured guest.” In that way he ordered a fire to be kindled, lest I take cold.

It was not servants who brought the logs in, however, but ssed intian Order, although he had turned aside, saying, “It is better to be a chaste husband than a licentious priest.” Like many men who have served two masters, he had never completely forgotten the first one.

The fire was dying. More ordered tapers to be brought so that he might read the Office. Although he offered me
place of honour, I declined. I desired to see him in his customary role. I desired to know him. Truly to know him.

First came the admonition. “Brothers, be both sober and vigilant,” he read. Then followed silent meditation. Then confession:

“I confess to Almighty God, to blessed Mary ever Virgin, to blessed Michael the Archangel, to blessed John the Baptist, to the holy Apostles Peter and Paul, and to all the saints, that I have sinned exceedingly in thought, word, and deed, through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault. Therefore, I beseech Mary ever Virgin, blessed Michael the Archangel, blessed John the Baptist, the holy Apostles Peter and Paul, and all the saints, to pray to the Lord our God for me.”

Then Psalm 133:

“Ecce nunc benedicite Dominum.

“Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!

“It is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron’s beard, that went down to the skirts of his garments.

“As the dew of Hermon, and as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion: for there the Lord commanded the blessing, even life forevermore”.

The fire died, as More’s words did. I felt embraced by God, by this blessed family, by the moment, by the words.

“And now to bed,” said Lady Alice, breaking the spell.

“Except for the moon-watchers.” Margaret smiled at me.

“Margaret once had a fancy for astronomy,” More said. “But when I continually had to point out the difference between the moon and the sun—”

“Nay, I never excelled at astronomy,” agreed Margaret. “It baffled me.” She looked at us all. “I must to bed. Father is right.”

Lady Alice likewise excused herself. Thomas More and I were left entirely alone. As I had wished, had dreamt of.

“Show me your secret,” he said. “I am anxious to see what you have brought.”

Carefully I opened the velvet-lined fitted wooden box. Inside was a set of lenses, and a board where they could be affixed into a series of holes.

“If these are paired and aligned in a certain way, they bring things closer, I know not how. My eyeglass maker showed me this trick. I can play with them and see objects on the far side of the room as if they were within arm’s length. I must confess I have not tried them on the stars. But perhaps tonight?”

“Yes! Yes!” He sounded genuinely interested, and extracted one and studied it intently.

“I had my eyeglass maker grind them,” I said. “I have had to resort to wearing reading glasses these days, as I made “fifty-year-glasses,” “sixty-year-glasses,” and so on.

“We have awhile yet before the eclipse begins. Let us adjust them when it is less chilly, and avoid the condensation on the lens.” He rose, gathering his drab grey wool about him.

He ushered me outside, through the rear door of the Great Hall—silent and dark now—and out onto the little meadow behind his manor house. The sharp, sweet smell of promised spring was in every breath.

The land rose slowly to a little knoll. More took a torch and led me toward it. Only as I came closer did my torch show something else to be there. As my eyes took in the structure, so my nose smelled new, oiled wood.

More indicated it. “A moon-watching platform,” he said. “The Chinese, I am told, call all balconies such, and so they should.”

He had built it for me. For my visit. In his reduced circumstances, still he had seen fit to honour me, and my wishes....

I mounted the steps of the small deck, encircled with a railing.

“I built it on my highest land,” he said.

“You built this . . . for my visit? The wood, the workmen’s fees—”

“I built it myself,” he said. “That is why it tilts so.” He laughed. “I hope our calculation table can stand steady.”

My men were busy setting it up. They could manage.

“It is steady, Your Majesty,” they said. They had made all the necessary adjustments to the legs and the angle of the top.

“You may keep pastime in the winter parlor,” More told them. “Request more wood if you like.”

Now we were alone. No ceremonies, no mitigating forces, and there was still an hour before the eclipse. It was most inconvenient of the Almighty to schedule it so late.

More walked around the new-smelling platform, rubbing his hands in the cold. There were two chairs on the deck, obviously fetched up from the house, as they were indoor chairs.

“We could look at Venus first,” he suggested.
“But there is little to see,” I replied. “It is always of a uniform appearance, and so bright. I prefer Mars.”

“The God of War,” said More. “Spoken like a true prince. Of late it has seemed brighter, at least to my naked eye. May I?” He indicated the larger lens, the one to be held at arm’s length.

“If you insert the handle into the hole at the far edge of the board, then tilt it”—I showed him how—“that can serve well for stars near the horizon. It will free one hand.”

He was delighted with the innovation.

“I wonder what the red is?” he mused. “Does Mars have red seas, do you think?”

“Yes,” I said. “Most likely. Or perhaps it burns with a red flame? Or perhaps it is covered with blood?”

He sighed. “To think there are other’s theory that all the planets circle the sun—he has not published, of course —”

“It is not for us to ‘comprehend’ with our finite minds, but to seek to obey Him in whatever world He has placed us,” I said. “It is not, of course, always so plain.... God confounds us, tests us.”

I hesitated. But the moment was here, the moment when I must speak. “Thomas, I came to see you tonight not only to view the eclipse, but also to warn you. I do not know what you hear from London of worldly matters. Gossip and rumours distort and are no friend to truth. But I am speaking the truth, as your friend, when I tell you that Parliament will require an Oath to support their Act of Succession, which they are even now in the process of making law.”

“Of what will the Oath consist?”

That question again.

“That the swearer believes the Princess Elizabeth to be the only legitimate heir to the throne. That the swearer will support her claims against all others”—I paused—“should I suddenly die.” How remote that seemed, standing out on the brave little moon-platform.

“That is all?”

“Yes. I believe so. Perhaps a few words to the effect that my marriage to Anne is a true one, the one to Katherine null and void—”

“A few words?” He dashed his hands against the railing of the platform. “Always ‘a few words’! Oh, would that they were many—then it would be so much easier. A few words. God, why are You so cruel?”

His voice was sharp in the still air, rising like a rapier, rattling itself against God.

“Yet it is all the same.” His voice quieted at once, before he turned back to me.

“I hope you will not refuse the Oath,” I said. “For it will be law that those who do not subscribe to it are guilty of treason.”

His expression—of course, I could not see it well in the starlight—seemed not to alter.

“I thought it best to warn you, so when you are called to swear, you will know,” I continued. “You will swear first, and then your household. It will only take a few moments. Commissioners will come to your household, at crown expense. You will not be disrupted.” I sounded apologetic, and that would never do. “See that you take it,” I said.

“And if, in my conscience, I cannot?”

“Then you must die a traitor’s death. For you will have acknowledged yourself a traitor, according to law.”

“Then surely the Princesses Katherine and Mary must die as well. For they, above all others, would damn themselves in so swearing.”

“You must not consider others when taking the Oath. That is no concern of yours. Consider only yourself, and your immortal soul.”

“I shall remember that, Your Grace.”

“You can hide no longer!” I said. “The Oath will hunt you out, even here. Know that that is not good enough! There are all sorts of silences. Few of them are good. They range from the hateful, through the mocking, to the indifferent. St is nthd="1em">"I have none. I know the answers. Once one knows the answers, however much one dislikes them, then there are no more questions to ask.”

“But do you know the answers?”

“Yes, Your Grace. I knew them before you came here. But I thank you for coming.”

“As long as you understand.”

“I understand,” he insisted. “I understand.”

The eclipse having ended, we made our way slowly down the slope to his house, dark now. Off to the right I saw a small building, and I asked, out of a sort of politeness, what it was.

“I call it the New Building,” he said.

“But what is it used for?”

“All the things the Old Building had not room for,” he answered.
“Private things?” I understood—or thought I did.
“Yes.” He actually stopped, and framed his words carefully. “Private things.”

I was to sleep in the upper chamber in the rear of the house. The bed had been fitted out with a feather mattress, and laid over with furs. I must confess that by the time I reached the chamber I was groggy and ready for sleep. I would have slept on a stone altar.

“I thank you, Thomas,” I murmured. As soon as the door was shut, I staggered toward the bed, and fell upon it, neglecting to remove my clothes. I flung myself full length and passed into a deep sleep. I had meant to think upon Thomas and his obvious disregard of my warnings, but I thought of nothing at all.

Sometime in the middle of the night I awoke, as wide awake as if I had slept a fortnight. The little candle across the room jumped and danced. It had burned halfway down from where I had lighted it. Hours before? Moments? I had no sense of time.

I knew only that I could not sleep. A peculiar sort of energy flowed through me, and I knew I must be up. I swung my feet over the side of the bed, fished for my shoes. They were there, cold and hard, the left transposed with the right, so sleepy had I been upon retiring.

I padded across the room to take hold of the candle, use it to find a praying place. For I knew that was what I needed to do: to pray. I had not prayed in days. My soul was starved for it. I grasped the candle, held it aloft. Of course there was a devotional niche, complete with kneeler and pictures of the saints: the one essential in a Thomas More room.

But in passing over to it I saw a deep yellow light shining from outside the window. It came from somewhere on the grounds. Was it the cooks, lighting the day’s fires? Yet it seemed too early. Then I remembered that More had let most of the servants go.

It was in the New Building. Could there be thieves? More had refused to tell me what purpose the New Building served. Had he secreted his jewels there? Perhaps he had kept more than he admitted.

No matter; thieves were there. I would not wake More; I would rather confound them myself.

I attired myself fully, then drew on my cloak. I crept down the darkened stairs and made my way to the great upper room, and yet men sought to rob him. Anyone associated with court, no matter how remotely, was always assumed to have hidden riches.

The building was close now. I pressed at the door and was relieved to find that it swung open easily. I came inside and shut it.

Now. I was obviously within range of the robbers. The thought that I could confront them, frighten them away, somehow relieved my conscience. I had brought More to lowered circumstances (or had he brought himself?), and yet I could personally prevent their being lowered further. One somehow ransomed and redeemed the other.

Inside the building, it was icy cold—colder, even, than outside. That startled me, and I had to draw my mantle closer about me as I felt my way about. I could not ascertain where the light had come from, for all seemed to be dark within. Perhaps the thieves had extinguished their light.

I pressed my way past one door, taking care not to make it squeak on its hinges. Now I could see light, faint light. It originated around a corner.

I flattened myself against the wall and peered around it. I expected robbers, filling their bags with More’s reduced belongings. They would be laughing, flinging the things in, desecrating them, already spending the money in their heads.

But there was no intruder there. Only More himself, bare to the waist, kneeling on a pallet. Over his shoulder was a whip. But no ordinary whip. I recognized it as the “discipline”: a small metal ring with five chains suspended from it, each chain ending in a hook. As I watched, he beat himself with it, slowly, rhythmically, reciting all the while, “It is for You, Lord, for You. Let my imagination and my memory be effaced. For You, Lord, for You.”

He rocked back and forth on his knees, thrashing himself and chanting.

His entire upper body was cut and bleeding. There were slashes all over his back. But they were superimposed on flesh that was already irritated and infected. Yellow pustules were scattered like the blooming of evil little flowerets all over his chest and back, and his whole skin was bright red. There was not an inch of unmarked skin on his upper trunk.

“Forgive me, Lord, that my sufferings do not approach Yours,” he intoned. “I will increase them, so as to please You.” Then he picked up the “discipline” again, and began to flog himself. He gasped with each fivefold lash, yet continued. Blood oozed from the new-created gashes down to his waist, where it dribbled to the floor.

“I cannot begin to appreciate Your sufferings, O Lord,” he murmured. “This as yet feels like pleasure.” He whipped himself until his shoulders were completely raw and laid open. “It is not enough!” he cried, flinging
himself forward, prostrate upon the ground. “I cannot go the full length. Only give me strength.”

There was no crucifix before him, yet he seemed to see it.

His hand—twitching now, but obedient to his will—reached out and grasped the “discipline” once more. He held it out at arm’s length, then flicked ore,” he murmured, as though in a trance. The whip hit him full in the face again. I feared for his eyes. “More, O Jesus.” Another lash. The blood was swelling now like a spring stream, running down his neck.

Suddenly he flung himself prostrate before his inner vision again. “Enough? But, O Lord, I would do so much more ... give You so much more!”

He lay motionless for long moments, then eventually pulled himself to his knees.

“As You wish, Lord,” he repeated, and crawled toward a dark garment lying nearby. He began pulling it on, and as he did so, he screamed in pain.

“As You will, Lord!”

He continued to draw it down. But it stopped at his waist, and was sleeveless. A hair shirt. I knew then what had caused the hideous, tormented redness of his delicate skin, and brought about the boils and infections. The ends of the horsehairs—tied, to be prickly and blunt—worked their way into the skin of the wearer within a few hours. Hair shirts were woven and constructed thus, to torment the flesh of the wearer.

Worn on top of fresh lashings and scourgings—what agony would it inflict? Too little for More and his torturing God, evidently.

Now he was fastening a linen shirt over his hair shirt. Did he wear the hair shirt always? Every day? For how long had he worn it? I would never know the answers to those questions, as More would never give them, and I could never ask them.

But I knew the answer to my own tormenting question. More would seek the full punishment of the law as yet another “discipline.” And I would, perforce, be the one chosen to administer it.

I hated him in that moment—hated him for making me his scourge. That was all I had been all along: his scourge, his temptation, his test. I was not a man to him, but an abstract trial, a representation of one of his confounded Platonic ideas. He had never seen me at all, but only the symbol he had chosen to assign to me.

I despised him. He was a blind fool, taking living beings and recasting them in the image of his abstract honour.

Farewell, More, I bade him silently. May you enjoy the “discipline” you have chosen. Remember always that it is your discipline, not mine. For I would keep you with me, veil mine own eyes, imagine that you were as I would cast you in my own imagination....

Before he could come upon me, I was out the door and into the free cold air, then back to my own chamber. When I awoke again it was mid-morning, and the sun was cheerful.


“Indeed,” I said. “As well as you.”

“Then did you pass the night calmly,” he said. “For never have I slept a fairer sleep.”

The smile was remote.

“May you sleep many another such,” I replied.
It was May Eve, and I lay at Oxford. I had come to inspect Wolsey. Therefore I gave my blessings to the nuptials and arranged that the wedding should take place at St. George’s Chapel in Windsor.

It was not to be a state affair, even though Fitzroy’s titles gave him formidable rank as a peer of England: Duke of Richmond and Somerset, Lord Warden of the Marches, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, and Lord High Admiral of England, Wales, Ireland, Normandy, Gascony, and Aquitaine. It was not to be a state affair simply because to do such a thing, at the very time that the Oath of Succession was being administered, would be to focus undue attention upon yet another claimant to the succession. The issue was heated enough already when loyalties were pulled between two females, Mary and Elizabeth. Reminding everyone of a comely royal lad of marriageable age was not politic.

He was comely. I was proud of him, proud of his Tudor looks and his sensitivity and regal bearing.

And still another reason was that Anne did not care to be reminded of my living son, since she had not given me one of her own. That Bessie had was a continual insult to her.

It puzzled me then, why Anne had not. It was not for lack of coupling, or for lack of joy in our bed. Since I had returned from my “pilgrimage,” there had been no more of that earlier trouble. Our bodies spoke even sometimes when our words could not bridge the gap between us—by that I mean the gap that separates each individual from any other. Nonetheless we were son-less. The Princess Elizabeth was a year old now, thriving at Hatfield House, attended by her sister Mary, who insisted on referring to Anne as “Madam Pembroke” even now. She was as stubborn as Katherine....

Katherine. As I selected my rings from an octagonal inlaid Spanish box, I thought of Katherine. She had refused the Oath, as I had expected. But her manner of doing so was to barricade herself in her rooms at Buckden and refuse to admit Brandon or to speak to him and his commissioners. He waited two days in her Great Hall for her to emerge so he could apprehend her and force her answer.

When he ascertained that she had a cook, provisions, and her confessor locked up with her, he knew she would not come out for six months, would perhaps even starve herself to death in there and call herself a martyr for it. Her confessor would give her last rites and send her soul right up to heaven. In disgust, he left, after dismissing the rest of her servants and carrying off her furniture. The townspeople reviled him and threatened his life even for that. An ugly mob, they surrounded the house and harassed my commissioners, waving their stupid pitchforks and hoes.

That was enough. I needed no Anne to urge me to end this childish, stubborn, and aggravating behaviour of Katherine’s. Brandon could do nothing, but I was King. I ordered her removed immediately to the gloomy fortified manor of Kimbolton, and put under house arrest. Henceforth she would have two “keepers,” Sir Edmund Bedingfield and Sir Edward Chamberlayn, loyal to me. She would live in total isolation, with no visitors and no correspondence permitted her. She was now politically dead.

But even there, she found a way to be contumacious. She refused to speak to anyone who did not address her as Queen. Since there were only fifteen who did—her confessor, her physician, her apothecary, her “master of the rooms,” two grooms of the chamber, three maids of honour, and six menial servants—she shut herself up with them and would not set her foot beyond her own doorsill out into the “contaminated” parts of the house. I wanted her as seldom before. I wanted to tear away her silver-gossamer veil, penetrate to that guarded chamber of hers, violate her strange, solitary, private eroticism. Anne, Anne...
I needed to remember those silver moments when I faced the hard, ugly fact that Thomas More had spent the winter months of 1534—35 in the Tower, along with Bishop Fisher (confined shortly thereafter). They were lodged in the more “comfortable” parts of the Tower, not in the dungeons below, where a dozen or so recalcitrant monks languished in darkness and deep chill, chained and helpless.

Only three orders of monks had defied the Royal Supremacy and refused to take the Oath: the Franciscan Observants, a group of highly devout and visible “preaching” friars; the Carthusians, an order that stressed individual discipline and prayer, and was less a monastery than a collective group of hermits (this was the order that More had almost joined, naturally); and the Bridgettine order at Syon.

The Observants I had a special fondness for. Their main chapel at Greenwich was where I had first been married, to Katherine, and where both Mary and Elizabeth had been christened. I knew them to be good and holy men. But their order stressed preaching. It was here that I had been denounced as “Ahab” by the Friar Peto.

The Observants were vocal, and their preaching and pronouncements carried great weight not only in England, but also abroad. It was my duty to silence them, and silence them I did. In August, 1534, there were seven houses of Observants, with two hundred friars. By December there were none. By refusing to submit to the Royal Supremacy, they ceased to exist as an order in England. They were scattered and their houses closed. That was that.

The Carthusians were another matter. They insisted on obstructing the earthly agents of both God and their divinely appointed King. They fought, argued, and threw up annoying barriers in every way possible—like their heroine, Katherine. How alike they were! What similar spirit infused them!

Both of them met the same fate: imprisonment and isolation.

The Bridgettines, a “double” order of both monks and nuns, had only one house, at Syon, near Richmond. Richard Reynolds, their scholarly prior, was proving as stubborn as Katherine.

The rest of the realm had taken the Oath. Even More’s household had taken it. My commissioners had returned from the North with their listings, and there were no names subscribed on the refusal list.

My rebellion had succeeded. My defiance of the Pope, of my false marriage with Katherine, had been accepted, sworn to as a law of the land. The astounding thing was not that it had been possible, but that there had been so few resisters. Doom-sayers and ill-wishers had predicted that Englishmen, the Pope, and Francis and Charles would never tolerate such an affront. Yet the Englishmen had acquiesced, the Pope had yet to order a Holy War against me, and for all that, Francis and Charles had yet to obey. A great company of “yets.” In the meantime I reigned supreme, and honoured Anne as Queen, and forced others to do likewise.

I prayed daily that More and Fisher would repent and come to swear the Oath. They were not senseless men, and surely the Holy Spirit would talk with them, convince them.

“He refused to attend my Coronation,” she said spitefully, “and made up that insulting parable about losing his virginity by so doing.” She rolled her eyes heavenward and pointed her hands together in a Gothic spire.

I laughed. “He is a man from another time,” I said. “He is fifty-seven years old; when he was born, my grandfather was King. He thinks in those terms.”

“I am pleased, then, that you have outgrown him. That world is passé.”

“Passé. Always French with you, my courtesan!” I reached out to enfold her in my arms.

“But it is passé,” she laughed, sliding away. “He pledges his troth to something that has died. Beautiful as it may be, it died. And I did not kill it!” She looked agitated.

We were in her winter sitting-parlor at Richmond. In Katherine’s day, this very chamber had been hung with Biblical tapestries and fitted with prayer-niches. Now the windows were naked, giving out onto magnificent views of the frozen Thames below.

People were sporting on its surface. There were young lads with bones strapped to their shoes, sliding about, playing all sorts of games. There were others swatting stones back and forth with sticks. The figures all looked black, their sticks and legs making them appear as insects.

“I did not kill that world!” she repeated. “Any more than these gamesters killed summer.”

“Yet you sport upon its surface, and that seems to be a desecration,” I said. “To some.”

“To More and his like!” She turned to me, her black eyes hard and gleaming. “You will not permit those slanderers to live?” she asked. “For if they live, they insult me daily by their existence.”

“Unless they change, they will not live,” I said. It was not a promise but a fact. One that I deplored and prayed would soften and give way to something else, something more ... malleable.
“Good,” she said. “I was afraid that a softened version of the Oath might yet be offered to them.”

In the privacy of my midnight chamber I had framed a version of the Oath that encompassed only Parliament’s enactment and left the Pope and his dispensation untouched. I had thought to offer it to More and Fisher. But I had never worded it to my own satisfaction. How could she know of it?

“There are no variations in the Oath,” I insisted. This seemed to satisfy her—or did it?

“I know full well you love More!” she burst out. “And I know in what way, and in what manner! In an unnatural manner!”

“Unnatural?” Her cryptic allusions baffled me.

“’Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind; it is abomination.’ Leviticus, Chapter eighteen, verse twenty-two.”

“Anne!” I cried. “This is unseemly! And where did you read the Old Testament?” I asked, irrent?

“It is true, is it not?” She ignored my question. “You have ‘lain down with him’ in the meadows of your mind; sported and frolicked with him there, excluding all others. Craved his approval and love, sought it and cried for it? And now, even now, when he defies you and throws that love back in your face, you seek to mollify and placate him! Your darling must have a special Oath, handmade and tailored and tenderly fashioned by his lover—the King!”

“He is not me,” I said.

Pity!

“His lover is pain, disguised as Christ.” And he will wed her, with my executioner officiating as priest, I thought.

“Very allegorical,” she sniffed. “But it fails to clarify just how you intend to rescue your beloved from the pit he has digged for himself, as the Bible puts it.”

“There are only the regular steps by which to ascend. The Oath, and utter loyalty.”

“No special hand extended from the King? In an allegorical sense?”

“You should know well of allegories! You stage enough of them—insipid, mincing things, but all the same. You as a goddess, surrounded by worshippers? Do you enjoy the fawning, the stylized, false verses and compliments? Fie, lady, I outgrew them by the time I was twenty!”

“By then you had been King three years. When I have been Queen three years, perhaps I shall follow suit.”

“No, you shall follow suit now! Lent is soon approaching, and you will cease these ‘entertainments’ for the duration. Do you understand me, Madam?”

“Indeed.” She managed to infuse the word with disdain.

More and more our times together were like this: acrimonious, full of rancour and mistrust, a collapsing of respect. Yet I continued to desire her and crave her presence; I knew not why. She vexed my soul, not comforted it.

During the next few months it became increasingly clear that the refusers of the Oath would have to stand trial. At the end of 1534, Parliament passed another act, the Act of Supremacy, acknowledging my title as Supreme Head on Earth of the Church of England and defining it as treason to “maliciously seek to deprive” me of any of my rightful titles. Now the men in the Tower would have to be judged on that aspect as well.

Bishop Fisher was calm throughout his imprisonment, never seeking any deliverance. The Pope made a belated gesture of support by naming him a Cardinal. But Fisher cared not. He was an old man, an extension, really, of my grandmother Beaufort, never comfortable in the world that had grown up around him since her death. From the beginning of my Great Matter (styled by some “the divorce”), he had taken a stand against me. In the formal hearing of the divorce case at Blackfriars, Warham had presented a list of signatures of all bishops supporting my cause, including Fisher’s.

Fisher had risen in gaunt dignity and said, “That is not my hand or my seal.” Warham had admitted that Fisher’s signature had been “added,” but thers against me—Warham himself, for example. But in the end, alone of all the clergy, Bishop John Fisher stood unconvinced and unswayed.

He was finally brought to trial on June 17, 1535, on a charge of high treason for depriving the King of one of his titles by denying that he was Supreme Head of the Church in England. He admitted that he did not accept me as Supreme Head, but sought to exonerate himself by denying that he had “maliciously” done so. But the verdict came in: guilty, and he should die.

The Carthusian priors of the houses of London, Beauvale (in Nottinghamshire), and Axholme (in Lincolnshire) were hauled up out of the Tower and made to stand trial. Along with them were three stubborn monks from the London house. They all refused, for the last time, to take the Oath. They all tried to say they had never intended their
own private thoughts and opinions to be “malicious.” But this failed to convince the examiners. They were sentenced to be hanged, then cut down alive and their entrails pulled out and burnt, and to be drawn and quartered, on May fourth. Reportedly they went to their deaths singing and with glad countenances, watching each of their fellows being torn limb from limb, absolutely undeterred.

Now there was no one left but More.

More must stand trial, and it must be a grand and public trial in the largest hall in the kingdom: Westminster Hall, where Coronation banquets were held. More was too monumental a public figure to command less.

First he had had several “pre-trials,” or examinations. These examinations were led by Cromwell, Cranmer, Audley (who had replaced More as Chancellor), Brandon, and Thomas Boleyn. In all of them he maintained his “silence.” I could report all the intricate reasonings he used, but I will not. The truth of the matter is that he based his case (clever lawyer that he was) upon legal hair-splitting—basically upon whether his silence was “malevolent” or not. It was the legal implications of silence that were on trial, not More himself.

His sophistry and legalisms did not impress his judges, and they found him guilty.

Once he saw that silence could do him no good (and that his judges had fathomed him true, in any case), he asked to make a statement. This request was granted.

“This indictment is grounded upon an act of Parliament directly repugnant to the laws of God and His Holy Church,” he said. He went on to explain that no one portion of Christendom could make laws governing the Church in that particular land, if they ran counter to the laws in every other land. England could not declare herself above the laws binding other Christian countries. We—Parliament and I—claimed that we could. And there the argument ended.

I have restrained myself from describing More’s trials and arguments in all their details, since the end was the end. It is torture to retrace each step and say where one action, one word, could have altered the outcome. His family came to visit him in the Tower and did their utmost to persuade him to sign the Oath, excuse himself, liberate himself.

In the Tower he spent his time writing. There were several books, some in Latin—Of the Sorrow, Weariness, Fear and Prayer of Christ before his Capture was the longest—and others in English: A Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation; The Four Last Things. The latter described the four things that a man on his deathbed must deal with: ly cys of heaven.

More examined the moment of death carefully and concluded that there was no “easy” death: “for if thou die no worse death, yet at the leastwise lying in thy bed, thy head shooting, thy back aching, thy veins beating, thine heart panting, thy throat rattling, thy flesh trembling, thy mouth gaping, thy nose sharping, thy legs cooling, thy fingers fumbling, thy breath shortening, all thy strength fainting, thy life vanishing, and thy death drawing on” was in store for you.

From his window in the Tower, More saw Richard Reynolds of Syon and the Carthusian monks being carted out of the Tower for their felons’ execution at Tyburn. Reportedly he looked at them longingly and then said to his daughter Margaret (who continued to visit him and beg him to recant), “Lo, dost thou not see, Meg, that these blessed fathers be now as cheerfully going to their deaths as bridegrooms to their marriage?”

Then he berated himself for his “sinful” life. He was ever obsessed with his own sinfulness and even of the sorrow of the world at large and its purpose. He wrote:

But if we get so weary of pain and grief that we perversely attempt to change this world, this place of labour and penance, into a joyful haven of rest, if we seek Heaven on earth, we cut ourselves off for ever from true happiness, and will drown ourselves in penance when it is too late to do any good, and in unbearable, unending tribulations as well.

More had at last embraced his dark side. When he closed the gate at Chelsea on his way to his first examination, he was said to have murmured, “I thank God, the field is won at last.” He had turned his back on that quietude of Chelsea, on his wife and family, too, and thanked God that they would no longer be there to torment him, keeping him from becoming that monk who had first, in youth, served with the Carthusians as a novice. He never wished to see them again. That was what neither I, nor others, for a great long time, could comprehend.

He had said it clearly, himself, to Margaret, when she came to visit him in the Tower. “I assure thee, on my faith, my own good daughter, if it had not been for my wife and you that be my children, I would not have failed long ere this to have closed myself in as strait a room—and straiter, too.”
Now he had passed the test, forsworn—albeit belatedly—the things of this world, and could pledge his vows in blood. Undoubtedly, to one of that mind, it was a great relief. He had not disappointed or betrayed himself to a lesser life.

The execution was fixed for July 6, 1535. He told his daughter, “It were a day very meet and convenient for me—Saint Thomas’ Even.” His assignation with eternity was neatly fitted in with the Church calendar, which seemed to soothe him.

How could I feel upon receiving this news? Like a father whose daughter has chosen to marry unwisely, yet is deliriously happy in the meanwhile? Should I rejoice with her, grieving in my heart? Or should I use my authority to forbid the match?

I knew no action I could take would prevent this marriage. It had been contracted since More’s earliest days. Yet I wanted him here with me, on earth!

Evenim in the Tower and sought to convey my anguish and love.

Aye, flattering Fortune, look thou never so fair,
Nor never so pleasantly begin to smile,
As though thou wouldst my ruin all repair,
During my life thou shalt not me beguile!
Trust I shall God to enter in a while
His haven of Heaven, sure and uniform:
Even after thy calm, look I for a storm.

So he longed always to be beyond any possible ties or recall to earthly matters.
LXIII

Fisher was executed on June twenty-second. His judges had pronounced the same sentence on him as that meted out to the Carthusian monks.

“I cannot imagine such a death,” Anne had said, upon reading the sentence.

“It is the usual felon’s death,” I replied. “Have you never known of what it consists?” Every English child had witnessed executions. Tyburn, where commoners were executed, was a popular public excursion place. People took their food and blankets and forced their children to watch, “lest you fall likewise into crime.” It was instructional. I had always thought it was a pity that hell was not equally observable.

“No. I have never watched an execution. Nor do I wish to.” She was agitated.

“Perhaps you should. As Queen, you should know to what we condemn felons.”

“It is the fire part I cannot bear!” she said. “To be burnt, to be touched by that evil, hot, licking, consuming thing—oh, they knew well what they did when they made hell a place of flames! I would never go there, never, never—”

“Then do not sin, my sweet.” I smiled. The remedy was at hand. Those who did not wish to go to hell knew precisely what they should do to avoid it. It was all laid out.

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“Spare Fisher!” she said. “Do not let the flames touch him. No one deserves that!”

“A signature on a paper would have prevented it.”

“Even so . . .”

I had intended all along to commute his sentence, to allow him a painless beheading. But Anne’s outburst puzzled me. It showed me yet another side of her.

“Have you long been troubled by this fear of fire?” I asked her.

“Always. Since I was a child, when once in my room a lighted piece of wood escaped from the fireplace. It landed on a stool nearby. It glowed and then subsided. I went to sleep watching it—and then awoke, suddenly, to a blaze. The horrible heat, the diabolical grin of the fire—‘I fooled you, now I have you....’ ” She shuddered. “And the crackling, the roasting . . .”

“Be at peace. Fisher shall not face that,” I assured her.

Indeed, Fisher was led out onto a tidy scaffold at Tower Hill, just outside the Tower walls. He had always been ascetic and gaunt, but his fourteen months in the Tower had turned him into a “death’s-head,” est shirt, as it was the garment with which he would enter Paradise.

That should have been that. But it was the beginning of a set of different challenges to my reign.

Fisher’s severed head was parboiled, as was the custom, and set up on London Bridge. The midsummer weather was hot and stagnant; foul odours rose from the Thames, which sloshed back and forth in an enervated fashion. Fisher’s head (minus its Cardinal’s hat—that would have been too macabre a touch) should have rotted and turned into a horror. But it did not. Instead, it seemed to glow and become more lifelike every day. People began to gather on the bridge to pay homage to it, to tell it their troubles....

To ask it to intercede for them.

Fisher was on the way to becoming a saint.

I ordered this ended. In the night my servants took down the head and threw it into the river.

Fisher, the incipient saint, was checked in his progress. But the weather, and the mood, continued ugly. There were pestilential vapours about, infecting the entire populace. It was best to do More now, and have the whole business finished. Then, that being done, I could go out on progress, ride out amongst the people, talk with them, soothe them. They needed me.

An unhappy languor had fallen over the court, as in one of those tales of enchantment wherein a witch has put everyone under a spell. Anne seemed particularly affected, alternately nervous and apathetic. Others moved about as though their brains had flown, or were held for ransom.

Then Anne told me her news, and that broke my spell.

“I am with child.” Magic words. Words that called to action.
“Praised be God!” I exclaimed. All would be right: out of these present troubles and hideous upheavals, the original purpose of which I had all but forgotten, a Prince would come.

I clasped her to me, feeling her slender supple body, all encased in silk. “Praised be God.”

More’s execution was to be July sixth, a fortnight after Fisher’s. I granted his daughter Margaret permission to witness the actual execution. He bequeathed her his hair shirt (yes, he had continued to wear it all through his captivity), and hearsay is that it has been preserved in the family as a relic to this day. He sent no message to his wife.

It was an oppressive summer day, not columbine-fresh as some can be, but lowering and heavy. The humours in the air hung waiting, malevolent.

Anne, in her characteristic, brave fashion, had attempted to mock it by staging a “Pope Julius” party in her apartments. She had had a number of boards painted up for the game that had been invented in the summer of 1529 featuring Pope Julius (he who had granted the original dispensation in 1503), with stops called Intrigue, Matrimony, War, and Divorce. She had set up tables with rounds to determine which players should be matched, culminating in a Master Board with a grand prize. The “tournament” was to begin ased in breezes. Rose-scented incense supplied the sweetness that was lacking in the reeking outside air. As we were at Greenwich, there was the blessing of some slight breezes, borne inland from the sea. It was undoubtedly worse in the other palaces.

The entire court was assembled for Anne’s “tournament,” from the Privy Council through the ladies-in-waiting. Crum was there, looking eager for the gambling; the Seymour brothers, Edward and Tom, back from a fruitless diplomatic mission in Paris; Norfolk, Anne’s uncle; and ... as I have said, everyone.

Anne, looking almost as yellow as her gown in the oppressive heat and her condition, flitted about explaining the rules of both the game and her tournament to everyone. At the tinkle of a bell, all began. I was seated at table with Thomas Audley, Richard Riche, the Solicitor-General, and Jane Seymour, Edward and Tom’s younger sister, whom I had not seen before.

They were all people of velvet: Audley so yielding and cautious; Riche so smooth and pleasing; Mistress Seymour, so soft and comforting. They played according to character, and as a result I won the game easily, being the only one to play boldly and abrasively.

Pope Julius. It was a clever game, but belonged to simpler times. The truth was that Pope Julius was dead, and there had been three Popes since. My enemy, Pope Clement (or had he been my friend? Certainly I could never have had a more apathetic foe) was now dead, succeeded by a much more hardheaded gentleman, Alessandro Farnese, called Paul III. Rumour had it that Paul intended to implement what Clement had only threatened: a Holy War against me. The Roman Catholic Church was on the offensive at last, having gathered its forces after being stunned by the initial successes of Martin Luther. Pope Julius was simple to understand and manipulate; he made a fitting board game.

I was vaguely disappointed when the game ended, although it ended under my own aggressive bidding. I had enjoyed my partners, enjoyed especially Mistress Seymour and the way she held her cards and pushed her token about the board. I cannot explain why observing the hand and arm motions of a graceful woman should prove so appealing, like a ceremony of sorts, a dance.

The bell was rung; we must change tables. Outside I saw the heat waves reflected in the light coming in the windows, rising from the river.

Noon. More was being led out.

Going up the scaffold, he turned to the Lieutenant of the Tower. “I pray you, Master Lieutenant, see me safe up and, for my coming down, let me shift for myself.”

“Now you come to this game with points already,” explained Anne. “You may keep them, only demerits will subtract from the total score—”

He put his head down on the block and made a joke with the executioner. In the Tower he had not shaved, but had grown a long beard. He smoothed it neatly down and asked the headsman not to strike it, as “it has done no treason.”
We played a second round. At my table were those who had already won—Cromwell, Norfolk, and Edward Seymour. This game was more difficult. My opponents did not hold back and kept strategies in their heads the entire time, not merely one or two plays, but contingency plans as well.

The air grew stifling. Sweat gathered about my neck, wilting my fair linen collar.

I asked. He laughed (a smug, hateful laugh) and waved a gloved hand. The walls crashed and turned to water, and bubbled up under the chair I was sitting in. I was carried away, spinning, my arms frantically clasping the chair arms, my legs on the rungs, carried down a dark watery chute....

I awoke. The sound of water was a deluge around me. It was beating against the windows, and I could hear trickles. Somewhere it had found an entrance, had nosed open a little crack between stones or through a piece of loose mortar.

My mind cleared. Rain. There could be no rain tonight. It was impossible. The sky had been absolutely clear at sunset. The soaked fields had been granted respite. The crops would recover, and the harvest be normal. That was what the clear sky had promised.

The downpour, which had penetrated even into my sleeping mind, continued to soak the already waterlogged earth outside.

It has not stopped raining since More died, the common people were saying. On the night of July sixth it had begun to rain, and it had continued, intermittently, for the six weeks since. The vegetable crops had already been drowned, rotted. The grains—oats, barley, wheat—by far the most important, as yet were salvageable. But if they were lost!

Damn this rain! I leapt from my bed and went over to the window. It was not a sweet, soft rain. Ugly, hard thrusts of water were striking against the glass.

Henry Norris stirred on his pallet and rolled over. He no longer slept at the foot of my bed, as it was too close to the outer, waterlogged wall and invited mildew. Instead he had moved to an inside wall.

It was raining on More’s head, which had turned black impaled on Tower Bridge (so they told me). At least it was not growing into an object of veneration and superstition like Fisher’s. I myself had not seen it, nor did I intend to.

This whole business disgusted me, sickened me. Only let this summer be over, let a year’s cycle come round, so that every vicissitude of weather (all normal, all normal) was not converted into an “omen” or a “judgment.” This time next year there would be an heir to the throne; Anne’s boy would be born. Then see how they would remember More—not at all! They were fickle, shallow creatures, the people. Anne’s son would give them instant **lethe**, instant forgetfulness, on the subject of More, Fisher, the Oaths.

One thing cancelled out the other—did it not? There could be no gains without payments. And these things were my payment for Anne.

The rain hissed at me.

*Do your worst, I dared it. Do your worst, and I shall yet prevail.*

I badly needed to make a summer progress about the realm, to reassure my people and to take readings on their minds. Yet, because of Anne’s pregnancy, I dared not risk her travelling, even in the comparative comfort of a litter, at this time; and I myself would stay with her, watching over her and taking care of her.

She was difficult during this pregnancy, hard to please. She had fancies, one of which was that as long as Katherine and Mary lived, she could not bear a living son. She needed music to soothe her, and therefore Mark Smeaton mus221; She needed entertainments to amuse her, and therefore I brought the Oxford players to court, and bade them write and perform some “fantastical history of times past,” so as to entertain the Queen.

They did so, writing a history of Dr. Faustus and performing it most grandiosely, with red-tinted smoke and demons dragging the damned Faustus down to hell. Anne was delighted with it and showed lively interest in the red smoke and sudden apparitions of the Devil, since she had attempted a similar effect in “Cardinal Wolsey Descending to Hell.” Hell always interested people from an artistic standpoint.

She exhibited none of the behaviour I had come to expect from a pregnant woman: the happiness, the contentment, the interest in the coming child. She was restless and self-absorbed, with glittering, feverish eyes. Yet that was of no moment, as long as the child was healthy. Anne was like no other woman in the world; her pregnancy was as singular and disturbing as she herself.
The cursed rain kept up all through the remainder of the summer. There were occasional fair days, as if to tease us, like a beautiful woman who has no intention of yielding her favours but continues to make promises. The first grain crop was now ruined, and the flooding of the fields made it impossible for a second to be sown. This winter there would be hardship at the least and starvation at the worst.

The people had stepped up their visits to shrines, imploring Our Lady, Thomas a Becket, and all the others to hear them. The monasteries reaped a tidy profit from all this, as Crum never failed to remind me. I had allowed him to appoint inspectors to compile records of the assets and holdings of all the clergy in England, to be summarized in a Valor Ecclesiasticus. They had fanned out eagerly over the realm to get their information.

Crum liked the fact that offerings were pouring into the shrines’ coffers all across the land. I found it ominous. More’s head had disappeared from London Bridge. Who had taken it, and why? Were they setting up a shrine to him, too?

I had no one to confide these apprehensions to. Crum was not a man to tolerate apprehensions, either in himself or in others. He would discuss only the realities of a situation, not its intangibles. Cranmer, close as I was to him in many ways, had so many apprehensions himself that I did not wish to encourage them.

As for Anne, she had isolated herself completely in that court world where she whiled away her time. What happened beyond the doors of the Queen’s apartments was not of the remotest interest to her. As her spirits alternated between high-pitched nervousness and melancholia, I let her suit herself. Anything to keep her happy and to protect the pregnancy. Except dancing, which was too vigorous. I forbade her to dance.

Thus it was with stunned disbelief that I beheld her dancing with great abandon late one evening after she had ostensibly retired. We had had supper together, a quiet one, as I had given leave in August to all the courtiers who wished to return home for visits. Court was always closed during the summer hunting season, and I was usually on progress. Anne had kept on the men in her retinue, but given the women leave to go. As we dined, I could hear Mark Smeaton playing plaintive love songs in the next room; the incessant rain muffled the actual melodies.

Anne picked at her food.

Satan is a murderer. Jesus said so. He was a murderer from the beginning.

From the very beginning: Anne had cursed Wolsey, and he had fallen from power and died mysteriously. I had thought of poison, but self-administered.

How blind I had been!

Warham had suddenly died, just when Anne needed him to.

Percy, who had abandoned her under duress from his father and Wolsey, had been unable to perform with his wife, and was now dying of an unspecified wasting disease.

My sister Mary had openly criticized my passion for Anne and supported Katherine, had refused to attend Anne’s coronation. Mary had become mysteriously “ill,” wasting away and dying at the age of thirty-five.

Someone had tried to poison Bishop Fisher at a dinner at his home. Two servants had died, but Fisher, though ill, had survived. Survived, to be more surely destroyed through me, for denouncing the lies, the forged signature. ...

Under your correction, My Lord, there is no thing more untrue.

My gut contracted. I felt ill myself—poisoned. Could it be?

Yes, she had struck at me, too. The mysterious leg-ulcer, appearing from nowhere, disappearing on the instant that I had done that which Anne wished —humiliated Mary, sent her to serve Princess Elizabeth, turned her home over to Anne’s precious brother George ... her creature.

My impotence ... had it been a curse from her, or just the natural revulsion of my flesh from joining itself to hers, even though I knew not why? But she had overcome it, lifted it away, so as to bind me more closely to herself.

I had begun dying, both in body and certainly in spirit. Like Fisher, I was not an easy victim, but the decline had begun. Anne’s slender little hands were guiding me on the sloping path leading to the grave.

Her hands!

I was violently ill; vomit rushed up into my mouth and I spat it into the basin on my sideboard.

Anne’s sixth finger.

She had a sixth finger on her left hand, a clawlike nub that branched off from her little finger. She wore long sleeves to cover it and was skilful past reason at concealing it. I had only glimpsed it once or twice, and such was her magic, and my resulting blindness and confusion in her presence, that I saw it, but did not see it.

A witch’s mark.

I was sick again, vomiting up green bile, bile that dotted the sides of the basin in mocking imitation of the emeralds thereon.
She could read my thoughts. Even now, she knew what I was thinking. I remembered her knowledge of my substitute Oath for More, one I had never committed to paper.

No. Her powers were not that strong, they could not penetrate even here. I was safe as long as I was not in her actual presence.

Yet the confusion, the roar in my head, persisted. She could stir my thoughts, muddy them from afar, but not control or read them.

She must be contained. I would order her aparorming. When it grew light.
I waited for that light with a fervency I thought I had lost forever. It belonged to childhood, to that time when the dark was an enemy, and only the light was friendly. A daytime moon was called a children’s moon because we preferred seeing it in the light....

Dawn came and released me. In the clear light my revelations about Anne did not seem absurd, as is usually the case the next morning. Instead they seemed even more obvious and certain.

Anne was a witch. She was tainted with evil and practised evil, nurtured evil and harnessed it for her own worldly advancement.

Last night was her time. This morning was mine. And before night fell again, I must be far away.

I had not hunted in a year. The season for stag and roe, my favourite game, had opened while Anne’s “pregnancy” kept me close at hand. I would go hunting, have clean sport in the daylight.

The nearest forest where such game abounded was the Savernake in Wiltshire, three long days’ ride west of London. Sir John Seymour, my old companion-at-arms, had retired to his manor there several years ago, and was warden of the royal hunting preserve at Savernake.

I would go there, pass some days at Wolf Hall, and wrestle with the terrifying revelations that had been thrust upon me. I would go alone. There were no companions whose company I wished. Nay, I needed one, for safety’s sake. Someone I loved, who was quiet. I would ask...

I heard rustling outside my door. I had not slept in my own bed—indeed, had not slept at all—and Henry Norris was searching for me. Henry Norris would be the one. Discreet. Silent. Committed to me.

I opened my door to him. “Make yourself ready,” I said briskly. “I leave today to hunt in the West Country, and I wish you to accompany me.” To his surprised expression, I said, “It is for a few days only.”

I must give no hint of haste, or of fleeing. Yet Anne must be contained, prevented from stirring. I knew not what to do with her, or what was required. I could not think. I was numb with what I now knew. It changed everything, but now it was I who must wear a mask. I needed time, time to think and recover myself and, yes, time to grieve. I was bereaved. I had lost a wife, and my own innocence.

I rode in silence to the West. The setting sun warmed and consoled me, drawing me toward a resting place. I was tired, and longed for some respite.

That first night, we stopped near Wokingham. The brothers of Reading Abbey were gracious (unlike those of St. Osweth’s!). We were given quarters that were snug and comfortable and told that we could join them for Compline in their chapel. We did so, and it was with profound relief that I joined in the prayers. They asked me to lead them, but I declined. I was in no spiritual condition to lead others in prayer.

Night had fallen in the small priory. The monks filed away, silently, to bed. The Prior, Richard Frost, motioned us to follow him, and at our quarters he blessed us. Then, after lighting our candles, he bowed and was gone.

A single candle on a bare table. That was my light, and I lay down on the cot where I would spend the night, and pulled the is left. They seated him kindly.

He did not look different. He was the same John Seymour who had fought with me in France, had shared my dining table. His features were yet intact, his eyes the very same. Outwardly, all is as it should be; therefore the rest is preserved as well. So we think.

His blue eyes rested on me. They looked at my hair, my face, my costume.

“Who is this?” he asked querulously.

“It is the King, Father,” said Edward. “He has come to hunt with us.”

“The King?”

He had known me, joked with me, ridden with me.

“King Henry. Henry the Eighth.”

He nodded, but there was no understanding in his eyes. I wanted to say, Remember the Battle of the Spurs, you rode right behind the French that day. Remember how they ran!

He smiled, an idiot’s smile. It was all gone. But no, it could not be. Behind that face, it was there yet. He lived, he nodded, he ate—how could Sir John be vanished? He was there yet, we just did not know how to call him forth.

“Oh, ’twas merry!” he said. “Merry, merry ... no one’s merry. Not now.” He pushed his spoon about his plate.

An infant. He had become an infant; his clock had run backward. But it was against nature. Either we were killed or we expired in weakness. We did not turn back into infants.
“Now, Father.” A gentle voice, and two hands caressing him, arranging his plate. The vegetables—carrots and
parsnips—separated from the mutton. He smiled and patted her hand.  
I looked to see who this was. At first I could discern nothing beyond the dull brown costume of a maidservant
with a white headdress. I caught her hand.  
“You are kind, mistress,” I said. She was so unobtrusive, yet so competent. 
She pulled back from me, not demurely, but in insult. 
“It is hardly a kindness to minister to one’s own father,” she said, extricating herself from my grasp...  
“Jane?” I asked, but she was gone. 
“The French are foul,” said Sir John. “They lie in wait for us. They have not improved. But the Pope is worse.
This new one ... he is much harder than Clement.” He shook his head, seemingly all alert and involved in politics, as
he once had been. “They say he sucks his toes.” He cackled, fiendishly.  
Edward and Thomas continued eating. 
“They say he sucks his toes!” insisted Sir John, so loudly that the ancient timbers above us absorbed it. “And
furthermore, the north tower needs repair!”  
As soon as was decently possible, I left the hall. Servants got Sir John to bed, and I sought mine. The bed was
narrow, hard, and musty. Morning Mass in the nearby parish church was at six. I would attend. Meanwhile I fell
asleep with my prayers—for Sir John, for Anne, for myself.  
We all attended Mass—the entire Seymour household, save Sir John. It was quick and unembellished. The priest
mumbling his Latin was as colourless as the grey stones surrounding him. He must have been plucked bare.  
“A fine crop of pears this year,” said Cromwell, once again picking up my own unspoken thoughts. “The warm,
clear May when they flowered, followed by all the rain, was just what a pear tree wants.”  
A good thing that something wanted More and Fisher’s wretched rain and storms. Certainly the grain crops
hadn’t, nor had the people. 
“Try some of its elixir,” said Cromwell, handing me a small silver cup of perry—a fermented drink made from
pears. Saluting one another, we sipped. The liquid was smooth and delicate.  
“Yes, the rain did them well.”  
He put down his cup and looked at me, waiting, his black eyes deep and understanding. 
“Crum, I have been hunting in the West for the past fortnight.” I knew he knew that—undoubtedly one of his
spies had found his way to Wolf Hall—but it was courteous to volunteer it.  
He smiled. “And was the hunting good?”  
“Indeed. Hares, stag, roe—we dined to bursting on game every night. I had forgotten how very much I enjoy
being a hunter. You hunt, do you not, Crum?”  
“With hawks, yes.”  
“I’m told you have a fine collection of hawks. Where are your mews?” Not here in London, surely.  
“In Stepney.”  
“We must hawk together soon.”  
“I would be pleased.”  
Pause. Enough pleasantries. “We must hawk together indoors first. There is one who flies at too high a pitch, one
who never should have been empowered to fly at all—one who must be brought down and sent away,” I said. “Her
feathers must be plucked, and she must be sent away, out of the royal mews.”  
Was there the smallest hint of a twitch in his lip, a suppressed smile? “The Queen does fly high,” he said, slowly
but boldly.  
“It is in my power to lower her as surely as I raised her up. I would be rid of her, Crum, I would be rid of her. She
is no wife to me.” More than that I would not say; it was not meet. Crum should be privy only to my conclusion, not
the reasons behind it.  
“You would send her away, or un-wife her? Which is your wish?”  
“To un-wife her. That, above all!”  
Crum stood up—with my leave—and began to walk a bit. Up and down, up and down, upon the fine polished
wood floor of his chamber. He stood by the window and placed his fingertips squarely on a large globe he had
mounted on carved legs, and twirled it. The world spun, a glossy pattern of coloured countries and seas.  
“If there is a fault with the marriage that invalidates it, the world will consider the Princess Dowager vindicated
and restored to her rightful place.”  
Katherine. Here in London she seemed nonexistent, vanished into the mists of the fens. Certainly she had ceased
to exist for me. But to the Emperor and the Pope, all of England was the same, London no less remote than
Kimbolton.
“You will m”>

_The Seventh Commandment: Thou shalt not steal._

She had stolen the throne, had stolen the rites and anointing appropriate to a true Queen.

_The Eighth Commandment: Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour._

It forbids lies, rash judgment, detraction, calumny, and the telling of secrets we are bound to keep. She did not tell lies, she was a lie! The Father of Lies had lain with her....

_The Ninth Commandment: Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour’s wife._

She coveted others’ husbands. Me, in the beginning; then Thomas Wyatt, Francis Weston, even her brother George. All were married, yet she demanded that they pay court to her.

_The Tenth Commandment: Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour’s goods._

Greedily, Anne had always looked to the possessions of others, wanting them to spite their owners. I remembered the insistence on depriving Katherine of the christening gown, of the royal jewels, on taking over Wolsey’s York Place. She desired the things only because they were treasured by an enemy.

“Thoughts lead to deeds,” I said. “Must we wait for a murderer to murder?”

“We must, as God Himself must. Besides, in the eyes of the law, he is not a murderer until then. Your Majesty... can you not clarify the problem regarding the Queen? I could help you so much better if I knew your meaning exactly.”

No. To let him be privy to my knowledge might endanger his life. The Witch would know.

“No. It is enough for you to know that I must be rid of her, divorced from her. Find means to effect this! Use all your subtleties, use all your powers, but bring it about!” The same instructions I had once given Wolsey about Katherine, and he had failed. “Fail me not; it is a desperate situation!” Crum was not bound by his own glory and reputation; he was much freer to act than Wolsey had ever been. His own ambitions did not hobble him from serving his King. Our self-interests were perfectly in harmony.

“I will need time,” he said. “It would perhaps be beneficial if I were to attend the Queen’s Michaelmas festivities to observe. If you could secure me an invitation?”

So Anne was planning yet another of her fetes. “Yes, of course. Is it to be a large one?”

“The entire court, so they say. I did not receive an invitation. The Queen has never... cared for me.”

“How ungrateful, considering that you masterminded the great revolution which she now uses as her throne.”

He shrugged in mock humility. “I have not exhausted my capacity to mastermind, and nothing is secure forever.” His eyes were alight, like those of a small boy given a great wooden puzzle. His ingenuity was being challenged and given a chance to fly, hunt, and bring down prey—like one of his beloved hawks.

I had received an invitation from Anne regarding the fete in honour of Saint Michael the Archangel and All Angels, to be given by Her Majesty the Queen, the time, the particulars, all interwoven with a curious pattern of black and white, in which gradually the design changed from one to the other. The Solicitor-General, was standing between Chancellor Audley and his wife. His utterly featureless, forgettable face smiled blandly, blankly. His lips moved, saying nothing. Yet his testimony had helped to convict More.

More.

His replacements and inheritors milled about: Thomas Wriothesley, another “find” of Cromwell’s, strutted about pointing and mincing. He had lately aristocratized his name from Risley to Wriothesley and talked in what he assumed was a fashionable soft tone. Beside him stood Ralph Sadler, a pleasant little rodent of a man; William Petre, sweet and malleable; Bishop Stephen Gardiner, calculating but inept—an unfortunate combination.

They all left a bad taste in my mouth. I found myself wishing to spit, particularly on the plume of Risley’s rakishly affected hat.

It was with relief that my eyes found another group of “New Men.” There was William Parr, barely twenty, but with a gravity of manner that suggested an earlier era. He was from a northern family, one that had served me well against the Scots. His sister, Katherine, married to old Lord Latimer, was beside him, her youth not at all compromised by her husband’s needs. Although he was also from Lincolnshire, he kept a London town house and brought his wife often to court, where she sought out the few remaining scholars and Humanists, pointedly avoiding Anne’s suite. I was surprised—pleased, but surprised—to see her here this evening. Jane Seymour, in pale autumnal gold, stood talking to her, and beside her were Edward and Tom Seymour—the former wooden and mannered, the latter preening like a multihued cockatoo.

The older men stood off in another clump by themselves—the Duke of Norfolk, looking as though he had an
indigestible lump of suet in his belly that was turning his face yellow as well; next to him the Duke of Suffolk, untroubled as always. God, I envied him that. It was a special gift never to spend unrecoverable moments in worry or regret. Now that I knew the true reason for Mary’s death, I did not begrudge Brandon’s remarriage; it seemed a revenge on Anne that he did not grieve overlong. Where was his young wife? Not with him. That was no cause for alarm. Ah, I spied her with Lady Latimer, an equally young but serious woman. So different from Anne, they were....

There was William Fitzwilliam, the Lord Privy Seal, of an age with myself, standing with the two Dukes. He disliked Anne (not that he had ever said so directly, but he conveyed it in every disdainful gesture. I would have enjoyed seeing him take the Oath, as he undoubtedly did it with a mockery that belied the words), and his weathered face was set like an obstinate donkey’s as he rocked on his heels and waited for the latest manifestation of her foolishness. By his right elbow was good, solid John Poyntz, of Gloucestershire, with a face like those I had seen lining the roads whenever I went out on progress, and his friend Thomas, Lord Vaux, made a Knight of the Bath at Anne’s Coronation. Vaux bore a remarkable resemblance to Thomas Wyatt, but he had no literary ability whatsoever, even though he attempted to write poetry. Beside all these stood Cranmer, primly and eagerly, as though he really enjoyed this and awaited the “entertainment.”

In another self-contained circle were Edward Neville, Nicholas Carew, and Henry Courtenay, a sort of old snowbank of privileges and ideas. Left over from an earlier time without ever having achieved or striven for anything then, they were melting in the new times and felt themselves trickling away. Chapuys was with them, his swift movements and nervous energy always a pleasur surprised to see that Satan was handsome. His face was even familiar, but, in the flickering footlights, appeared altogether new. It shone with supernatural beauty.

“I am he, the light-bringer, Lucifer, the morning star,” he said, and indeed he was all these things.

Evil was not always ugly; it was at its strongest when disguised as an angel of light, and who knew that better than I?

“Fight with me!” he exhorted us all. “Together we shall defeat the angels and reign forever in heaven!”

A battle ensued, and only the Archangel Michael and his hosts of extra angels routed Lucifer and his black legions. All about the Great Hall, braziers were lit, and clouds of smoke poured out, enveloping everyone. The fight on the stage extended to us as well; suddenly both angels and devils were amongst us, shrieking and struggling. A great heavy wing smashed against my chair, scattering feathers; and three demons scurried after its owner and crawled between the rungs of my chair. I recognized one: Francis Bryan, with his eyepatch. Then a familiar gesture, the way he tossed his hair, betrayed another, and my heart froze: Henry Norris was decked out as a demon in Anne’s masque. The fight turned real; swords were drawn. The onlookers joined in the pandemonium, and yet I cared not. A drowsy lethargy had sunk over me, paralyzing my limbs and dazzling my mind. The smoke ...

“Opium.” Anne, once again, read my thoughts. “Purchased at great expense and trouble from the East. It is the Great Lethargy, Sloth in a powder. ... But watch now, it will prevent any harm.”

The swords slowed their momentum, dropped by their owners’ sides. Motion turned to heaviness. Only the demons retained their quick movements, as if immune. They shrieked and raised their arms, and from beneath the black-draped platform swarmed a horde of evil beings: werewolves, phantoms, mummies, banshees, ghosts, grave-worms, corpses, witches, warlocks, decay, regret, remorse....

Anne rose beside me, crying out with them, her red mouth open and curved, and I knew her for a vampire, eager for blood, as she had sucked mine and turned me, too, into a creature of the night, a creature who had changed into something alien, and lived by others’ blood, even the blood of his friends.

She took my hand, and I rose with her. I had become as she was: just as evil, just as bloodthirsty, just as tainted. Her lips had infected me, corrupted my being. Yet I would not be that way, I would be redeemed.... In vain I looked for an angel. I saw only a dismembered wing lying on the floor, torn from its shoulder harness and with its wax frame sagging and trampl.

My head spun; my senses were suspended. I felt myself following Anne, letting myself be pulled along a dark, muffled, secret passage leading away from the Hall. Westminster was full of such secret ways and connections, fashioned as it was in ancient times. Anne was taking me away, away from the safety of the others, and this moment was one I could no longer avoid or postpone.

Her fingers were slender and cool as the jewels upon them. Her face was seen only in brief licks of light from the guttering torches in their iron sockets. Behind her, her costume streamed out—great, billowing, smokelike puffs. I was drugged; the opium smoke had stunned me, like the smoke from Jane Seymour’s torch putting the bees to sleep.

We were in a chamber. It was a small chamber, hung with filmy draperies. There was a strange odour within. I had never smelled it before, and it bore no lto any other; therefore I cannot describe it, save that it was sweet and caressing.

“The end of the fête,” I said slowly. It seemed my lips were numb.
She drew back her hood, which shrouded her face. The coverings fell and her face, unique and entrancing, was revealed. To see it was to remember, and to relive, and then to enter once more into the past, when it had commanded supreme obedience and longing in my heart.

_I knew better, and yet I loved her once again._ Almost all of me did. The conquest was not complete, for there were parts of me new-formed since first I had loved her, and those were not in her power to reclaim; those stood apart in clucking denunciation. But for the rest, they rose up like the dead at the Day of Judgment. And once again there was that rush of feeling, of transport, of excitement.

But not quite. It was not quite the same. I knew more now, it had all been spoilt somewhere along the way, and that lodged itself like a stone in a shoe; we may run, and leap, and bound, yet the landing is sharp, and so we do not bound quite so high or exuberantly ever again.

I loved her with all my might and heart; but soul and mind did not enter in. This time they demurred.

She came to me and kissed me.

How many months, how many years ago had I longed for her to do exactly that? There had been a time when I felt near death because she did not. Yet here it came to me, unbidden and unsought, with her body pressed up against mine, and all the gestures I had once so coveted, and while it was exciting, it was not soul-satisfying. I had grown beyond whatever hunger she once could have satisfied.

Yet my body—my Judas-body, ever the betrayer—responded and for an hour or so helped me believe that I had not changed, that all was as it once was.

“My Lord, my love, my dearest—” Her words poured, molten, in my ears. There was, of course, a bed, all bedecked in the sheerest linen, laid with furs and pillows of swan’s down. Anne had arranged all this, had had servitors set it all up, much as I had once done in heated anticipation in my own chambers.

Her words, her hands, her voice, all reached out to me and sought to claim me. Because I was stronger now, and essentially free of her, the appeal was all the more poignant. I could appreciate, as I never had before, the exquisite little things about her: the way she drew aside her clothes, even folding them without actually folding them; her dramatic ability to turn a little storage room into a chamber of carnality; the sensuality behind her desire to watch the light playing on the opalescent surface of the draperies, so that they seemed to pulsate and throb from within. I saw all this, and appreciated it; but the appreciation itself was somehow an enemy to, and acknowledgment of, lust sapped by time.

Was it all gone? Of course that is always the question. If I wade out into a pond, it may seem, on the surface, calm and empty. How safe to shrug and clamber ashore again, never venturing to plunge below the cold, demanding, slimy surface. If I lay with Anne upon the bed, what would happen? Could I predict how I would feel? Did I dare to find out?

She pulled me, and I followed. Yes, I would do it, because if only I could feel those feelings once again, it would words pouened and was larger than ever. Ugly black streaks spread out on all sides of it. Dr. Butts was still with Mary, and I did not wish to separate them, so I was forced to treat my affliction myself. None of Dr. Butts’s associates was knowledgeable enough—or discreet enough—to involve himself with my illness.

Meanwhile, the reports were that Mary did not improve. Neither did Fitzroy, who was wasting away before Henry Howard’s devoted eyes. I could not bring Mary here, for security’s sake (unless, of course, she took the Oath), but I could bring Fitzroy.

Then came word that Katherine had fallen ill—“obviously,” said the report, “of poison.” Thus, in spite of Katherine’s precautions and suspicions, Anne had prevailed. Whether by natural methods (bribed cooks, powders) or supernatural, no longer mattered. What mattered was that Anne had prevailed. And she was now pregnant, carrying a child, with the Act of Succession vested in that child, and we had all become dispensable, I most of all. As the pain shot through my leg, I had a constant reminder of that.

Chapuys was frantic with worry about both Katherine and Mary, and betrayed his very real personal affinity for them, apart from political maneuverings. He begged for permission to visit Katherine, but I withheld it for a time. I knew that any attention from Chapuys, with its representation of outside concerns, might stir Anne to injure Katherine further, until she was beyond help from any quarter. To flatter me, Chapuys pestered me for a tennis match, something I had long ago urged upon him.

“In the enclosed court at Hampton, we can play during the nasty weather,” he said.

“Perhaps. Perhaps.” I could not run about on this infected leg, but I hoped it would diminish by Christmas. “At the holiday time, when we move there.”

Would I even be walking by then? What would Anne’s hand have done to me by then? I must consult with Cromwell, my totally unscrupulous and utterly discreet Cromwell.

“I must be rid of her!” I cried.
“We have already determined that as long as Katherine lives—” he began.

“Aha!” Therein her own hatred and jealousy was her undoing! For, out of spite, she was causing Katherine to languish and fail. “If Katherine should die, then Anne can be set aside,” I finished.

“In a special limbo designed for ex-wives,” suggested Cromwell.

“By God, you sound as if you expect it to be a permanent position, created by me!” I barked.

“No, no, Your Majesty,” he assured me. “Nothing of the sort. It would be an unnecessary expense to the Exchequer—on a permanent basis.”

I settled myself more comfortably on my chair, and rested my leg upon a padded footstool. I wished I could mention my leg to Crum, but I dared not. I realized with a start that I trusted no one now; there was no one I knew to whom I could reveal any intimate thing about myself without fear of betrayal. So that was what Father had meant. It was loathsome, this aloneness. He claimed it was the price of kingship. Was it? At present, the answer was yes. Was it worth it? The answer to that was also yes. One can get used to anything.

A wad of pain worked its way up my leg, and it was all I could do to keep from crying out. “So that the moment the child is born ... she may be sent away.” My belly contracted with the pain, but my will kept the cry of pain from escaping. Crum never heard it.

“There are rumours,” he said. “Rumours that the conspirators stand at the ready in Northumberland and along the West Marches to spirit Katherine away.

Would he never be gone? I could not mask this pain much longer. “So the dream has come about, and the Papal forces are ready to move,” I said. “It was inevitable. Yet”—another spasm of pain—“if Katherine is ill enough, it all comes to nothing.” Yes, the Devil was stupid to wound Katherine.

“Out of England, she might rally.”

True. Beyond our shores, treated as her vanity dictated, hearing words of flattery and submission, she would mend quickly enough.

“Out of England she shall never go,” I said. “And as for her misguided knights-errant, we shall disempower them, subtly, so that when and if the time ever comes when they might try to move ... they shall find themselves stuck fast.”

Poor Katherine. She would never know of her would-be rescuers.

“I would send the Princess Dowager a token of encouragement in her illness,” I told Crum. “Not Chapuys. But a box of delicacies, and one of my musicians.... See to the land arrangements.”

There, that should occupy him. Else I might scream if he did not immediately quit my presence and allow me to massage my leg.

Anne’s pregnancy fared well; the most healthy being in all England was that one which lay within her womb. While her magic blighted all of her enemies, her child and her salvation waxed strong.

The year slipped further toward the dark bottom of its wheel. My leg did not mend, but at least it did not worsen. Fitzroy, whom I had brought to court under the pretext of inviting him to keep Christmas with us, remained pale and wracked with a cough (it sounded the very same as Father’s), but likewise did not worsen. Mary hung in the limbo of not-truly-ill/not-truly-well, and I was given the painful task of refusing Katherine’s natural pleas to help her. She had written Chapuys:

_1_ _beg you to speak to the King, and desire him from me to be so charitable as to send his daughter and mine where I am, because if I care for her with my own hands and by the advice of my own and other physicians, and God still pleases to take her from this world, my heart will be at peace, otherwise in great pain. Say to His Highness that there is no need for anyone to nurse her but myself, that I will put her in my own bed in my own chamber and watch with her when needful._

_I have recourse to you, knowing that there is no one else in this kingdom who will dare to say to the King, my lord, that which I am asking you to say. I pray God to reward your imm in a costume from Turkey.... The wife of my youth. She had been the wife of my youth, and in dying she took that with her. Those lost days gleamed now more brightly than ever._

I mourned for the Spanish Princess, angry that her life had been, on the whole, so sad. And now there was no hope for anything better, no last-minute changes. She lay beyond all changes.

What sort of faith did I have, then? Presumably she had passed into another world, where all such
considerations were cast aside. She was in glory, clothed in a spiritual body, no longer the Spanish Princess or the crippled, sickly old woman she had changed into, but changed yet again into something glittering and immortal. While her physical body was being cut open and embalmed, the immortal Katherine was long since departed, rewarded beyond anything I could ever have bestowed on her.

So I believed ... so I believed....

But if it were not so? If the poor old body was all there was, then what a cruel reward. I wept, alone in my private box in the Chapel Royal, astonished and bewildered at my tears. Did I not believe? Were all my beliefs hollow, worthless? That was what my tears betrayed.

*For if the dead are not raised, neither has Christ been raised. It follows also that those who have died within Christ’s fellowship are utterly lost. If it is for this life only that Christ has given us hope, we of all men are most to be pitied.*

I should not be weeping for Katherine’s bitter life, if I truly believed that each particle of that bitterness was pleasing to God and was now earning her tenfold of glory and reward.

I was a liar, then, a hypocrite. No, I was a doubter. There was a difference. One was honest and human, the other was not. Even Peter had doubted.

God, most almighty and everlasting, please remove these doubts that burn and torment me far worse than my leg. Remove them, or I cannot go on.

Somewhere I heard a stirring. There was someone else in the chapel, down below. I decided to go. I felt more oppressed and troubled than when I had first sought the silence and darkness. Perhaps it would do for another what it had failed to do for me.

I was halfway down the long gallery when I heard the door open and turned to see a figure stealing away from the chapel. It was Jane Seymour, and she was rubbing her eyes. She walked slowly until she came to a window seat, then sat down. She stared, blinking, at the floor.

I approached her carefully. She looked up at my approach, and her eyes and the tip of her nose were red. She attempted to smile, as if that would render them invisible.

“Mistress Seymour,” I said, settling down—uninvited—beside her. “Can I be of help? Are you troubled?”

“I am troubled,” she admitted. “But you cannot be of help.” She fumbled for a handkerchief.

“Only give me the chance,” I offered, glad of the opportunity to take my mind off Katherine.

“I would leave court,” she blurted out. “As soon as the roads are passable, if Your Majesty would so graciously permit me.”

“But why?”

“I am not mentioning the Princess Dowager has received for her ‘good end,’ ” said Anne, loudly. “There is talk of little else but her saintly departing. Already people are directing prayers to her, asking for her intercession. Can you afford to have created another saint? First Fisher, then More—now Katherine?”

I signalled for the musicians to take up their playing again, to drown out this conversation.

“You push me too far,” I said. I wished to choke her for her taunting words.

“It is true,” she answered. “The people have canonized Fisher and More, in their hearts—never mind what Rome pronounces—and they are well on their way to doing it with Katherine. You should be dancing with us, to counteract it, not leading them in honouring her! Your own security demands it, regardless of your feelings.”

“Fie! You dress your own evil gloating in political wrappings. Dance, my love, all you wish. Soon the time for your dancing will cease.”

I turned and left her in yellow, as I had first beheld her.

The embalmer at Kimbolton, who performed an autopsy on Katherine, submitted a secret report to me. He had found all the internal organs as healthy and normal as possible, “with the exception of the heart, which was quite black and hideous to look at.” He washed it, but it did not change colour; then he cut it open, and inside it was the same.

“Poison,” I said softly. I had known it all along. Anne’s poison. It was that triumph she celebrated at her Yellow Ball. I wondered if the particular poison she had chosen was, indeed, yellow. How like her if it were.

Now only Fitzroy, Mary, and I were left to dispatch. Emboldened by her success, she was foolhardy enough to commit her plans for Mary in a letter to Mrs. Shelton, Mary’s “keeper”: “Go no further. When I shall have a son, as I soon look to have, I know what then will come to her.”

*Go no further. No more poison for now? Mary was safe, then, for the present.*
A tournament had long been scheduled for the end of the month. I did not wish to cancel it now, as it would indeed seem as though England were mourning a Queen rather than a Princess Dowager if I did so. Holding the tournament would signal that the time for observing the death was past. In addition, it was necessary that I quench the rumours and questions beginning to circulate about my health. If I rode in this tournament, it would be proof that there was nothing wrong with me.

I was forty-four now, well past the age when most men participated in tournaments. Brandon had retired from the lists several years ago. But I still enjoyed the challenge, enjoyed the whole ritual associated with it, and I was loth to give it up.

That January afternoon, one had to be a Northman born to relish the idea of putting on cold metal armour. It was a bright, blue-and-white day, the edges and outlines of all things appearing extra sharp. The air seemed thinner and harder than normal, and even the sounds of the trumpets and pendant bells on the horses were as brittle as icicles. The tournament colours, bold and primary, made a great heraldic shout against the white snow as the challengers rode out. Today the clash of metal against metal would ring and echo coldly, and sparks would be struck, like showers of stars.

“It was a Prince?”

“It had the appearance of a male, of some sixteen weeks. Do you wish to—?”

I nodded. A physician’s attendant brought the basket to me. I pulled back the coverings and stared at the jelly-like creature there, almost transparent, and only a few inches long. The male genitalia were recognizable. I pulled the cloth back over it.

“I will see the Queen now,” I said. “When was she—when was this delivered?”

“Not above half an hour ago,” Dr. Beechy said. “She strove, with all her might, to keep it within her womb. She quite exhausted herself by her efforts, making this issue more painful than a normal birth. She needs … comforting.”

“The Queen has miscarried of her saviour,” a diplomat wrote that week. Indeed, Anne had lost the son upon whom she had based all her schemes and visions of triumph. She was done for.

“So,” I said, as I approached her bed, where she was still being sponged and ministered to by her women, “you have lost my boy.”

She looked up at me. Stripped of her jewels, her immaculately coiffed hair, her stunning costumes, she was as ugly and wiry as a sewer-rat. Like one of those, she swam for safety.

“O my Lord,” she cried, “he was lost for the great love I bear you. For when my uncle, the Duke, brought me word of your accident, and that you were not thought like to live, my pains began—”

Liar. That was two days ago.

“Has Her Majesty been in labour since Thursday?” I asked Dr. Beechy blandly.

The honest, frightened physician shook his head. “Friday it began, Your Majesty.”

“It was for despair that your love had left me!” she cried. “On Friday I saw the locket that Mistress Seymour wore.” She used her thin arms to hoist herself up to a sitting position, where she glared at me. “Can you deny that you are giving her tokens?

I will not have it!”

“No, I’m no Katherine! And your maids shall never live to flaunt their tokens in my face!” She opened her hand, and lying on her palm was the locket I had given Jane—my mother’s locket.

“I tore it off her neck, her thick, bullish neck. She’s plain, Henry, and has a fat neck. It’s pale and lumpy-looking.”

Her whole body was straining forward, and the cords stood out on her neck. I could see a vein throbbing slowly, right under her ear.

“You will not have it? You’ll have what I dictate that you have, and endure it as your betters have done.”

“Katherine?” she screamed. “Slender and with a curve. Yet the head it bears up is filled with evil and curses and malevolence. You’ll get no more boys from me.” It was not a threat but a statement, and a promise to myself.

She hurled the locket at me. I caught it easily, although she meant it to hhard.

“When you are on your feet again, I shall speak to you,” I told her, closing my fingers over the locket.

I left her chambers.

I was free. She had no further hold over me.
March had come in like a lamb, the country folk said, so it was bound to go out like a lion. They were correct, but not for the reasons they thought. This mid-March day, I, the lion, was hawking with Cromwell, my presumed “lamb.” At least he was always obedient and docile; in that way he was lamblike.

The day was one of those March oddities—glum and yet alive with potential. Everywhere ice was melting, and one could hear the water flowing in streams and brooks, trickling out of woodland snowbanks, oozing into our horses’ hoofprints. One felt the growth ready to spring out of the dry, tightly packaged stems, one could see the glimmer of green beneath the trampled, brown, straggly grass. The wool-puff clouds against the sky seemed rinsed clean and purified. March was a tonic, a scourge, an astringent.

It was a fine day for hawking. Cromwell and I needed to confer, and what better excuse to betake ourselves deep into the countryside and leave the palace spies and eavesdroppers behind? Crum had long been eager to show me his birds, and I had been eager to see the creatures for whom he actually seemed to have warm feelings.

He kept both peregrine falcons and goshawks. By law, one must be at least an earl to fly peregrines. I intended to make Cromwell Earl of Essex—depending on how well he served me in what he judiciously refrained from calling the King’s Greater Matter.

He asked me which I preferred to fly today, and I chose the peregrine. He chose its smaller mate, the tiercel. We took them from the hawk-house, hooded, upon our gloved wrists, and rode west beyond Richmond, until we were in the open country near Hampton. All the while the falcons were quiet, but Crum chattered on, uncharacteristically, about them.

“Her name is Athena. I had a difficult time training her to the lure. But she’s strong. She even takes big old hares. Isn’t afraid of them!” He made sweet clucking noises to her.

“Mars, here”—he lifted his wrist—“enjoys rook-hawking best. He loves to plummet out of the sky and fall on a rook, break its neck, let it drop, in a shower of black feathers. It’s a lovely sight!” he sighed. “Mars can even take a jackdaw. I get particular pleasure out of watching that. The ’daw tries to outfly him, but can’t.” Crum frowned.

“Now, now!”

I noticed that Mars was flexing his talons, and one tip had almost penetrated Crum’s leather hawking glove. “I love to see them kill,” he said simply. “They are spectacular in flight and fight.”

“Would that we could emulate them,” I agreed. “Our best methods are clumsy by comparison, and there’s no sport in our executions.”

“A subject that, alas, calls for our attention.”

We reined in and prepared to slip the falcons. There was a flored ly. I had been forced to reveal the truth about Anne—Black Nan!—so that he would understand the force he was working against.

“Of witchcraft? No, Your Majesty.”

The sleek, dark shapes of the falcons, climbing quickly above us, were breathtaking.

“But she is a witch! Why can you not find the evidence? Then—execution will be demanded.”

“I thought to discover it. I assumed there would be certain potions, powders, books. But all I found was ... adultery.” He looked apologetic. “Her serving-woman, Lady Wingfield, has told me a strange tale ... of men hidden inside closets in the Queen’s bedchamber, waiting for code-words bidding them to emerge and come to her bed. It is all ... bizarre.” He handed me a piece of parchment, long, stained, with many entries and inks. “Oh, look!”

The falcons had overtaken the rooks, and were now above them, singling out their targets. Then they would drop, perpendicular, wings folded close to the body, like smooth, dark stones of death.

“Yes, yes.” I had seen falcons kill before.

I glanced at the paper in my hands. I felt myself go weak, felt my hands tremble. I did not wish to see this, but at the same time I was compelled to read it.

It detailed that the musician Mark Smeaton and “others” had had regular sport in Anne’s bed.

A great thud in the sky, which carried to our ears: the falcons had hit the rooks, attacking straight from above. The rooks were dead, and plummeting. The falcons swooped yet again, catching them as they fell. A lazy swirl of black feathers followed them, like a funeral party.

My eyes were forced back to the paper. The details went on and on, relentlessly.

This list would be read out in court, to her shame.

She was even fouler than I had imagined. My hands were contaminated in touching this filthy compilation. “The Great Whore,” I murmured.

I raised my eyes. Cromwell had been watching me all the while, his black button eyes riveted on me.
“I thank you,” I finally said. “It is time I knew the full truth.”
“God sends pain to correct us,” I said, by rote. I had been taught that. Did I truly believe it?
“Nonetheless, it hurts. The only way to avoid it is to cease to care.”
Was that what Cromwell had done, after his wife’s death?
“It would be restful not to care,” I agreed. It would be a peace, an absence I could not imagine. All my life I had cared—about everything.
“Shall we?” He indicated the field, with the fallen rooks. “If we don’t remove them, the falcons will feed full, and will hunt no more today.”
Feeling outside myself, I watched as I walked toward the kill. I walked, and used a lure to remove the falcons so we could stuff the poor, mangled rooks into our bags. All the whileee wife had just been irrevocably revealed as an adulteress, a whore.
Why could I not feel? Why this strange detachment, this jumpiness, along with a perpetual shadow, an inner tolling of a bell?
The falcons were off again, and Cromwell and I continued the eerie conversation.
“I have had Master Smeaton to dinner,” he said. “I entertained him last week, at my London house. He was flattered to be invited. I was able to ... persuade him to talk. He admitted everything. That he had had carnal relations with the Queen.”
“He said ... ‘carnal relations’?”
“I have his words,” said Cromwell. “Allow me?” He indicated the horses, and his saddle-pouch. We walked back, and he drew out a sheaf of papers.
“The details of the conversation,” he said. “I thought it best.”
I read the entire hateful thing, wherein Smeaton confessed his adultery and named William Brereton, Francis Weston, and Henry Norris as her lovers as well.
Henry Norris. My companion of the chamber, my friend.
Did she take an especial relish in bedding him?
He must have protested. I knew Norris, an honourable man. He must have been a difficult quarry, a challenge to her ingenuity and persistence. But she had evidently succeeded.
According to Smeaton’s confession:

Anne had asked Norris why he had not been more eager to conclude his arranged marriage with Margaret Shelton, and, answering for him, said, “Ah, if any accident befell the King—such as his jousting accident this January—you would look to have me for yourself. You look for dead man’s shoes!”

So I was reduced to this teasing formula. I felt diminished, depersonalized, weakened.

Francis Weston was likewise neglecting his wife in favour of Norris’s fiancé. When Anne chided him, he had replied, “There is one in your household I love more ardently than either my wife or Mistress Shelton.”
“Why, who?” asked Anne, innocently.
“It is yourself,” he confessed.

When she came upon Mark Smeaton alone, skulking and looking forlorn, she asked him, cruelly, “Why are you so sad?”
“It is of no importance,” he answered, with as much dignity as he could command.
“No, please tell me.” Her voice was full of luring concern, and he wished to believe it. “Are you unhappy because I have not spoken to you in company?”
After bedding with him, she had undoubtedly taken a taunting delight in ignoring Majesty. I took the liberty of writing them down immediately after quitting her presence, lest I forget.” He shrugged. “Perhaps it was foolish?”
“No, no. You did well.” I appreciated caution and thoroughness. I opened the purse and gave him a sovereign.
“We thank you.”
I put the purse away, and the letter. Jane had shown herself to be all that I hoped for. Let this, then, silence the murmurs in my head. Let me not yield to the temptation to test her further. Let there remain some semblance of innocence and trust in me, lest I have nothing to offer Jane Seymour in myself.
April. The very word has a green sound. April. It should have a green look and a green smell as well, and this year it did. A strange odour perfused the air, as a green wind swept over the land. It was a sharp odour, a deep odour, of warmth and primitive beginnings.

I rode alone in the meadows when I smelled it. I would have had Jane beside me, but I could not seek her company unchaperoned, and so I did not. The pastures and meadows turned velvety emerald; and the woodlands were a display of pastel colours, as the baby leaves of a thousand trees uncurled: not green at all, in their first hours, but lavender, pink, red, gold.

Cromwell had all in order. The arrests would be made on May Day, following the customary jousts.
“Everyone will be all together then, and that should simplify matters,” he explained. “The ceremonial presence of the Yeomen of the Guard will serve to disguise their true purpose.”

Disguise, true ... the tortuous theme of the past half-year.
“The arrests can be made unobtrusively. In the confusion and high spirits, no one will notice. They can be imprisoned by nightfall, all at once. Interrogation the next day, May second. Trial by May tenth. Execution by May fifteenth at the latest,” he said.

“Good.” The sooner it was over, the better.
“It will be necessary for you to attend with the Queen,” Cromwell said apologetically.
“Quite so.” If she could play her part, so could I.

We sat in the royal box, Anne and I. This was the first year I had not participated in the May Day tournament. The reason I gave out was my fall in the January jousts. Still, it was difficult to play the part of a spectator, as if I were an old King, one who existed only as a voyeur. It was a world with which I had no wish to acquaint myself, had always disdained and rejected.

Humility, I thought. Being thought old and infirm and accepting it with grace is humility. Just as Christ pretended to be powerless before Pilate. (Although he could not resist the cryptic comment about only “allowing” Pilate to have power.) But comparing myself with Christ was pride. I extracted pride even from humility; I could squeeze it from any situation, like juice from an orange.

Anne was in white, the same white she had worn, and so well, at her Coronation. She knew how fairly it set off her dark hair, her creamy skin; and such were her powers that for a few moments, as I sat beside her, I stradd to the spectators, to the participants. The sun was bright on the field, and shone on the knights’ armour. I longed to be with them, instead of penned up in this watching box.

Anne’s lovers all rode in the contests. I watched her carefully out of the corner of my eye to see how she behaved toward them. Weston and Brereton caused her no notice—poor men! did they suspect how little she regarded them? —but she quivered with attention to her brother George, who performed well enough. (Not as a champion, but certainly passable.) Then Norris took his place, riding against Francis Bryan. Before beginning, he made the customary bow to the royal box.

Suddenly Anne leaned forward and flagrantly dropped her handkerchief. He picked it up, kissed it, passed it along his brow, then handed it back up to her. Their hands met, caressed.

This effrontery was a spark to my tinder. It was so brazen, so blatant, that I could not endure it. The insult was too great.

I stood up and said softly to Anne, “So, Madam. You shall have your reward.” I looked my last at her. I should never see her again upon this earth.

I left the royal box, and informed Cromwell that I was returning immediately to the palace. “Make the arrests as soon as this course is over,” I ordered him. “Do not delay.”

The handkerchief had been the last liberty Anne would take with my folly of having loved her. There is required a small act to kill love utterly; for reasons known only to God, large, heinous acts do not do it. Perhaps they are too great, have too many chinks and explanations. Only a small act of malicious disregard can achieve the final killing. A lace-edged handkerchief did what even Smeaton’s confession had failed to do completely, that is, in every corner of my being.

Norris had not ridden, after all. He had divested himself of his armour and left the grounds straightway, riding after me. He overtook me before I was in sight of Westminster, and rode boldly up to me. I refused to look at him.
“Your Majesty, you are angry at me,” he said.
I did not reply.
“Pray tell me my offence, so that I may amend it.”
“The handkerchief ...” I began. “Was it necessary to mock me so? Or was that her doing?”
“As God is my witness, I do not understand.”
“Stop the pretence!” I hissed. “You are the Queen’s lover. I know the truth, and you shall die for it.”
“It is not true!” His voice rose in terror. “It is not true! Never have I betrayed you with the Queen, in thought or deed!”
“Come, Norris. She has betrayed us all; you are not alone.” He, too, was a victim. “Confess the truth, and you shall go free.” Suddenly I meant it. How could I punish him for a fault I shared with him?
“Confess the truth!” I repeated. “Let someone, at last, speak truth to my face!”
The whole truth was a different creature from the half-truth. I wanted him not to deny the accusation, for I knew the physical facts were true, but to somehow redeem it, to acknowledge the bald facts but to give them some interpretation I could live with h wa>
They came into her presence boldly, not deferentially.
“You have committed adultery,” the Duke accused her, “with five known men. These men are already imprisoned and have confessed. You, too, must confess. There is no more need to hide and lie. All is known.” He also accused her of incest and intent to murder her husband.
Anne angrily denied it. “I am clean from the touch of any man but my true wedded husband, the King!” she screeched.
Her uncle shook his head sadly at her stubborn lie. Already the State Barge, which would convey her to the Tower, was waiting by the water-steps of the palace, manned by Kingston, the Constable of the Tower, and four enemy women spies chosen by Cromwell to report every word Anne uttered henceforth.
“Tut, tut, tut,” murmured the Duke, shaking his head like the clapper of a bell.
That afternoon Anne was rowed to the Tower, while the bright spring sunlight glanced off the Thames and common folk waved excitedly at the State Barge.
When she was received at the entrance, she fell to her knees. “God help me!” she cried. “I am not guilty of the accusation!”
Then Kingston and his men took her away—to the selfsame rooms she had lain in the night before her Coronation. There she would stay, alone, with no kind person nearby. Where there had been flatterers and singers that other May night three years ago, now there was silence and mystery.
“Where is my sweet brother?” she cried.
“I left him at York Place,” Kingston answered. The truth was that George Boleyn had been taken to the Tower that very morning.
“I hear say that I shall be accused with five men; and I can say no more but nay without I should open my body,” she cried, flinging open her skirt hysterically. No one understood her words.
“O Norris, hast thou accursed me?” she asked the air. “Thou art in the Tower together, and thou and I will die together; and Mark, thou art here too.”
When the King heard how she called upon her brother, Norris, and Smeaton, he wept.
Cromwell knew the Queen well. He knew that she was “as brave as a lion,” as someone had once described her, but that even a lion needs an adversary. Without an adversary, without a clear-cut accuser, she would nervously babble and betray herself. He directed every word she spoke to be recorded. Anne Boleyn had never known how to keep silent. Cromwell, who had heard the “I have a longing to eat apples” speech, knew well how to exploit her fatal weakness.
The very first day he reaped a bountiful harvest. She recalled her conversation with Weston in which he had professed his love. She compared him with Norris. “I more fear Weston,” she said, and explained why.
The next day she came to her brother. Her spies had told her that he had been arrested.
“I am very glad that we both be so nigh together,” she said.
Kingston confirmed that five men had been arrested and now lay in the Tower because of her.
“Mark 220;That is because he is no gentleman,” said Anne, callously. She looked about. “They shall make ballads of me now,” she said dreamily. “But there is none but my brother to do so. Shall he die?” she asked Kingston.
At his refusal to answer, she descended to threats. “We shall have no rain until I am delivered out of the Tower!” she cried.
Kingston shrugged, unmoved. “I pray it may be shortly because of the fair weather,” he replied.
In the meantime the King stormed and screamed. He was wilder than Anne. The night after Anne had been taken to the Tower, his natural son, Henry Fitzroy, had come to call upon him and bid him good night. The distracted, sorrowing King fell on his thin shoulders and cried, “God be praised you are safe from that cursed and venomous whore, who was determined to poison you!”

The bewildered, coughing Fitzroy merely held him fast: son comforting father.

Then an eerie silence descended. The Queen and all her accused paramours and conspirators were held behind the stone walls of the Tower. Juries were being assembled, and formal accusations drawn up. Parliament was prorogued, not to meet again for a month. The King forbade any mail or ships to leave England. The outside world wondered what was happening there. They knew it must be something terrible and momentous.

HENRY VIII:

I started receiving letters. First Cranmer wrote me, in amazement and condolence:

And I am in such a perplexity, that my mind is clean amazed; for I never had better opinion in woman than I had in her; which maketh me to think she should not be culpable. And again, I think that Your Highness would not have gone so far, except she had surely been culpable.

Now I think that Your Grace best knoweth, that next unto Your Grace I was most bound unto her of all creatures living. Wheretofore I most humbly beseech Your Grace to suffer me in that which both God’s law, nature, and also her kindness, bindeth me unto; that is that I may with Your Grace’s favour wish and pray for her, that she may declare herself inculpable and innocent. And if she be found culpable, I repute him not Your Grace’s faithful servant and subject, that would not desire the offence without mercy to be punished.

Then Anne took pen in hand to persuade me. But the letter venomously accused me of shortcomings rather than addressing her own:

Your Grace’s displeasure and my imprisonment are things so strange unto me, that what to write, or what to excuse, I am altogether ignorant. Whereas you send to me such a one, whom you know to be mine ancient professed enemy; I no sooner received this message by him, than I rightly conceived your meaning; and if as you say, confessing a truth indeed may procure my safety, I shall, with all willingness and duty, perform your command.

But let not Your Grace ever imagine your poor wife will ever be brought to acknowledge a fault, where not so much as a thought ever proceeded. And to speak a truth, never a prince had wife more loyal in all duty, and in all true affection, than you have ever found in Anne Boleyn—wit which name and place I could uld become her adulterers and concubines... contrary to the duty of their allegiance ... she most falsely and treacherously procured them by foul talk and kisses, touchings, gifts and various other unspeakable instigations and incitements ... in accordance as her most damnable propensity to crime drove her on: that, moreover, for the perpetration of that most wicked and treacherous crime of adultery by the Queen certain servants of the said lord King, through the most vile provocation and incitement day after day by the said Queen, were given over and attached to the said Queen in treacherous fashion, and that from here and from other sources this is the account, as here follows of the treacherous deeds and words.

The list of actual acts and adulteries began:

On 6 October 1533 at the palace of Westminster ... and on various other days, before and after, by sweet words, kissings, touchings and other illicit means, she did procure and incite Henry Norris, a gentleman of the Privy Chamber of Our Lord the King, to violate and carnally know her, by reason whereof the same Henry Norris on October 12 violated, stained, and carnally knew her.

As for her own brother George, Lord Rochford, on November 2:

... with the Queen’s tongue in the mouth of the said George and George’s tongue in the mouth of the Queen,
with kisses with open mouth, with gifts and jewels, by reason whereof Lord George Rochford, despising all the Almighty God’s precepts, and by every law of human nature, on November 5 violated and carnally knew his own natural sister.

The rest of the list (filled in with lascivious details) was:

— On Nov. 19, 1533, at Westminster, with Henry Norris.
— On Nov. 27, 1533, at Westminster, with William Brereton.
— On Dec. 8, 1533, at Hampton Court, with William Brereton.
— On May 19, 1534, at Greenwich, with Mark Smeaton.
— On May 20, 1534, at Greenwich, with Francis Weston.
— On June 20, 1534, at Greenwich, with Francis Weston.
— On April 26, 1535, at Westminster, with Mark Smeaton.
— On Dec. 29, 1535, at Eltham, with George Boleyn.

In addition to her “foul and insatiable lust,” she had conspired with her paramours against Henry’s life. She had told them “she had never wished to choose the King in her heart” and had “promised to marry one of them when the King died.” To keep them her love-slaves, she had played one off against the other, giving them outrageous gifts.

Cromwell and his Attorney-General, Sir Christopher Hales, introduced two other charges: that she had poisoned the Princess Dowager and attempted to do the same to the Lady Mary; and had injured the King’s health maliciously—for when the King became aware of her evil, he “had conceived in his heart such inward dis I knew, regardless of how others snickered at it.

She had mocked the King behind his back, her accusers said, made fun of his poetry, his music, his clothes, and his person. She had also written her brother George concerning her pregnancy, indicating that the child was in fact his.

Anne rose to defend herself. Standing as proudly as ever I had seen her, she tossed her head and spoke in a loud, ringing voice that carried to the farthest reaches of the stone chamber.

Significantly, she did not answer the latter charges. She addressed only the adultery ones, claiming that she was innocent, although she had given Francis Weston money, and had asked Mark Smeaton to her chambers to play the virginal. She spoke with eloquence and wit, and with unearthly charm.

But it did her no good. When the verdict was called, the majority of peers pronounced her guilty. Then her dread uncle Norfolk rose to pronounce sentence:

“Guilty of high treason, adultery, and incest. Thou hast desired death, and thy judgement is this: That thou shalt be burnt here within the Tower of London on the green, else to have thy head smitten off as the King’s pleasure shall be further known.”

A great silence, then a movement from the peers. Henry Percy has collapsed. He must be carried, lying limply on his attendant’s shoulder, from the Hall. Anne watches him, and something in her face changes, withers.

She speaks now, but without fire.

“O God, Thou knowest if I have merited this death.” She pauses. “My Lords, I will not say your sentence is unjust, nor presume that my reasons can prevail against your convictions. I am willing to believe that you have sufficient reasons for what you have done, but then they must be other than those which have been produced in court, for I am clear of all the offences which you then laid to my charge. I have ever been a faithful wife to the King, though I do not say I have always shown him that humility which his goodness to me and the honour to which he raised me merited.

“I confess I have had jealous fancies and suspicions of him which I had not discretion and wisdom enough to conceal at all times. But God knows, and is my witness, that I never sinned against him in any other way.

“Think not I say this in the hope to prolong my life. God hath taught me how to die and He will strengthen my faith.

“Think not that I am so bewildered in my mind as not to lay the honour of my chastity to heart now in my extremity, when I have maintained it all my life long, as much as ever Queen did. I know these my last words will avail me nothing, but for the justification of my chastity and honour.

“As for my brother and those others who are unjustly condemned, I would willingly suffer many deaths to deliver them; but since I see it so pleases the King, I shall willingly accompany them in death, with this assurance, that I shall lead an endless life with them in peace.

“I beg you, good people, pray for me.”
She rises wearily, and Kingston leads her out of the Hall and back to her imprisonment.

Her uncle is crying openly. The charges are read. They consist of the incest and adultery with his sister, the Queen. He denies it. Of plotting the King’s death. He denies it. Of implying that he is the father of the Princess Elizabeth.

At this he smirks and keeps silent, raising one eyebrow mockingly.

A last charge, written on paper, is presented to the peers, then shown to Lord Rochford; it is forbidden to speak the charges aloud before the people. The information has been supplied by Rochford’s own wife, Jane.

“Ah, yes,” George Boleyn says loudly, and reads the paper word for word. ‘My sister Queen Anne has told me that the King is impotent. He no longer has either vigour or virtue in his private parts.’ He laughs, jarringly. Cromwell protests, scolding like an angry jaybird. Boleyn smiles, saying, ”But I will not create suspicion in a manner likely to prejudice the issue the King might have from a second marriage.”

In one sentence, the King is now the accused. The next marriage has been mentioned, the unspoken thing the people are wondering about. Is it true the King has already chosen a successor? Could it be that all this is arranged merely to facilitate a new marriage?

But Cromwell has a higher trump: yet another statement by Jane Boleyn, Lady Rochford. She swears that there is an incestuous relationship between her husband and his sister the Queen. The “accursed secret,” known heretofore only to herself, she must in conscience reveal.

Now the accuser is discredited by his own wife, shown for the foul thing he is.

The twenty-six peers pronounce him guilty, and the Duke reads the sentence:

“**You shall now go again to the Tower from whence you came, and be drawn from the said Tower of London through the City of London, there to be hanged and then, being alive, cut down—and then your members cut off and your bowels taken out of your body and burnt before you, and then your head cut off and your body divided into four pieces, and your head and body to be set at such places as the King shall assign.**”

A cruel hush descended on London after the trials, a breath-holding until the executions. Those who passed by the Tower could hear hammering, and knew the scaffolds were being reassembled, dragged out of storage where they had lain since More’s execution last summer.

It was said that the King passed these spring nights on his barge, courting Jane, and that the sound of music and the glow of lanterns carried across the water. They said he was rowed back and forth under the shadow of the Tower. They said a great deal of nonsense, but it made a striking story and painted a picture of the King as a satyr. The truth is that he went out on his barge only once, and not to “the shadow of the Tower,” but to visit Jane at Nicholas Carew’s house on the Thames.
HENRY VIII:

It was over, then. The trial was over and the Witch had not escaped her just sentence. Crum reported it all to me—even, sadly, the personal attacks on me. I was not affected by that; my only fear was that somehow, even yet, Anne wTo be burnt or beheaded at the King’s pleasure—I remembered her horror of fire. Would it not be revenge for my “pleasure” to inflict that on her? For her to meet her death, bound and screaming, for her flesh to be roasted, her blood boiled in her veins? I could smell the charred flesh, the stench of her hair aflame....

But I could not. I could not do that, knowing that she was bound for hell as soon as her soul quitted her body—where there would be fire aplenty, the everlasting fire that burns but does not consume. I would not imitate or mock the Devil in providing an earthly substitute. Let Anne quit this earth without bodily pain.

But there was one thing I would have of her, one thing that only she could give: information, a confession that our marriage had been false all along. I would send Cranmer to her, to receive her confession, holding out the promise to spare her the flames if she only admitted it, admitted that she had brought this marriage about by witchcraft, and now abjured it. For I would be freed of her before her death. She would not breathe her last as my wife. I would not be linked to her!

“Go to her,” I commissioned Cranmer, “to her suite in the Tower, and extract an oath from her regarding this matter.” I noted the questioning look on his face. “Yes, she still keeps state, under my express command. She has her royal quarters, her jewels and gowns.” I remembered More in his bookless cell. “They were what she sold her soul for, were they not? Let her enjoy them to the end.”

She would keep everything to the end (except her title as my wife), and suddenly I envisioned the fitting way for her to depart this life. I would send for a French swordsman, and he would perform the execution deftly and with style. She had always loved the “French way”; doubtless a good English axe would be too crude for her sensibilities.

I wrote out the order for the Lieutenant of Calais. What a surprise I was giving her, right up to the last....

I began to laugh—first a little, then hysterically.

WILL:

We heard the screams of laughter coming from the King’s private chamber, but dared not enter. It sounded as if a madman were within, and we feared that somehow an intruder had gained entrance. The laughter was not recognizable as the King’s; that was the reason why at length a guard opened the door and checked inside.

There was no one there but King Henry, seated before his writing desk, and red in the face, looking apoplectic.

I approached him—I was the only one who dared—and stood ready to summon the physician. He had suffered a seizure, I was sure.

“Now, good my Lord, help is coming,” I said, in what I meant to be my most reassuring tone.

“Help?” he said, in a quiet voice. The red was draining from his face. “Nay, there’s no help for it. ‘Tis done, ’tis done.” He indicated a letter, ready to be sent. “A pretty French death,” he said. “One’s death should be consistent with one’s life, should it not? Only we seldom can arrange it. Well, I shall oblige.”

Had the strain, tarted to rise, then shook his head. “One thing more. I must give them an easy death as well. Commute the sentence to a simple beheading. There, that’ll do.” He began scribbling orders on parchment. “But they must content themselves with a local headsman and a regular axe.

On the morning of May seventeenth, with Anne watching from her window, her five lovers and co-conspirators were marched out to the hill beyond the Tower moat, there to mount the scaffold. It was a fine high one, so that all the onlookers (and the crowd was vast) could have a clear view.

Sir William Brereton was the first to stand upon the platform. He whined like a coward and shook bodily.
“I have deserved to die, if it were a thousand deaths,” he cried. Then, at the motioning of the headsman to lay his head upon the block, he protested, “But the cause whereof I judge not—but if you judge, judge the best.” Seeking further delay, he repeated himself three or four more times.

But at length his voice failed, and he was forced to put his head down. The headsman raised his great axe and chopped clean through Brereton’s neck. The head rolled in the straw, and the headsman held it up, as was customary.

It took some few minutes to remove the body and head, lay fresh straw, and wipe clean the block and axe. The dead man was taken down by steps on the opposite side of the scaffold.

Next came Henry Norris. He said little, but what he did say was flattering to the King.

“I do not think that any gentleman of the court owes more to the King than I do, and has been more ungrateful and regardless of it than I have. I pray God to have mercy on my soul.” Then he cooperatively laid his head on the block. The headsman struck, and it was over in the time it takes to draw a good breath.

Sir Francis Weston, that pretty boy whose wife and mother had offered a ransom of one hundred thousand crowns to redeem his life, stood fresh-faced on the scaffold, the blue May skies no clearer than his eyes.

“I had thought to have lived in abomination these twenty or thirty years, and then to have made amends. I thought little it had come to this,” he said, seeking to be clever and fashionably lighthearted right up to the end. When the headsman held up his severed head, though, the eyes were no longer a sweet blue but glazed-over grey.

Overhead, black shapes were gathering. The buzzards had scented blood and seen moving creatures suddenly cease to move.

Mark Smeaton stood proudly on the scaffold. “Masters, I pray you all pray for me—for I have deserved the death.” The lovelorn lute-player fell eagerly upon the block, as if afraid he might be contradicted or denied his death.

Last was Lord Rochford, George Boleyn. He could not help but see the stacked coffins to his right, and the shadows of the buzzards circling overhead, making spots on the scaffold. He looked out at the crowd, then over across the moat to his sister’s apartments.

Everyone was silent, awaiting his speech. But, strangely, he began speaking of Lutheranism (he had long been suspected of leaning toward heresy). “I desire you that no man will be discouraged from the Gospel at my fall. For if I had lived according to the Gospel—as I loved it and spake of it—I had never come to this.” He went proudly "3”.

The hearers were not interested in a sermon, which they could hear from any friar or court preacher. It was not religion that they wanted, but blood and sins.

“I never offended the King,” he suddenly said, defiantly. “There is no occasion for me to repeat the cause for which I am condemned. You would have little pleasure in hearing me tell it,” he said petulantly, cheating them of their fun. “I forgive you all. And God save the King.” He might as well have stuck out his tongue. The nasty salute was his farewell to the world. The axe struck, and his head was disconnected.

The five coffins were borne away in the warm May sunshine, and the disgruntled buzzards flapped away.

Anne was to die the next day. But Henry’s “surprise,” the French swordsman, had not yet arrived, so the execution was postponed. The original day proved to be windy, and full of thunderstorms, so it was just as well.

Anne was to be executed within the precincts of the Tower, on the little green outside the Queen’s lodgings. No more than thirty people were allowed to witness it, and the legs of the scaffold were lowered so that no one standing beyond the Tower walls could glimpse the proceedings inside. Invitations to the event were eagerly coveted. The Chancellor, the three Dukes (Norfolk, Suffolk, and Richmond), Cromwell, and the Privy Councillors were called upon to be witnesses, as well as the Lord Mayor of London, with the sheriffs and aldermen. A cannoneer would be stationed on the battlements, to fire the cannon the instant the Queen was dead.

The King would not attend. Nor would Cranmer. Nor any of the Seymours.

All the night before, Anne kept awake, praying and singing. She composed a long dirge-ballad for her lute, as if in defiance of the fact that her brother could no longer do it. She was determined to be celebrated; and distractedly, on her last night on earth, she wrote these verses, and set them to music:

Oh death, rock me asleep
Bring on my quiet rest
Let pass my very guiltless ghost
Out of my careful breast.
Ring out the doleful knell,
Let its sound my death tell;
For I must die,
There is no remedy,
For now I die!

My pains who can express
Alas! they are so strong!
My dolour will not suffer strength
My life for to prolong
Alone in prison strange!
I wail my destiny;
Woe worth this cruel hap, that I
Should taste this misery.

Farewell my pleasures past,
Welcome my present pain
I feel my torments so increase
That life cannot remain.
Sound now the passing bell,
Rung is my doleful knell,
For its sound my death doth tell,
Death doth draw nigh
Sound the knell dolefully,
For now I die!

Defiled is my name, full sore
Through cruel spite and false report,
For wrongfully he judge of me;
Unto my fame a mortal wound,
Say what ye list, it may not be,
You seek for that shall not be found.

Besides her praying and composing her ballad, she had one other bit of earthly business to attend to. She asked one of her women attendants to seek Mary’s forgiveness for the wrongs she, Anne, had done her and for the severity with which she had treated her, for, until that was accomplished, her conscience could not be quiet. The woman promised to do this in Anne’s name.

Dawn came before five, and Master Kingston was already exhausted from the tasks of the day ahead. As host for the execution of a Queen, he naturally had many details of both practicality and protocol to attend to. The witnessing dignitaries must be properly received and grouped about the scaffold according to rank; the twenty pounds in gold alms, provided by the King, to be distributed by Anne before her death, must be got up in little velvet bags; black drapery must be hung about the scaffold; and all chronicles mentioning the execution of a King or Queen must be consulted for the last time, in hopes of finding some overlooked detail that would provide the proper embellishment for the hideous occasion.

In addition, there was the matter of meeting the French headsman and giving him instructions; having the grave already dug and waiting; and procuring a coffin. Kingston was all in a dither, as he had received no instructions from King Henry about either the grave or the coffin, and yet the Queen’s body would have to be disposed of somehow.

He was running late. And then came the welcome news: the King had postponed the hour of the execution from nine o’clock until noon. But still no word about the coffin!

Kingston sought out Anne to tell her of the delay. She was disappointed. “I had thought by noon to be past my pain,” she said sadly. Rushing toward her gaoler, she whispered, “I am innocent!” She grabbed Kingston’s arm, gripping it painfully. “I am innocent!” Then, in one of her characteristic mood shifts, she suddenly cried, “Is it painful?”
“No,” said the Constable. “It is over too quickly. There should be no pain, it is so subtle.”
She circled her neck with her hands. “I have a little neck,” she said. “But the axe is so thick, and rough.”
“Have you not heard? The King seeks to spare you that. He has sent to France for a swordsman to perform the duty.”

“Ah!” She smiled, a little sliver of a smile. “He was ever a good and gentle sovereign lord to me.” She began to
laugh, that hideous, raucous laughter which cut itself off as abruptly as it began. “Will you carry a message to His Majesty on my behalf?”

Kingston nodded.

“Tell him he has ever been constant in his career of advancing me: from a private gentlewoman he made me a
Marquess, from a Marquess a Queen, and now he hath left no higher degree of honour, he gives my innocency the
crown of martyrdom.” She gestured sweetly. “Will you tell my Lord that?”

“Never have I seen one to be executed who has such joy and pleasure in death,” he said, to himself rather than to
her, him.

“Master Kingston! Master Kingston! The people will have no difficulty finding a nickname for me. I shall be la
Reine Anne sans tête ... Queen Anne Lack-Head!”

Frightened, he slammed the thick oak door on her shrieking laughter, but it carried right through the wood.

All this I heard later from the Constable himself. As for the actual execution, I witnessed it in the King’s stead. As
the hour approached, Henry dressed himself all in white. I dared not ask him why, but there was a dreadful
deliberateness in his choice of clothing, as if he were performing a secret ritual. He had kept entirely to himself for
the past three days: beginning with the executions of the five men, then on the next day, wild and windy, when he
had awaited the arrival of the ship from Calais carrying the swordsman from St. Omer. Now he made ready to go
out, ponderously and methodically. His face was expressionless, but I was shocked when I beheld it. The three days
had aged him a decade.

“Go there for me,” he said. (No need to ask where “there” was.) “Watch it all. Tell me of it later. I shall be at
Westminster. Outside. Perhaps I shall ride.”

Yes, outside was the place of choice, this sweet May morning, when all the meadows were springing mint and
violets. A warm wind had come up out of the south.

To die on such a morning would require extraordinary courage.

It was just noon when the door from the Queen’s lodgings opened and Anne emerged, escorted by her only
known women friends, Thomas Wyatt’s sister and Margaret Lee. She was exquisitely dressed, reminding us all of
her extraordinary ability to radiate beauty when she so chose. We were all struck by the high colour in her cheeks,
the glitter in her eyes; she was more alive than any other person on the’ green.

Her neckline was low, to expose her neck and make it easier for her executioner.

She mounted the scaffold carefully, holding up her skirts, then presided over the proceedings as if she addressed
Parliament.

Before her was the great wooden execution block, with a cupped indentation for her chin, and a four-inch span for
her neck to stretch across. Around its base was enough straw to soak up the blood.

The Frenchman, slender and athletic, stood to her right, his steel sword pointed downward. To her left stood his
assistants; their grisly duty was to tend to her headless trunk. A length of black cloth was at the ready, to cover her
with. They smiled at her.

Overhead the sky was clear, and no cloud was visible. The damnable birds, lately returned from the winter,
insisted on chirping and singing, flaunting their freedom and careless disregard.

“Good Christian people,” she spoke, “I am come hither to die, according to law, for by the law I am judged to die,
and therefore I will speak nothing against it.” Her words rose, and her eyes seemed to fasten on each of us
individually. She looked directly into mine, and in an instant I recalled—nay, relived—every meeting we had ever
had.

“I come here only to die,” she repeated. “And thus to or more merciful Prince was there never. To me he was ever
a good and gentle sovereign lord.”

Her words were respectful, but there was irony and mockery in them. The message was the same as that which
Kingston had not dared to carry. Anne would make sure it reached Henry’s ears.

She closed her eyes for a moment and fell silent, as if she had finished. “If any person will meddle with my cause, I require them to judge the best. Thus I take my leave of the world and of you, and heartily desire you all to pray for me.”

Her words were ended. There had been no protestations of innocence, no mention of her daughter, no pious exhortations, no jests. Anne had arranged her exquisite death as she had arranged her fêtes and masques: out of the bare materials she had fashioned something of memorable, fragile beauty.

She turned to her ladies and gave them their farewell remembrances—a gold and black enamelled book of devotions, a few private words.

Then she calmly removed her headpiece and collar to ready herself for the swordsman. Refusing any blindfold, she closed her eyes and knelt down beside the block.

Then, suddenly, her courage deserted her. She heard rustling on her right, and, terror-stricken, looked up to see the swordsman advancing on her. Her eye froze him, and he retreated. Trembling, she lowered her head again, squeezing her eyes shut.

“O Jesu have mercy on my soul O Jesu have mercy on my soul—” she rattled on. Again her head jerked up, and she caught her executioner as he raised his sword.

She forced her head back onto the block, her whole body straining to hear her executioner move. “To Jesus Christ I commend my soul, to Jesus Christ I commend my soul, O God have pity on my soul; O God have pity—”

We saw the clever Frenchman signal to his accomplices on Anne’s left. They moved, and shuffled forward. “—on my soul. O God—” She started up toward her left, and saw the assistants moving toward her. While she stared at them, her head turned toward the left, the swordsman struck. His thin blade flashed in an arc behind Anne’s line of vision. It cut through her slender neck like a cleaver through a rose stem: some initial resistance, a crunching, then a clean sever.

Her head dropped from her shoulders like a piece of sliced sausage, and landed, plop! in the straw. I saw the cut neck: a cross-section of tubes, about six or seven of them, like a geometrical drawing. Then two or three of the tubes began to spurt blood, for Anne’s heart was still pumping. Bright red gushes of blood squirted like milk from an obscene cow’s udder—even the sound was the same. The squirting kept on and on. Why was there still so much blood left in her?

The hands hung down, trailing, beside the block. The suave French swordsman strode forward and felt in the straw for the round object that was Anne’s head. It had landed some two or three feet to the left. He held it up by its long, glossy hair.

The cannon boomed, once, upon the battlements. 

It still had her appearance, as in life. Her eyes moved, and seemed to look mournfully at the bleeding body still kneeling at the block. The lips moved. She was saying something....

The witnesses broke ranks and sought to remove themselves from this incomprehensible horror. There was no one who would dare tell the King of these last moments; certainly I would not, either.

Everyone scattered, leaving the severed head (the swordsman had departed) and the blood-drained trunk slumped on the scaffold.

The King had not provided a coffin.

In the end, her ladies found an empty arrow-chest in the cellar of the royal apartments. It was too short for a normal person, but it would serve for a decapitated trunk, with the head tucked inside. They wrapped the cooling body with its congealing bloody neck-stump in the black cloth so courteously provided by the Frenchman, and insisted that the sexton of the Tower chapel of St. Peter-ad-Vincula reopen the fresh grave of George Boleyn and lower the makeshift coffin on top of his.

There was no service, no funeral. Anne’s remains were left literally to shift for themselves.
Beyond the environs of London, the wildness of the country was the same as that which must have greeted Julius Caesar. It was all pristine, new, untouched. I took my horse up the wooded hills which, even in the shade, were recreating themselves in green. I tried not to think of what was taking place in the Tower and its grounds. The world was recreating itself; could I not do the same?

Behind me the Thames wound in the low areas, a happy ribbon, reflecting the sun. Across from Greenwich lay my ships at anchor, their masts bristling, making splinters against the rippling waters, downstream from the Tower... the Tower....

I heard the cannon: a small, faraway sound.

Anne was dead. The Witch was no more, not upon this earth.

I should have felt elated, delivered, safe. But this heaviness of spirit was not to be removed, ever. There was to be no rebirth in green. I was permanently changed, never again to return to my former self. Outwardly I might retain my original appearance, like a rotting melon: all ribbed and rounded on the outside, all fallen and decayed in the secret inward parts.

The cannon spoke of her death. What of mine?

It is not all or none, I told myself. There is a vast tract stretching between the beginning, in health and simplicity, and the end, in disease and convoluted compromises. I tread it now; that unsung territory is my challenge, my making, my own private landscape.

“Jane,” I called, from the courtyard. “Jane.” It was not a command but a cry.

Jane appeared in the upper window, above the doorway of Nicholas Carew’s house. She had sought the cleanliness of the open country once Anne had been arrested and there was no more Queen to serve, no need to remain at court.

“I am here,” she said. She left the window, came down the stairs, and walked slowly out the front door. I dismounted and stood waiting, weary, yet accepting that weariness as something that would never go away, would only have to be shared.

She came to me silently, extending her hands. Her face shone with an otherworldly love and kindness. She understood, without being contaminated by her knowledge.

“Jane,” I said, making Jane.

Afterward, at York Place, I gave a great afternoon banquet, ostensibly to celebrate Whitsun—for the centerpiece was a huge cake of crushed strawberries, seven layers to commemorate the seven gifts the Holy Spirit conferred upon the Apostles at Pentecost—but it was in reality a bride-cake, and a bride-feast.

England had a true Queen at last, and no one begrudged her me.

I ended the celebrations by bringing her with me to the Opening of Parliament on June eighth.

Seated beside me on the Chair of Estate, looking out over both Lords and Commons, she heard Chancellor Audley exclaim, “Ye well remember the great anxieties and perturbations this invincible Sovereign”—he nodded toward me—“suffered on account of his first unlawful marriage. So all ought to bear in mind the perils and dangers he was under when he contracted his second marriage, and that the lady Anne and her accomplices have since been justly found guilty of high treason, and have met their due reward for it.” He shook his head as the ugly black shadow passed over the entire Parliament, and over my soul as well.

“What man of middle life would not this deter from marrying a third time? Yet this our most excellent Prince again condescendeth to contract matrimony! And hath, on the humble petition of the nobility, taken to himself a wife, this time, who by her excellent beauty and pureness of flesh and blood, is apt—God willing—to conceive issue.” The company rose in acknowledgment of this.

“The lords should pray for heirs to the crown by this marriage,” Audley concluded.

Jane was now my wife, and Queen indeed: wedded by a true rite, saluted by the common people, and honoured by Parliament. It was done, and I was happy at last.

Happy at last. Why is it so difficult to describe happiness? There are words aplenty for anguish, despair, suffering, and these are full of vitality. But happiness is left with weak verbs, supine adjectives, drooping adverbs. A description of happiness moves a reader to skip over those passages and causes a writer to flounder in treacle.

Yet how can we recall it if we do not write of it? We put up summer in preserved fruits and conserves, we trap autumn in wine made from late-ripening grapes, we make perfumes of spring flowers. That way we can recall, albeit in a slanted or altered way, some essence of the moment.

But human happiness... all our words for it are so bland, as if the thing itself were bland, or merely an absence of pain. When in fact happiness is solid, muscular, and strong; its colour all the spectrum of light; its sounds as sweet as water splashing in a Pharaoh’s desert palace; and its smells those of the flesh and its life: fur, heat, cooking.

I was happy with Jane, as happy as one of the great cats stretched out in the sun around Wolf Hall. Only touch
them and feel their deep, rumbling purrs, as they rest entirely in the present moment. That was me, that summer Jane and I were one.
Happiness begets courage, inasmuch as we raise our eyes from huddled self-absorption and, secure behind the ramparts of our solid, sun-.”

Pope Paul III. There was no doubt that in this gentleman I had a tireless, clever adversary. He, unlike Clement, had drawn a line, and I was clearly outside it. Thereafter he made no apologies. His goal was to dethrone me or, failing that, to discredit me. It was he who had made Fisher a Cardinal, and it was he who had published the Papal bull which called for a Holy War against me by foreign powers and absolved all Englishmen from allegiance to me on my own soil. He was also grooming young Reginald Pole, a sort of latter-day Thomas More who had fled abroad, to be his weapon against me, deploying him on missions to implement Papal policy. I had been Reginald’s patron, paying for all his education, both here and abroad. The Pope had taken him from me and turned him against me. I left his name unmarked.

The monasteries. There were more than eight hundred of them scattered over the realm, and Cromwell’s report, *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, divided them into “lesser” houses and “greater.” Some three hundred of them were “lesser” and had an income below an arbitrarily selected point. These houses had only a few members and were likely to be lax and poorly run. Certainly it was inefficient of the orders to have a great number of tiny monasteries in operation. Cromwell had recommended dissolving these establishments, letting the truly committed monks transfer to other, more disciplined houses of their orders, and releasing the rest from their vows. The property, of course, would revert to the Crown, as it was treason to send it to Rome. He reckoned that millions of pounds would accrue to me. I left the word “monasteries” un-inked. More to discuss with Cromwell.

Now for a personal inventory. I wrote “poison.” I feared that Anne’s poison was slow-acting and irreversible. For my leg had not healed, as I had assumed it would do upon her demise. And Fitzroy—his cough had not lessened, and his colour paled day by day. I prayed that I could outlast the life of the poison, and ultimately defeat it, like a city under siege. Sooner or later its power must wane and abate. But it looked to be a long bodily siege. I was determined to withstand it. Would Mary? All the more reason for us to make peace. I was convinced that isolation increased the power of the poison. Under “poison” I included my impotence, which obviously had been due entirely to Anne’s malevolence, for it had disappeared with her.

General health. Since my fall in the lists, and the permanent state of ulceration on my thigh, I had had to curtail my athletic activities. The lack of exercise had caused me to gain weight for the first time in my life. My very flesh seemed to expand and change from tautness to looseness. I tried every means of moderate exercise to reverse the process and bring it under control: walks with Jane, long, slow cantering rides, archery, bowling. But the tide of creeping slackness and fat was relentless. It seemed I needed the violent excesses of long hunts with hounds and horses, wherein the horses would tire before ever I did; the sweating tennis matches wherein I would bet upon myself; the foot combat at the barriers in tournaments when I must leap and swing swords while encased in one hundred pounds of tortoiselike armour; even the rigorous dances in court celebrations. Deprived of these tests, my flesh sighed, expanded, and began to sag.

I left “general health” with no black line across it.

Cromwell had shown mounds, the actual day-to-day work was done by kennel-masters and dog-breeders, a staff of ten.

This fine day in late July the dogs were being exercised in the open fields not far from Blackheath. Like men, they grew restless and despondent if they were kept indoors and inactive too long; they were meant to run, especially the greyhounds and Scottish deerhounds.

The latter were an interesting breed. I had only lately been successful in obtaining puppies of this noted dog of the open northern country, which hunted by sight and not by smell. Of course, a man had to have a fleet horse and be an expert rider to keep up; in our southern areas, “chases” had been cut through forested areas in order to hunt in this manner.

“They say these dogs have been in Scotland since ancient days,” I explained to Cromwell. “But clansmen also claim that they were bred originally from Irish ‘swifthounds’—when Ireland and Scotland were exchanging families and settlers back and forth. ‘Tis all the same, the wild North. Savages.” I admired a pack of deerhounds bounding
off together. “But they breed good animals.”

Cromwell smiled, and sighed expansively. It never failed to surprise me how well the outdoors became him. I was used to thinking of him as a purely indoor breed. “Perhaps one day they will be tamed and civilized. But not in our lifetime,” he said. “Now we must merely contain them.”

How quickly he came to the point. The open country gave us the opportunity to discuss it, as I had planned. “The disaffected lords assembled by Chapuys—what of them? In my experience, a group never disbands without having made a gesture of some sort.” I threw it out to him.

“Yes, it is like a woman all dressed for a ball. She must dance to some tune.”

“Well, I’ve got no tunes to play on them.”

“A northern one, most like. But as yet there’s nothing. Wait long enough, and eventually the maiden takes off her finery and goes to bed.”

We walked together, smiling and seemingly discussing the dogs. We approached another trainer, with a group of short-legged, dark hounds. He was offering them a piece of cloth to smell.

“How are the slow-hounds progressing?” I asked him.

“Excellently. They have been able to track three different men through a forest, a market-square, and a graveyard—right after a funeral!—and each time identified the proper one in a crowd.” He grinned.

“These track by scent,” I said. “They are of great use in tracking outlaws, kidnappers, and so on. My breeders are attempting to purify the strain even more—to make their scent keener and their endurance greater. Then they’ll be almost on a par with your agents, Crum.” Why I needled him in front of others, I knew not. Crum smiled, a poisonous smile. It said: Why must I endure this?

We nodded and moved on.

“You have read the report of the monastic visitations?” he asked, the moment we were out of earshot.

“Yes. The immorality your commissioners found was ... a disgrace.” I had hoped that St. Osweth’s was a degradedus “trusted to see the King of Scots King of England.” The bailiff of Bampton hoped to see the Scots King “wear the flower of England.” The vicar of Horncchurch, Hampshire, had said, “The King and his council had made a way by will and craft to put down all manner of religious; but they would hold hard, for their part, which was their right; and the King could not pull down none, nor all his Council.”

A Sussex man, when told about my fall in the lists, had replied, “It were better he had broken his neck.” A Cambridge master called me “a mole who should be put down”; his students, “a tyrant more cruel than Nero” and “a beast and worst than a beast.”

Other statements reported by Crum’s agents were: “Cardinal Wolsey had been an honest man if he had had an honest master”; “The King is a fool and my Lord Privy Seal another”; “Our King wants only an apple and a fair wench to dally with”; and then there was a yeoman’s detailed recounting of how I had been riding near Eltham one day, seen his wife, abducted her, and taken her away to my bed.

It was certainly true, what the Kentish man said, “If the King knew his subjects’ true feeling, it would make his heart quake.” The sample I did hear, did just that. My own unsettled and miserable state, from the beginning of my Great Matter to its end, had transferred itself to them. My new contentment would also transfer itself, but it would take time.

I had lost my son, but I would cheat the Witch of claiming my daughter as well. Under Cromwell’s threats to drop her suit, and Chapuys’s advice, and the Emperor’s final lack of commitment to her cause, Mary gave in. She copied out the “suggested” letter, provided by Cromwell, in which she admitted her mother’s marriage to me was incestuous, in which she renounced all allegiance to the Pope and acknowledged me as the Supreme Head of the Church in England, and her spiritual as well as her temporal father. When I received the letter, I thanked God for it. Now all was clear for our reconciliation. I would have Mary back again; I would have my little girl!

Theologians call the parable of the Prodigal Son the sweetest yet strongest story in the Bible. Now I knew how that father had felt. Or was I being presumptuous? I would read the parable over in the new translation that would soon be issued under my patronage.

Already it was nicknamed “the Great Bible” for its size. The recently promulgated “Ten Articles of Faith” required for believers in the—wy!—Church of England specified that each church should have a Bible in English, and Miles Coverdale’s translation was being used for the purpose. Originally it was to be printed in France, for their presses were larger than ours, but the English churchmen had run afool of the French Inquisitor-General and had had to transfer their entire printing operation to England. The copy I consulted was one of the advance ones, sent for my inspection. One necessary change: Anne’s name on the dedication page, as Queen, must be replaced by Jane’s, as was being done elsewhere in stone and wood carvings.

I turned to Luke, Chapter fifteen, verse ten.

Likewise I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth.
Or one person who realizes that he is not a sinner.

*And he said, A certain man had two sons.*

To have hoped so fully, so that the thing seemed so assured . . . now this second death. God teases us on the rack of expectations; the earthly ones we construct as implements of torture are poor imitations of His own.

The door opened. I was no longer looking at it, and so Mary was fully in the room before I saw her. And then she seemed a vision.

A tiny young woman—that was my “little girl,” She was short, and that made her seem young, belied her true age.

“Father.” Her voice was low, gruff. It seemed an odd thing to issue from her throat.

Before I could reply, she flung herself down at my feet and began reciting, in that near-growling voice, “I, most humbly lying at your feet to perceive your gracious clemency, my merciful, passionate, and most blessed father, Supreme Head of the Church of England....” The words were all stuck end-to-end as she admitted her mother’s marriage incestuous, abandoned her allegiance to Rome, and acknowledged my claims of overlordship of the Church of England.

I bent down and pulled her gently up, hugged her to me. Her head came only up to my chest.

“Mary, daughter. You need say no more. Thank you for coming back to me.”

At once she began to cry, and I knew she wept for her “betrayal” of her dead mother. But to go on living is no betrayal. I said nothing and let her cry. But oh! my heart sang to have her back . . . back from both Katherine and Anne. God be thanked that they were both dead. Their deaths freed me from my past, and my mistakes.

“You are welcome here at court,” I finally said. “Come, the Queen wishes to see you again.”

“Queen Jane was always kind,” she said, in a low monotone.

Jane had come to court when Katherine was already isolated and beginning her stubborn martyrdom. The self-seekers had followed Anne’s rising star. But Jane had remained with Katherine and befriended Mary, who was only seven years younger. (Jane had been born the same year I became King.)

Together we walked from my inmost private room and out into the common chamber. I requested that the Queen come straightway. While we waited, Mary and I stood together awkwardly. I no longer felt elated, but almost uncomfortable with a grown woman who was a stranger but also my daughter. Would Jane never come and relieve this tension?

*Jane, Jane, help me, as you always do....*

Jane appeared, at the far end of the chamber, and came swiftly toward Mary, arms outstretched, a great natural smile on her face.

“You are welcome here at court,” I finally said. “Come, the Queen wishes to see you again.”

“I have so longed for this day,” said Jane. “Now my happiness is complete.” She held out her other arm to me and locked us all together, turning the water of awkwardness into the wine of ease, against all odds.
Edward the Confessor. Pilgrims had come from far away to see it, and had addressed their most fervent prayers to it. It was a glass vial containing drops of the Virgin’s milk—miraculous help for barren women.

Cromwell’s inspectors had found it to be a fraud, refilled regularly with ground Dover chalk dissolved in thin olive oil. The slightly yellow tint gave it an authentic look of antiquity.

The monks at that particular shrine had made a tidy living from exhibiting their precious “relic.” “Disgraceful,” I said, but more in sadness than in anger.

I turned to the next confiscation. This was a marble Virgin that wept “real tears” and could be petitioned (with money) to share one’s own sufferings. I turned it around. There was a small line behind the head, indicating an opening of some sort. I pressed upon the neck, and the stone piece moved outward. I prized it out, and found the head to be hollow. There was a porous container inside to be filled with salt water that oozed through the minute ducts leading to the Virgin’s eyes at just the proper rate. It was an ingenious contraption. And it only had to be refilled once a week.

All across the land there were similar versions of these famous hoaxes. They could not be maintained without the conspiracy of corrupt monks. How could one profess himself a follower of Christ and yet practise the same trickery as the priests of Isis or the Canaanites?

Parliament had passed the Act of Suppression of the Lesser Monasteries. The Act began: “Forasmuch as manifest sin, vicious, carnal, and abominable living is daily used among the small abbeys . . .” It was based on the reports that at Garadon there were five homosexuals, “one with ten boys”; that at Selby one of the monks had had sexual relations “with five or six married women” who had come to seek benefit from the Abbey’s “Virgin Girdle,” which protected one in childbirth; that at Watert, Brother Jackson was “guilty of incest with a nun,” and that at Calder, one Matthew Ponsonby “showed peculiar depravity.” At Bath Priory—where the prior had tried to buy Cromwell off by sending him a leash of Irish wolfhounds—monks were “more corrupt than any others in vices with both sexes.” At Lewes, the prior had “eight whores” and the place was a “very whorehouse and unnatural vices are here, especially the sub-prior, as appears by the confession of a fair young monk.”

One by one the houses were being closed. Those monks who had a true calling were being transferred to larger, stricter houses. The rest were to leave and find their livelihood elsewhere. Their monastic property was to be sold and the proceeds to revert to the Crown. The relics were being sent here, for my inspection. It was an unhappy task.

Monasticism had begun as a pure flowering of spiritualism. The great founder of communal Christian living (for until then there had been only desert-living Christian hermits) was Saint Benedict. He thought it better for men to live with other men, and gathered together hermits and wrote instructions, called the Rule, by which they could actually increase their spiritualism by living in a community governed by holy rules. In his view, a man should best divide his time between prayer, study, and manual work.

In time, other interpretations of his Rule prevailed. The Cistercians stressed manual labor and apartness from civilizalsasted eight months and even the summers were grey and raw, leading Northumberland men to claim they had “two winters—a white one and a green one.”

Since ancient times these peripheral lands had gone their own way, little connected to anything further south. A few great warrior families—the Percys, the Nevilles, the Stanleys—had claimed overlordship of these dreary, cruel wastes, and through them, the Crown had demanded obeisance. But these people knew nothing of me, and I nothing of them. The only touch of love and softness they had ever known was through the great Cistercian monasteries: Fountains, Rievaulx, Jervaulx, Kirkstall. There they could stumble in following a snowstorm and find warmth, food, shelter. There, and only there, could travellers stay the night in safety. There they could be taught to read and write, if they so desired.

Now rumour reached them that their abbeys were to be closed. They had heard, distantly, that ties with Rome were broken. For them, the Church—through Rome—was their one distinction, their one blessing, that set them apart from their wild neighbours even further north. Word had reached them that the newly independent “Church of England” had set forth its beliefs in a statement of Ten Articles that leaned toward Lutheranism and dropped four of the seven Holy Sacraments.

This was the aforementioned Ten Articles of Faith to Establish Christian Quietness, a statement of doctrine drawn up by my bishops in hopes of doing exactly that. The recent changes had so confused the laity that I had thought some clarification of beliefs was in order.

The resulting Ten Articles were a magnificent compromise between the traditionalists and the reformists. Like all compromises, it evidently satisfied no one of either persuasion and unduly alarmed both factions.

The northerners heard, also, in a distorted and distant way, that commoners had replaced noblemen in the King’s Council. They had always been served well by “their” noblemen, and feared for themselves without their guardians.
But more than anything else they feared change. Like the slow-growing trees in their region—which took three or four years to attain the one year’s growth of a similar tree in southern England—they were unable to respond quickly to climactic changes. The plant that grew from their soil was the Pilgrimage of Grace.

A pilgrimage was what they called it, but a rebellion was what it was. It broke out in spots, like the pox, all over Lincolnshire and Yorkshire. Eventually the mass coalesced into a great pustule—some forty thousand strong—in the area of the middle of Yorkshire. I did not pop the pustule directly—that would have made too great a splatter—but lanced it and let it drain away and dry up.

So much for metaphor. Now let me set down, in summary, exactly what happened in those autumn months of 1536.

I had sent my commissioners north to supervise the suppression of the small monasteries, as stipulated in the Act of Parliament. The first resistance they met was in the hamlet of Hexham, in Northumberland. There an armed mob of monks and townspeople chased them out.

Next, a spontaneous revolt arose in Lincolnshire. The rebels surrounded the castle of Kyme, where Bessie Blount and her new husband, Edward, Lord Curt, where I met with him at Christmas.

Thus ended the so-called Pilgrimage of Grace—neither a pilgrimage nor imbued with grace. But it did alert me to the deep-seated affection for the monasteries and the “Olde Religion” in my far-flung territories. When I met with Aske, one of his requests—and a reasonable one, too—was that I show myself to them, so that they might know me as well as my southern subjects, and that I agree to hold Jane’s Coronation at York. It was a pleasant thought, and would make Jane’s crowning altogether different from Anne’s. In the end, though, the rebellion in the North failed because it had only the common people’s loyalty, not that of the great lords of the North: the Nevilles and Percys; the Earls of Derby, Shrewsbury, and Rutland. These looked at the magnificent Cistercian monasteries and realized the properties could be theirs, if they but supported my policy. And they were right.

The other rebellion, more unexpected and uncharacteristic, came from within the royal apartments. Jane herself took the part of the Pilgrims. Tender-hearted, she hearkened to their complaints and tried to persuade me to capitulate to them.

“Can you not let the monasteries in the North remain?” she begged. “Their needs are different from ours, their land is different. How can you know unless you see for yourself?”

“There can be no exceptions,” I tried to explain, gently. “For once exceptions begin, they never end. The Welsh, the Cornish, the fen country—all will want their special concerns catered to. Besides, this business of the monasteries concerns only myself and Rome.”

I had an ugly flash of memory. “These rebels, like Darcy and Hussey and Dacre, Lord Abergavenny, were first seduced into treason by Chapuys’s plot to help Katherine’s cause. The Pope is part of it—else why would he have dispatched that filthy Plantagenet creature of his, Cardinal Pole, to come as Papal legate and lend a hand to the rebels? No one co-operates, of course. The Cardinal languishes in Flanders, unable to find a willing sea captain to sail him across the Channel. May he rot there in the Lowlands!” My voice was rising at the perfidy of it all—honourable, thoughtful man—ironically, just the sort of “commoner” I liked to have on my councils and to which his Pilgrims objected.

The Percy family had ruined itself in the Pilgrimage. Earlier, Henry Percy (Anne’s erstwhile lover), now the sixth Earl of Northumberland, had bequeathed his familial lands to the Crown upon his death. Whether poor dying Percy did it as a gesture of despair or mockery toward his brothers, I knew not, but it presented an elegant solution to the problem of no Crown holdings in that wild area. Naturally the two younger brothers, Thomas and Ingram Percy, objected, and became traitors and rebels in hopes of reclaiming their ancestral lands. All the while Henry Percy lay on his deathbed, his whole body “as yellow as saffron,” they said.

Some of the rich northern abbeys, thinking to protect themselves and win favour, gave shelter and aid to the rebels. Their actions had exactly the opposite effect: they convinced me that all the monasteries must be closed, for they were no friends to me or my government.

After the New Year, two leftover rebels, Sir Francis Bigod and John Hallam, impatient to have their “demands” met, regathered forces and attempted to capture the cities of Scarborough and Hull. Two abbeys, Watton Priory and
Jervaulx, joined in, and the next month rebellion broke out in two other shires, Cumberland and Westmorland.

That was enough. There would be no pardon, no promises on my part carried out. The traitors, one and all, would perish, and in the sight of those they had led. Robert Aske was hanged in chains on market day in the square at York; Sir Robert Constable, in the market at Hull; and Lord Hussey was beheaded in Lincoln.

Lord Darcy (“Old Tom,” who had shouted at Cromwell, “Yet shall there one head remain that shall strike off thy head!”) was beheaded at the Tower, along with Thomas Percy; and Tyburn (where traitors met the prescribed felons’ death) took care of the Abbot of Barking, the Vicar of Louth, and the Lancaster royal herald who had knelt in fealty to the rebels. Seventy-four lesser rebels were likewise executed in Carlisle.

The rebel monks, some two hundred of them, were executed as the stinking traitors they were. At Sawley Abbey, they had actually crept back into their officially closed house in arrogant disregard of the law. So I ordered the Earl of Derby to hang the abbot and a score of his monks from the church steeple, on long pieces of timber, so that all his “flock” could see what befell traitors. The white-clad bodies swung from the silent tower (the bells having already been melted down and carried away). I daresay their silent movements spoke louder to the neighbourhood than any ringing bells ever had.

This prompted the first surrender of a monastery. When my royal commissioners took up their work again in April, the Abbot of Furness Abbey, in Cumbria, found it prudent to meet my representatives with a deed of surrender, giving the Crown “all such interest and title as I have had, have, or may have in the Abbey.” This unforeseen gift made our task simple—although it rattled Cromwell, who had made out a complex schedule for closing the monasteries, based on their resistance.

“Sometimes it is difficult to appreciate an unexpected victory when one has been bracing for a struggle,” I said.

“Yes. This schedule was ingenious,” he replied wistfully, running his hands over it, where it lay spread out on our consulting-table. “Now I shall have to expand the numbers quisitions.”

The Court of Augmentations was the body Cromwell and I had created to process the monastic properties and dispose of them. “I think perhaps a new head is in order, to free you,” I said. “I shall appoint Sir Richard Riche.”

Cromwell chortled. He looked quite like a jolly uncle when he did so. “A masterful touch, as the Pilgrims demanded his removal from power. After me, of course. They despised us.”

I looked up from the table to glimpse the cold, promising March sky outside. This time last year I had been hawking with Crum, and had given him the fearsome commission....

“It is all over now,” I said in wonder. It was all over, and peace had come again.

“Tie your pardon?” Crum looked at me, alert.

“I was only thinking how quiet it is in the land.”

“All your enemies are dead, Your Grace.”
The day the abbot and monks of Sawley Abbey were hanged, I found Jane crying in her chamber.

I had made arrangements to spend the morning with her looking over the plans for the Queen’s New Lodgings, now being constructed at Hampton Court. I had thought my Janey—for so I called her, between the two of us—would relish being able to choose the wood, the artisans to carve it, and all the rest to make the royal quarters a reflection of herself.

Spread out all around her were drawings and samples of colours and materials. But she did not even seem aware of any of them. They surrounded her like dropped petals from an overblown rose, but she did not regard them.

“Well, Janey,” I said, stepping into the chamber, “have you decided? You spoke of purple, once—”

My spirits drooped as soon as I beheld her. No, I could not stand another source of sadness today! I could not comfort; I had no comfort to give. I wanted the monks blanked out of my mind.

“Have you not decided, then?” I chided her gently.

“—they all looked suitable.”

“Have you no preference, then?” I fought to keep the little saw-edge of irritation out of my voice. “These new lodgings are to be the equal of—”

“Anything in France,” she finished for me. “But I am no Madame de Heilly.”

“Francis’s mistress has no taste,” I said. “And these lodgings are for you, Janey. For you. Can you not understand how I wish for you to have a place of your own, not inherited from Wolsey or ... the others?”

“Yes, yes.” It was then that I realized the apartments were for me, not for her. I needed to see her in surroundings that had no echoes.

“Choose something, Janey. It will mean a great deal to me,” I begged her.

“Very well.” She bent forward, anuta, dark green is always suitable.”

“No, I’ll not have that. ’Tis too—expected. I’ll have scarlet instead.” She pointed at a smear of colour.


She smiled. “You will pin down my desires and preferences, in spite of myself.”

“I wish to see you captured by them, so that in your absence I can still see you.” I hesitated. Should I tell her of what I had seen? “Is the choice really that difficult, that you must cry over it?”

She quickly hid her face.

“There should be no secrets between us,” I said, as gently as I could. “Nothing to be ashamed of.” She knew me, knew all of me. And I was glad of it.

“It is not I who am ashamed! It is you—or should be!” she cried. “The monks—”

Not this again.

“—that you are having hanged this very moment—”

The arrogant rebels of Sawley, then.

“—in a mocking fashion—”

“The punishment must fit the crime! And should serve as a deterrent for possible converts. These particular monks were arrant traitors.”

“It is not the monks,” she wept. “It is you!”

Now I was completely confused and bewildered. “I do not understand,” I finally said.

“What does it do to you to order such things done?” she said. “It changes you, forever.”

Poor innocent. Perhaps she did not know me, after all. I was changed that way when I had had to order my first executions after my Coronation, those of Empson and Dudley. After the first they are all the same.

“I hope not,” I assured her, reluctant to reveal my true feelings. She would find them ugly. And possibly unacceptable.

“What sort of a world will my children inherit? A world without monks and nuns, a world where abbots hang out of steeples—”

Children.

“Janey, are you—?” I had prayed, I had thrown myself on God’s mercy, for there were so many physical hindrances....

“Yes. I have only just now begun to believe it.”

So that was what all this was about. The tears, the scruples, the evasiveness.

I embraced her, feeling her healthy, compact body against me.

A miracle. For I had thought some punishment lurked, and a child would never be granted me.
That Sunday, a *Te Deum* was sung in all the churches in thanksgiving for the Queen’s pregnancy. That meant it was officially announced throughout Christendom, and that everyone would hear of it: the Pope, the Emperor, Francis, the lingering rebels in the North. Truly it was a sign that peace had come again to England, that the horrible upheavals of the past decade were over, like a passing stormaks and doublets and hose and shoes, all in black. When he suggested perhaps the quantity was excessive, I insisted that he was mistaken. I ordered Cromwell to select all the black onyx from the Jewel House, and bring it to me. I paced and strutted and consulted books and Scripture.

Then I collapsed, and it was back to bed once more.

All this I remember as in a waking dream. Whenever I stopped moving, I was attacked by paralysing sorrow.

Slowly my head cleared. Then I began to be tormented by recurrent thoughts and obsessions, that in themselves became demoniac. They circled back again and again, as if to drive themselves like nails into my mind. It was in defence against them that I started to write them down, hoping that if I did so they might retreat. Perhaps the act of recording them would placate them, so they would leave me in peace.

I have kept the papers all these years. I do not know what is written on them, nor do I care to reread them. The transcribing did serve as an exorcism. I affix them here, only because I have no other suitable place to put them.

If grief is only in my mind, where does my bodily pain come from? In my chest there is a tightness, as if several men with thick arms were squeezing me, pushing my breath out. I feel as if I cannot get my breath, cannot expand my chest. My muscles do not obey. Or when they try, they are weak. I am suffocating. There has come a choking in my throat, something that constricts on its own, and aches on its own. When I cry, it vanishes. But within a few moments it is back again. Like a bear-keeper, it keeps me chained by a short leash.

I have dreaded going into certain rooms, passing by certain things we looked at together, as if it would be too painful. But when it happens —by accident, or necessity—I have been surprised to find it does not hurt, not any more than her absence hurts anywhere else. I feel her absence no more keenly when looking at a beehive than when looking at a book she had never seen. Why is that?

I want Jane back. I would settle for only one minute with her. I would settle for only one question to ask her. I would settle for the chance to say only one sentence to her. Only one!

I see her everywhere. I see bits and pieces of her: in one woman’s way of straightening her necklace, in another’s timbre of voice, in yet another’s profile. As if she were a mirror, broken, and the shards lay everywhere, in the most unexpected places.

I have been blaming God. But how much of it was my fault? The rumours that she took ill on account of bad handling ... I am beginning to believe them myself. If only I had not forced her to participate in the night ceremony after the christening. If only I had let her rest.... The quails. Why did I indulge her fancies and let her eat so many? It was injurious to her health.... And then, the infinity of smaller things in which I might have unwittingly contributed to her death. Every day I find more of them....

I remember once someone said to me, describing his wife’s death:—e hold my misery, made visible by these repulsive black hangings. God had robbed me of Jane, now I would rob Him of myself.

    I’ll serve another master, I threatened Him. In all the legends, this would have been sufficient to have called forth the Dark Presence. At once the Prince of Darkness (or one of his lesser demons) would have appeared in my chamber, contract in hand. It would have specified terms: so many days, so many years, in exchange for one (1) immortal soul of the High and Mighty Prince, Henry VIII of England, Wales, and France, as signed below....

    But no one came. There was no puff of smoke, no sulphurous fumes. That angered me, too.

    So you are as unreliable as the other one, I sneered to myself. The least you could do is have a reception for me. I gave grand ones whenever I signed a treaty with a foreign power. You are cheap as well as evil.

    I would serve no master, then, but myself. I would hit out and destroy; I would indulge every whim and appetite that raised itself. I wanted to destroy, to pull down all the ugly rottenness around me. If there was no
good left in the world, there was a surfeit of bad, and I would spend myself on it. Not in the name of God—that betrayer, that assassin—but in my own name: King Henry VIII.
I ordered an end to the mourning which I had imposed on the court even through Christmas. (Would that grieve God? Good!)

I began to confer with Cromwell again. Many things were afoot: the bishops had completed their “interpretation” of the Ten Articles of Faith to Establish Christian Quietness, all set forth in a volume called *The Bishops’ Book*, designed to answer laymen’s questions; it awaited my endorsement. A number of greater monasteries had offered their surrenders: Whalley, Jervaulx, Kirkstead, and Lewes. Rich prizes. I should love to see them demolished. I wanted to hear the groan of the stones being pulled out of their sockets, and the crash of stained-glass windows hitting the ground to explode in multicoloured shards. I wanted to see the “miracle” statues, with their hidden wires and water-filled reservoirs, pitched onto a roaring fire made from monastic choir-stalls and embroidered vestments.

In addition, I was being courted by the Continental powers. It seemed I was an eligible bachelor again, and a rich one at that. Cromwell begged me to “consider the matter and frame it to your most noble heart.”

I would never marry again. But for amusement I would look at the portraits. It was sport to order others to perform. “I cannot marry without knowing their appearance. The matter touches me too near my person,” I explained.

I dispatched Hans Holbein, More’s former painter who had done a passable job on Jane’s portrait, to the Continent to take portraits of Christina of Denmark and Anne of Lorraine. That should take months.

I began to order banquets and celebrations. My appetite had returned, and fearfully. Before, I had cared about my appearance. When I was young, it was important to me that the English King be more awesome than the French monarch. Then, I cared that Katherine, Anne, and Jane should find me desirable, handsome. Now there was no reason not to eat, to steep myself in pleasures of the palate. What else was left to me?

When the fish course came round, I no longer abstained from eels (a notably fatty fish). When the meat. Whand lamb. I drank flagons of wine at every meal, so that they passed in a haze of pleasure. I ate all desserts and even called for sweetmeats in my chamber in mid-afternoon. I had no other pleasure but eating. Riding and hunting were taken away from me; there were no women and all the things that go with them: dancing, fetes, musical evenings. But there was food—marvellous, unbridled food.

WILL:

Now I understand. This was Henry’s “Nero” period, when he behaved cruelly and erratically, and from which (unfortunately) much of his reputation is derived. (How unfair, that eighteen months should eclipse almost forty years!) He grew fat. As one eyewitness described him: “The King has grown so marvellously excessive in eating and drinking that three of the largest men in the Kingdom could fit inside his doublet.”

His beautiful features expanded and swelled, until his eyes were like little raisins set in a red mass of dough, and his strong neck became enrobed in a series of fat-rings.

He behaved grossly, and uncharacteristically: belching at banquets, eating with his fingers and throwing bones over his shoulder, yawning if he were bored; leaving betimes at entertainments and audiences, insulting ambassadors and councillors, making obscene, scatological jokes; and—most uncharacteristic of all—committing sacrilege. He threw his crucifix in the fireplace and pulled up the Virgin’s skirts and spat on her, before likewise consigning her to the flames.

He wrote a mocking, threatening letter to Charles and Francis when they signed a ten-year truce and peace treaty. He called Francis “that quivering husk of a disease-eaten fruit-tree” and Charles a “degenerate, balloon-jawed descendent of a baboon” and said their “feeble union, undertaken under false pretences and for preposterous aims, would bring forth a strange fruit of hideous appearance, pustule-ridden and smeared with excrement, with a hollow but rotten interior.”

When Pope Paul III published, publicly, his excommunication of Henry VIII and called for a Holy War against him (as earlier Popes had called for a Crusade against the Turk) Henry laughed uproariously (while wolfing down grouse and woodcock, a dozen altogether) and muttered, “If that Judas-serpent should slither from out his homosexual den of pleasure”—a great wipe of his mouth—“he should find a great shoe, yea, a leather boot, ready to
stamp him and make his guts issue from out of his lying, double-tongued mouth.” Then a belch, given with a great flourish.

He cared for nothing. He abandoned music (unlike Nero, he did not fiddle while the monasteries burned); all sport was neglected; he never attended Mass, except when required to. He had become a great, slobbering, vicious hulk.

I avoided him as much as possible, and he called for me seldom. I was one of the pleasures for which he had lost delight.

HENRY VIII:

*The Bishops’ Book* was published, and instead of quieting controversy, it sparked it. Because I myself had not authored it, people assumed that it was not authoritative, that further changes in doctrine were possible. The reformers knew exactly where they hoped to see the ark of the Church of England looting and destruction, all under the guise of religion. At first they had trembled to see their relics taken from their little local shrines and consigned to bonfires. Then, delight in the bonfire itself began to consume them. There is something so deeply satisfying about destroying, trampling, killing… And soon the people themselves outdid the royal commissioners in seizing the relics and desecrating them.

The townsfolk of Maidstone took the ancient Rood of Boxley and reviled it in the marketplace; those at Kirkstall burnt the girdle of Saint Bernard, looked to as helpful in childbirth, and tore up the wimple of Saint Ethelred, used to cure sore throats.

But these were insignificant relics and lacklustre shrines. What the common people did on their level, I would do on mine. I would make a great show of dismantling and utterly destroying the three most ancient, sacred shrines and pilgrimage-centres in England: that of Saint Cuthbert in Durham, that of Our Lady of Walsingham, and, most sacrosanct (and jewel-bedecked) of all, Saint Thomas à Becket’s in Canterbury.

Saint? The man was a saint as Thomas More was a saint, as Bishop Fisher was a saint! They were all nothing but filthy and abominable traitors and rebels against their King! Becket had won, in his day, simply because the Pope had managed to intimidate his weak King.

That was in his day. But there was no reason why… yes, none whatsoever… a man can be brought to trial long after the crime… and he must stand for it…

“Dismantle the entire Becket shrine,” I ordered my workmen, carefully chosen for both their skill and their honesty. “The gold I want in reinforced wooden carts. The jewels, inventoried and sorted, transported in locked coffers. As for the inner coffin, once you have removed the gold plate covering it, leave it as is. Oh, unfasten the lid, but do not open it.” I explained myself no further.

After they had departed for Canterbury, I sat down and began to draft an unusual summons to my Privy Councillors and the ranking members of Convocation.

We stood on the Opus Alexandrinum, the Roman-inspired pavement of intricately inlaid coloured marble that surrounded Becket’s tomb behind the high altar of Canterbury Cathedral. There were some forty of us, all told—from the Archbishop of Canterbury himself, Thomas Cranmer, and all his lesser bishops, to my Vice-Regent for Spiritual Affairs, Cromwell, and his Council subordinates.

They surrounded the iron chest, resting on its pink marble arcaded base, that housed the “sacred” remains of Thomas à Becket. The painted wooden lid was loosened and ready to be lifted.

The shrine was bare, otherwise. The canopy of gold netting which had sagged with the weight of pilgrims’ offerings—brooches, rings, jewels—had been emptied. The gold plate had been carted away, in twenty-six groaning wagons. Upon my finger glowed the “Regale de France”—a ruby which Louis VII of France had presented when he came to seek the saint’s help for a sick child. I had had it made into a fine ring, set round with sapphires, diamonds, and emeralds “recovered” from the golden canopy. I called it my “Becket ring.”

“My dear councillors and spiritual advisors,” I said, in a soft voice. It carried well in the small area. The acoustics were good. “We are here to try an accursed traitor. Since the defendant could not safely make the trial here.”

I looked about. Cromwell had the proper expression of normalcy on his face. The rest looked frightened, bewildered, or uncomfortable.

I nodded to the serjeant-at-arms. “You may call the defendant.”
“Thomas à Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, come into the court.”

I gave another signal, and four royal guards stepped up to the coffin and removed the wooden lid. At that, a silence gripped our party.

I must set an example for them. I approached the dark cavity of the iron box and peered within.

As I did so, I felt suspense, dread of what I might see, what might happen....

Nothing happened, and it was difficult to see inside, in the gloom. I called for a taper and thrust it right into the coffin itself.

There were rotted ecclesiastical vestments swathing a crumbling skeleton. Its mitre had fallen away, revealing a skull with a thin slice taken off its top. Dust and dirt lay an inch thick on the bottom. How did it come to be inside a sealed coffin? I wondered irrelevantly.

“You may view the accused,” I said, motioning to my councillors. They filed by, peering into the sarcophagus, lit by the single taper inside. One by one they returned to their places.

When all were silent and waiting, I continued, “The accused, Thomas à Becket, must answer to the following charges.” I unrolled a lettered parchment. “One: to the crime of defying and humiliating his King, Henry II of England and Angevin. Two: to the crime of masquerading as a saint.”

I turned to Cromwell. “You may present the Crown’s evidence against the defendant.”

Oh, how I enjoyed it: the delicious recounting of the ungrateful traitor’s behaviour, knowing all the while the final outcome. The crushing of one’s enemies . . . the Israelites had known that supreme pleasure, had celebrated it even in the Psalms. King David seemed to have had enemies aplenty, and he had been shameless in asking the Lord to do them in.

“A lowly man, Becket, who, gaining the confidence and friendship of the King of England, used that as means to advance his own power,” read Cromwell. “Not being content with ingratiating himself with the King and being granted familiarities far above his station, he coveted the Chancellorship and obtained that, then lusted after the Archbishoprpic and obtained that. He lusted after the power of the Church, and once he was endowed with all he desired, he had no further use for the King. So he turned against him, defied his laws, obstructed his decrees, and trafficked with his sworn enemy, the King of France.”

These charges were discussed, as a courtesy to legal niceties. Then I called for the verdict.

“Guilty!” Theirow led, guilty on all counts as charged. Guilty as an errant traitor to your divinely appointed sovereign lord. Guilty in that your death was untruly called martyrdom, being canonized by the Bishop of Rome, because you had been a champion to the usurped authority and a bearer of the iniquity of the clergy. There appears nothing in your life and exterior behaviour whereby you should be called a saint, but rather esteemed to have been a rebel and traitor to your prince.”

I took a deep breath in the rarefied air of the opened shrine, before continuing.

“The sentence is this: in future you are to be called only Bishop Becket, and all mention of you in books of Common Prayer, lists of saints, and so forth, are to be stricken out.

“And we hereby condemn you to be burnt as a traitor, and your ashes scattered.”

A mumbled response. “Guilty.”

“Guilty!”

“Guilty!”

“Guilty!” Theirow led, guilty on all counts as charged. Guilty as an errant traitor to your divinely appointed sovereign lord. Guilty in that your death was untruly called martyrdom, being canonized by the Bishop of Rome, because you had been a champion to the usurped authority and a bearer of the iniquity of the clergy. There appears nothing in your life and exterior behaviour whereby you should be called a saint, but rather esteemed to have been a rebel and traitor to your prince.”

I nodded to my unquestioning, obedient guards, who came forward, bent over the coffin, and began enfolding the bones within their robes of office. While we watched, they transferred the lumpy bundle—with a corner of the mitre protruding—to a new wooden chest, which they carried away.

A heavy feeling came upon the company, far heavier than when Becket’s remains were physically present. We could all hear the neat clicks of the guardsmen’s heels as they marched down the long length of the nave with their casket.

“There were, as I said, twenty-six cartloads of gold festooning the abomination that housed Becket’s miserable remains. I think an eighth-cartload for each of you who helped examine the justice of the matter would be most appropriate,” I said.

Thus I dismissed them. Even enriched as they were, there was no buoyancy in them as they took their leave and melted away into the gloom of the cathedral.

Only Cromwell remained, directly across from the emptied sarcophagus.

“Old bones smell ugly,” I finally said. “I would expect a fresh corpse to stink, or a waterlogged body. But this was clean, and dry.” I shook my head, wonderingly. The peculiar odour—of centuries of packaged, brooding death — was stronger than ever.
“It is done,” I said cheerfully, waving my hand—the one with the Becket ring on it. *Speak, Crum. Say something to banish the odd feeling I have inside ... a feeling I have not felt since ... I know not....*

“Your Grace, this must end,” Cromwell said soberly. The taper lit only part of his face, but his words were chiselled and clear.

They said what I knew already.

“I understand that this was but a political gesture, made to give a little sport to the dull proceedings of dismantling and inventorying the vulgar, Papalist shrines,” he continued, putting the most flattering interpretation on it. “I understand it, but I fear it will be misunderstood by the people and exploited by your enemies. You are aware, Your Grace, that many already question your sanity? Your actions of late have played directly into the hands of your sworn enemies. It is you who are a traitor to yourself. For the law defines treason as ‘giving aid and comfort to the enemy’ and that is what you have been doing —by your lack of self-control, by your actions that are open to unkind, even malicious interpretations. Forgive me, Your Grace—” The boldness of his words now frightened him.

He had no way of knowing that it had all gone flat, that I was weary of my rebellion and bored with my schoolboyish howl against God, Who seemed—most humiliating of all—not to have taken much notice of it. Certainly He had not responded in any observable way.
What had the past year of unthinking, pain-filled rampage gained me? I was forced to take a fearless look and confront the results.

I was certainly richer, from the plunder and seizure of the monastic property and shrines. Abbey plate and jewels and manuscripts and vestments now adorned my palaces, and I was buying the loyalty and support of the gentlemen to whom I sold or leased the abbey lands, making sure they had a vested interest in preventing a return to the Papal fold. There was nothing like property and money to sway a man’s political leanings.

I was isolated in the larger world. In company with Job, I could lament, For the thing which I greatly feared is come upon me, and that which I was afraid of is come unto me. The Pope had called for a war upon me, and lo! a miracle had occurred. Francis and Charles had actually made peace with one another, signed a truce, and loomed as allies against me.

My gleeful rage against the signs and relics of Popery, my allowance of the loosely worded (and interpreted) Ten Articles of Faith to Establish Christian Quietness had caused the Protestants to gain a pernicious foothold in England, and they were now trying to subvert my Church.

My orgy of self-pitying eating and drinking had expanded me beyond all recognition. I was obese, repulsive to look upon.

I had multiplied my troubles and problems. I had solved none and created new ones.

For several months I did nothing. I made few appearances, and those were restrained and circumspect. I passed no new laws and made no pronouncements. I reversed my eating habits, becoming as abstemious as a desert hermit, and found to my horror that the fat on me was firmly entrenched and did not obediently melt away at my command.

To check the dangerous foreign situation that had arisen, I decided to use monastic money to finance the construction of a chain of fortresses and defences all across the southern coastline, stretching from Sandown in the East to Pendennis in the West. I employed a Bohemian engineer, Stephen von Haschenperg, to design these castles, which would be constructed on new principles, allowing for the latest advances in cannon warfare. It would disappoint those who hoped that the monastic wealth might be used to found hospitals, colleges, schools. I was disappointed myself. But there can be no higher learning, no institutions of mercy, unless a country is at peace and not ravaged by her enemies.

I would halt the growing influence of Protestantism by rescinding the Ten Articles. They would be replaced by a conservative Act, setting forth the required orthodoxy of faith.

Parliament duly passed this Act of Six Articles. It affirmed the doctrine of Transubstantiation, noted it was not necessary to receive both bread and wine at Communion, said that priests could not marry, that vows of chastity were perpetual, that private Masses were permitted by severe means, for nothing else could prevail. This earned it the sarcastic popular sobriquet, “The Whip with Six Strings.”

In spite of my lack of interest, Cromwell had all the while been casting about in Europe for a bride for me. I had let him, for it amused him, and I wished to humour him. In the past year there had been several delicate queries made to Denmark (I have already spoken of the flippant Duchess Christina); to France (there were the three daughters of the Duc de Guise: Marie, Louise, and Renée; two cousins of Francis, Marie de Vendôme and Anne of Lorraine; as well as his own sister), and to Portugal (the Infanta).

None of these was seriously made—at least not on my part; although certainly on Cromwell’s—or seriously received. Cromwell’s diligence provided Hans Holbein with steady employment and lengthy travels and visits to the courts of Europe, but that was all. I had no desire—indeed, I had a revulsion —against the thought of remarrying. Now, in my personal inventory, I was forced to admit that I was no longer a very compelling object for a woman’s desires.

The very fact that I thought of it, grew concerned about it, was a signal that something was beginning to change, to stir....

In the meantime I guarded little Edward’s health, obsessively. He was not to be at court, because of the danger of infection, but kept at Havering—a clean manor in the country. His attendants were to be strictly limited in number, and all his linens, hangings, toys, and feeding utensils were to be washed and aired daily. As a result of all this seclusion I myself seldom saw him, but I rested secure in the knowledge that he was safe, and flourished. They said he had inherited Jane’s starry eyes. Yes, my Jane’s eyes had been like the sapphires from India. My Jane ...
The line of granite-faced castles was rising steadily pcam and made obeisance to England, in little tame waves. 
Across that water lay France, visible on clear days, but not today.
The water made the soothing slap-and-slide sounds meant to allay my fears. It was hypnotic, and seemed to say, *It is good, it is good, it is good.* ... False waters. French-tainted waters.
I turned and looked behind me, at the round belligerence of my defence castle, so muted and grey against the equally dull greenish grey grass on the knolls surrounding it. War had the characteristics of an elephant: grey and wrinkled and bulky. Also expensive to feed and house.
Cromwell was no longer visible. He had left the high places and was undoubtedly inspecting the heart of the castle, where men and ammunition must quarter. If there were a weak spot there, he would find it and seek to have it corrected.
I continued to watch the cold, grey-green sea spread out before me. Watching the sea, I did not have to think; and I was weary of thinking. All my thoughts were unpleasant.

“Your Majesty.”
Cromwell was beside me. “Ah, Crum.”
“The underground provisions are marvellous!” he reported. “Although under the earth, the whitewash and simple designs and open chambers make them aesthetic and even restful. And the decision to have only large chambers is not only practical, but avoids that ugly, cramped feeling of being confined. Von Haschenperg is a genius!”
Even though Crum was no military tactician, he understood the needs of ordinary soldiers—had he himself not served as a mercenary in Italy?—and thus his comments were valuable.

“I am pleased you find it so.”
Together we stood and looked toward France. I knew our conversation must tread on this delicate matter. But I was not eager for it.
“My negotiations with the French for your bride have foundered,” he finally said, hands clasped behind his back, still staring out to sea.
“How so?” I likewise kept my eyes firmly fastened on invisible France.
“The three daughters of the Duc de Guise have proved ... difficult,” he said. “The first, Marie—”
The widow of the Duc de Longueville, I suddenly remembered. The silly old Duke, held captive in England, who had acted as Louis’s proxy in “consummating” his marriage to Mary ... was his widow yet alive?

“She is young, and although large in person, is thought to be attractive,” said Crum, answering my unasked question.
“Large. I myself was “large.” “Well, as I am large myself—” I began.
“It seems she is betrothed to the King of Scots already,” said Cromwell.
James V, son of my sister Margaret. How old could he be, as James IV was killed in the Battle of Flodden in 1513.... Twenty-seven, then? Damn the Scots! I had heard little from them in a generation, had mistook their quietness for subservience.
“But her sisters, Louise and Renée, are said to be beautiful. I have sent Holbein to take their likenesses. Unfortunately, Renée, the most beautiful of the three, is I be is intelligent and loyal, and inclined to the match,” Cromwell said.

“And she is beautiful,” I added. Holbein’s portrait assured me of that. Intelligent—I needed that. And loyal—no less important.

“Indeed she is!”
“And not too Protestant? I’ll not have a Lutheran!”
“No, her house thinks as you do. A rare thing in these troubled times, to have recognized the twin dangers of Papacy and heresy.”

“Is her brother content to have her marry away from the Continent?”
“He is content, and ready to sign a marriage treaty.”
So here it was. I must marry again. Despite all my restrictions, both political and personal, it seemed a bride had been found to meet them. And beyond that, to provide a bit of exotica ... a Rhine Princess, whose device was two white swans, emblems of candour and innocence. There was a family legend in Cleves that a faerie swan, drawn in a boat down the Rhine by two white swans, had mysteriously “visited” a Duke of Cleves’s daughter long ago, and fathered her child. From him descended my Swan-Princess....

“Then send William Petre to join WotThat was also a form of mourning. So now I was reduced to just a few items
that still fit me.

Yes, I had remained stout—even, truth to tell, grown stouter, which I had vowed would never happen. I cared, but I did not care. That is, part of me, whatever old part of me was left, cared; the rest, the hollow-shell Henry, did not.

Now, suddenly, I was anxious to acquire new trappings ... just as I had eagerly refurbished Father's royal apartments so long ago. The tailor had called, and I prepared to be measured and choose fabrics, all in a high good humour.

What brilliant scarlet silks! From Flanders? A new dye process? What depth of satin—like a rich topaz! And now the measurements ... he laughed nervously ... the thin tape measure whipped out, a pale snake. Waist: fifty-one inches.

All gaiety gone for an instant. Fifty-one inches? Had I gained fourteen inches in my waist? In only four years?

I confronted the mirror set up to one side of me, and looked—truly looked—at myself for the first time since Jane’s death. My first impression was of a great white whale. No! And the ripples in the figure—were they entirely of fat or merely the uneven surface of the metal? I was so stunned I was able to put it just this baldly to myself.

A red thing appeared behind the whale, its surface equally wavy. So it was the fault of the mirror after all.

I turned to see Thomas Culpepper standing behind me, a greedy look on his face. “Ah, Thomas,” I said. “I should have known you could scent expensive fabric all the way through the door of the King’s inner chamber. Yes, you may choose something.”

I was fond of the lad, and since he had replaced Henry Norris as the man who attended upon me in my Retiring Chamber, I was not embarrassed to have him see me thus undressed. I knew all his secrets—yes, even the sordid business about his meddling with the gamekeeper’s wife, and his attack on her rescuers. Shameful!

“Oh?” A grin spread across his handsome face. He never refused favours.

“An early present to one of my groomsmen,” I said. “I am being measured for my wedding clothes.”

“The wedding will be a public one?” He looked surprised. “I thought—”

“Why ever not?”

“Just that your previous marriage to Queen Jane was so private, quiet.”

And the one to Anne Boleyn even more so! I knew what he meant: with your matrimonial history, Sire, is it seemly to make a public show for the fourth?

“I shall do as I please!” I roared, reading his mind and answering it. “So you think people will laugh at me? They’ll think me an old fool, is that it?”

He looked annoyed, not frightened. But then, his problem lay in lack of prudence, not lack of courage. “No, Your Grace.”

“You think I can’t afford it?” I couldn’t, not very well. Where had that monastic money gone, so quickly? On the coastal defences, much of it.

He smiled his dazzling smile. “Only that it will take place in deep winter—hardly a fitting time for great outdoor rejoicer lad. As nimble with his tongue as with his sword ... and his member. The latter two got him into trouble, and the former rescued him time and again.

“Oh, go choose something.” I cuffed him on the back of the head, and put back on my dressing robe. “Make the waist forty-nine inches,” I told the tailor. No need to yield to the inevitable yet. A wedding doublet of fifty-one inches? Not for King Henry VIII!

Culpepper held up a garnet-coloured velvet, as rich as a gem of King Solomon’s. But it did not suit his colouring. It made him look consumptive and too long indoors. “No,” I said.

Still he persisted in studying it. “There is one it would well become,” he finally said.

“A lady?”

“Aye. My cousin Catherine. She is orphaned and has little.”

Culpepper was not noted for his charitable spirit, so I suspected he meant to seduce her, using the velvet as a bait. “How touching.” I did not offer the luscious stuff he craved. “Come, choose something.”

The lingering lust on his face was replaced by the original greed. He chose cloth-of-gold, patterned with scarlet threads running crosswise. It would make him appear golden and shining all over, a god of youth.

Envy tore through me. As you are now, so once was I....

My bulky figure glistened back at me from the mirror. As I am now, so shall you be.... I finished the lines with fierce satisfaction. Preen and prance and love your cloth-of-gold looks now, my lad, they can’t last, they never do. I kept mine longer than any man has a right to, but they’re gone and there’s no bringing them back. Damn you! You don’t believe I was once magnificent, do you? Wolsey, Katherine, they would tell you, but they’re dead....

“Enjoy it, Culpepper,” I said, indicating the material.
LXXXV

It was time to talk to Crum. Crum, who had evidently never known a human passion, and so could never mourn its passing. Jolly, sensible Crum. Lately I had come to envy him, had come to believe that I had been cursed in the nature I had—always yearning, always feeling, always hurting. I wondered what it must be like to go through life as Crum, taking things only as they are, neither less nor more. Well, his sensible head would help me choose the Queen’s new household.

“It has been a long time since a brand-new household was set up,” he observed. “The seven years between Your Grace’s mother’s death and Queen Katherine’s Coronation were the last long period England was without a Queen.” He tactfully did not state the obvious: that for a long time I had had two Queens simultaneously, and my widowerhood after Anne’s death had lasted exactly one day. Probably he thought nothing of it, made no moral judgment. A rare man, Crum.

“Today I have a new palace to offer her, one no Queen has ever set foot in—Nonsuch. I would assure that the Queen’s royal apartments be readied in time to receive my bride in January.”

“We must make the assignments for her English servitors,” Crum said. “She brings only ten Flemish ont>

Approaching the grey stones, now sleek with ice, I felt my heart pounding so loudly it sounded, in my ears, like the beating of a falcon’s wings, just as he leaves the wrist. Be quiet, be quiet, be calm ... no, do not! Soar all you like, my sweeting.

Into the castle, past the stunned guards. All was quiet, most of the castle empty, drained into the Great Hall, where everyone was gathered on this second day of 1540, drinking, talking. I bade my party join them, and forbade anyone to follow me as I sought out the Lady Anne. They obeyed.

Now I made my way to the great Privy Chamber, wherein Anne was presumed to be, the passage leading up to the door so dark that I had to grope along, feeling as if I were participating in a masque, in an intricately staged New Year’s entertainment, as I had done so many times before.

The hard iron of the chamber door was unyielding, stiff. I wrenched it, and it shrieked, like a witch’s cry, and the door swung slowly, slowly open. I felt the hairs on my scalp rising, tingling, with the suspense of that groaning, sliding door....

Her dress was of cloth-of-gold. Magnificent! Her back was to me, as she gazed out the tiny, slitted window onto the white landscape below.

“Anne!” I cried.

She jumped, then jerked round. I could see nothing of her, as the light was coming from directly behind her. She made no sound beyond a horrified gasp of terror.

My long brown woollen cloak! I had forgotten to remove it, and now stood before her dressed like a highwayman. No wonder she feared me—feared for her life. I ripped it off me and stood before her, in my golden and green robes of state.

“Anne!” I cried in joy. “It is I, King Henry!”

She screamed, then clapped her hands over her mouth. “Herr steh mir bei! Wie in aller Welt—!”

She did not recognize me. “I am Henry, the King!” I repeated.

A woman came scurrying in from the adjoining chamber, along with a guard. The guard, whose face looked young but who had the body of an old hog, bowed. Then he jabbered something in the ugliest language I had ever heard. It sounded like the rumblings of a bowel. Anne replied in the same medium. Then the guard stammered, “Forgif ze Lady, King Henry, a-bot she zhot you vere a grooom, a horse-master.”

Now the Lady Anne had bowed before me, and I saw that her entire head was enveloped in a grotesque hat of some sort, with stiff wings and many folds, a madman’s kite. She stood up, and only then did I realize how gigantic she was. A female Goliath. And, in turning to me—

Her face was repulsive! It was as brown as a mummy’s, and covered all over with pits and smallpox scars. It was uglier than the faces of freaks exhibited at country fairs, the Monkey Woman, the Crocodile Maid, it was sickening—

A spray of spittle landed on my face. It was speaking, and in that language that was no language, but a series of grunts and gas-churnings. Her breath was foul, it was a nightmare, this could not be happening!

I backed out of the chamber, feeling for the door behind me, slamming it shut, leaning against it. I felt nausea fighting its way up in my throat, the acrid stench of it, but I fought it down. As the sickness receded, so did the anger: anger so cold and yet so hot I had never felt its like before.

I had been duped, betrayed. All those people who had seen her—all those envoys who had met her, who had
arranged the marriage—they had known. Known, and said nothing. Known, and deliberately led me into this marriage. They were all in it together—Cromwell, Wotton, the Duke of Cleves, Lord Lisle, and the entire company at Calais. And Holbein! Holbein, who could capture the subtlest facial characteristic with his brush; Holbein, for whom no skin was too fair, no hue of cheek too difficult to reproduce, no jewel too faceted to be perfectly captured and rendered—Holbein had made her pretty!

I stalked back to the Great Hall, where all the conspirators were gathered. Yes, gathered and drinking their stupid mulled wine and laughing at me. I could hear the laughter. They were all imagining the horrible scene taking place in Lady Anne’s chamber, only to them it was not horrible, but comic. They would pay for this!

“Lord Admiral!” I called from the doorway, and the throng fell silent. The Earl of Southampton turned around, grinning—a grin that wilted.

“Come here!” I ordered, and Fitzwilliam came toward me, a puzzled expression on his face. What a fine actor he was! Better that he should not have been quite so fine.

“Sire?” Just the right note of bewilderment.

“How like you the Lady Anne, Admiral?” I asked softly. “Did you think her so personable, fair, and beautiful, as reported, when you first beheld her at Calais?”

“I take her not for ‘fair,’ but of a ‘brown’ complexion,” he replied—wittily, he assumed.

“How clever you are. I did not know you fenced with conceits and metaphors, along with Wyatt and Surrey.” I glared all about the room. “Is there no one I can trust? I am ashamed of you all, ashamed that you dared to praise her, and reported her—by word and picture!—as winsome. She is a great Flanders mare! And I will not have her, no, I will not be saddled with her, nor ride her, nor hitch her to any conveyance in England!”

Never, never, would I touch her! If the propagators of this cruel comedy thought to see me wed her—assumed I would be meek enough to follow through—they did not know Henry of England! What did they take me for? Francis of France, forced to marry “the Emperor’s mule”?

“Saddle your own horses, and come with me! You shall answer for this at Greenwich.” I would not return to Hampton Court; God, no! Greenwich for business, for unpleasant business. It was at Greenwich that I had married Katherine of Aragon; it was at Greenwich that Anne had borne the useless Princess Elizabeth, and had lost my boy-child. Let Greenwich be the place where the Flemish Mare was turned around and shipped back to the Low Countries to pull her dray!

The bitter cold was heightened by the time we got back to Greenwich, as the sun was setting—a small, shrunken, bloody thing—and the sixteen-hour night was beginning. I rode straight up to the gatehouse and passed through, across the great courtyard and right up to the royal entranceway. “Summon Cromwell,” I barked to a page as I strode toward the Privy Council chamber. It was dark and dusty, not having been used these past two months while I kept court at Hampton. Attendants hurriedly brought beeswax tapers chill away. In the meantime we kept our travelling cloaks on. I took my place at the head of the table and waited silently.

Cromwell appeared. Upon entering the chamber he looked astonished. “Your Grace—honoured Council members —” he began, playing for time while he figured out what was occurring, the better to be in control.

“I like her not!” I relieved Cromwell of the mystery, and of the need for preliminaries and niceties. There he stood, the man responsible for all this. My enemy.

“I beg your pardon?”

“The Flanders Mare! The Lady of Cnd now—the wedding attire. When I ordered it, I had allowed every profligate desire to express itself. Each layer of clothing sought to outdo the one just beneath it. Now they were to be fitted together in one blinding ensemble. Culpepper held out the first undergarment, which was of finest China silk, embroidered with white. It was so light it almost floated as he passed it to me; and the sleek feeling as it slid down next to my skin was like a seductive serpent. But the layers after that became heavier and heavier, encrusted with gold thread and gemstones, Oriental pearls and silver of Damascus, until only a man of my breadth and strength could have worn them all.

I have worn armour and I know how heavy that is; but this was its equal. Yet what are gold and jewels but civilian armour?

My bride awaited me. My fate awaited me. Neither was what I would have chosen, but the ways of God were mysterious, and imperious. In just this frame of mind, I went forth for the public reception of Anne, Princess of the Duchy of Cleves.

The day was fair and clear and cold. Against the hard blue sky the golden tents sparkled, like galleons tossed on a sea. The standards above them snapped smartly like sails. Perhaps someday it would be possible for men to sail on an icy sea ... if a ship’s hull were constructed of very thick wood, several layers. ... Ah, what could I not do that day, what might I not invent, if only in imagination?
I rode surrounded in glory. Such a company of bravely bedecked knights —six thousand in all, counting the King’s Guard, yeomen, pages of honour, spears and pensioners, and all their trappings: the crimson velvet, the antique gold, the knots of gold—shining clearly and sharply in the January morning.

There were thousands more awaiting us on the broad heath—the Germanic merchants of the Steelyard on the east side, glaring across at their rivals, the merchants of Genoa, Florence, Venice, and Spain. In between were our own English merchants—all told, some twelve hundred men.

Down from Shooter’s Hill came Anne of Cleves in a carved, gilded chariot, drawn by horses trapped in black velvet. Like Diana drawn by steeds....

So I told myself, and so the noble chroniclers recorded it. On the parchment of the Kingdom, Diana, chaste and beautiful and athletic, was met by Jupiter, mighty and lust-filled and benevolent. You can read how glorious it all was, how the earth shook at our encounter and all the Kingdom rejoiced. Truly that day we all believed it, I as much as any other—and so history is made, so it becomes fixed like fruits preserved in wine long past their season.

Side by side, the Lady Anne and I rode down the hill and across Blackheath, and all my subjects cheered. The Thames (which had not frozen) was filled with boats with satin sails and banners, shooting off fireworks.

That was the public side. But once we reached Greenwich Palace, once the chariot was put away and the black velvet taken off the horses—then I was but myself again, a rebellious small boy inside the magnificent and ordained structure. I squirmed and fought. Once again I did not want to go through with it. The saintly resolve that had begun my day did not outlast the sunset. I gathered Cromwell and my Privy Councillors about me, balked, whined, complained. “If it were not for my Kingdom and that I have proceeded so far in the matter, I would not do what I must tomorrow for any earthly thing.”

I fell back into bed, ashamed of my weakness. I was no saint, although I had felt like one in the early dawn. Real saints remained saints.

How many times had I, in fantasy, made love to a stranger? I imagined it as a circus of voluptuousness, where all impulses might have free reign, because this unknown female would be willing for all, unable to censure or pass judgment. Now I was faced with the reality: a large shadow behind a silken screen, as Anne moved about, undressing. Was it my imagination, or did she deliberately delay? Was she as un-eager, as frightened as I?

The candles burned noticeably lower. I had thought by this time to have it all done with, finished. What was taking her so long? I poured out one cup of wine, then another. I wished to find, and maintain, a state in which I could perform mindlessly. I wanted enough wine in me to dull my trepidations, yet not enough to incapacitate me—a balance not easily achieved.

She emerged, moving slowly out from the screen, walking toward the bed. I approached from the opposite side. The candlelight blurred her features, and I took care only to gaze upon her hair, which was long and golden and shining where she had combed it out over her shoulders.

She climbed clumsily into bed. I followed. Then we sat, side by side upon the slippery sheets, staring ahead, not daring to look at one another.

She is a foreigner, I told myself, far from her homeland, married to a stranger. A virgin in bed with a man, sold into a marriage on the basis of a portrait. How frightened she must be! I at least had had some semblance of choice in the matter; she had had none. My heart went out to her, and in that moment I reached out for her, for the gentle virgin bride....

I kissed her and, shutting my eyes, began to caress her. It was cold in the room, and her natural modesty would cry out to be uncovered only in darkness and under the bed-wraps. I blew out the candles on our nightstand, leaving only the red, jumping flames of the fireplace to light the room. The fire crackled and sighed; Anne sighed, too, relaxing in my arms.

How soft and warm her gown was, how thick and sensuous her hair! Truth to tell, how good it felt to hold a woman, a maiden, in my arms again. I put my hand on her breast, under her gown.

Instead of the firm, high breast of a maiden, I felt the slack dugs of a woman long past her prime. I was so shocked I snatched my hand away with a startled cry. Anne jumped, and I felt her pull away.

It couldn’t be true! I couldn’t believe my own hand, surely I must have touched a pillow instead. I reached out with my other hand, trying to pull her back toward me, and my hand landed on a soft, quivering, wrinkly mass—her abdomen!

“You lied!” I cried. “You are older than you claim, you are withered, dried up! I have been cheated!”

She leapt out of bed, terrified of my ranting in English. The fraud! I vaulted off the bed and snatched the covers she clutched to herself, revealing her body in all its horror. Her breasts were hanging and shrivelled, her abdomen so paunchy and bloated—

“Pfah!” I cried in revulsion.

She looked at me and her eyes narrowed. “Pfah!” she spat in return, pointing at my member, which was hanging
exposed outside my nightshirt. “Pfah!” she repeated, then made a diminutive sign and began laughing. A long stream of that repulsive German followed, as she continued to revile me and I reached flection on myself. She looked like a witch as she cackled there in the firelight. I began to imitate her, sticking a pillow under my nightshirt to capture her grotesquely ugly belly, but she only laughed all the louder. I began laughing, too. Suddenly I realized that this strange woman had not embarrassed me, but only amused me, and that I felt freer in her presence than in anyone else’s I had ever met. Our laughter mounted higher and higher, until we were convulsed by it and gasping for air.

Our laughter then slowly died, and we faced one another. In the dull firelight, which was usually so kind to women, she was still frightfully ugly. No, not frightfully, for I was no longer afraid of her, nor she of me. But the situation—O sweet Jesu, the situation! I was husband to a wife I could be no husband to. And that was no laughing matter.

I sank my head morosely into my hands, and thus I remained for several moments. I became aware, then, of the most debilitating tiredness. I longed for sleep; my head spun. I looked over at Anne and saw her watching me warily, like a bird eyeing a cat.

She was afraid of me. Between my fingers (where she could not see me looking) I saw the apprehension and animal fright on her face. Then I remembered what Will had told me the people claimed was Christina of Denmark’s answer to my inquiries about her eligibility: “His first Queen he killed with a broken heart; his second was unjustly executed; and his third was killed through lack of care after childbirth.” And then, “However, if I had two heads, one of them should be at the King of England’s disposal.” I had thought it one of Will’s jests, and laughed. Now I wondered if he had been truer than he realized.

WILL:

“Truer than he realized.” Oh, Henry, Henry! It was you who were blind and deaf to what you had become in the eyes of Europe. When you sent your envoys out, seeking another bride, you were no longer the great matrimonial catch you had been before your Great Matter. No respectable Princess wanted to marry you! She felt it would be taking her life in her hands—that, at the very least, you were jinxed, even if you did not deliberately seek to undo your wives. Luckily, the Duchy of Cleves was so shielded, and the Lady Anne so ignorant of English and gossip, that her brother agreed to your suit. No, Henry, I did not jest. In fact, I censored the worst of the current remarks—the quotes I gave you were the only repeatable ones!

HENRY VIII:

But those who made refrains were ignorant! They had no idea of what they spoke. And why did they always take the woman’s side? Katherine did not die “of a broken heart.” She died of Anne’s poison and her own foolish pride. If only she had co-operated with me, she would never have ended her days in the fens! No, she would have lived in luxury and shared Mary with me, grown old in honour. And Nan—thank God the common people did not know the true blackness of her soul, the degradation of that Witch—lest they tremble and shiver in their beds and never know safety again. Even from the grave she cursed me, headless demon! And sweet Jane. God took her from me, and God alone knows how I would have ransomed my kingdom to save her. The people made a b.

I felt as if she were right there. Oh, wrong was I to have conjured up her shade! I fought to free myself from it; I reached over and touched Anne of Cleves’s arm, startling her.

“Let us sleep,” I said in as low and gentle a voice as I could. She could understand the intent, if not the actual words. She smiled slowly, then followed me back to bed, so preposterously appointed for love. Together we slid down into the satin and passed the calmest bridal night of any new-wedded pair since Mark and Isold.

We overslept. They awaited us at early Mass in the Chapel Royal, then went ahead and said Mass without us. They awaited us in the Privy Chamber, fresh garments at the ready, a great silver bowl of spiced wine for our
comfort. They awaited me at my Council Chamber, where Cromwell, Cranmer, the Admiral, and others expected to
detail the plans for the obligatory post-nuptial jousts, tournaments, and banquets. They awaited us impatiently,
eagerly, lecherously, like a pack of schoolboys suddenly privy to the private life of their schoolmaster. And I, the
schoolmaster, avoided them and played tuant like a student: our roles were reversed.

The wan January sun streamed in the windows, warming nothing. I glanced at Anne, sleeping beside me. Yes, she
was as ugly as I had thought. The emasculated sun was still strong and merciless enough to shadow all her
pockmarks and show her liver-coloured skin. Her yellowish buck teeth protruded from her lips as she snored on. Yet
I was no longer repulsed by her. She seemed like an ally, a strange companion in this misadventure of mine—with
Cromwell as my adversary.

Yes, Cromwell. I had thought him my ally, yet who was he really? He had appeared conveniently when Wolsey
had left court, ostensibly to act as Wolsey’s agent in the tangled financial affairs he had so uncharacteristically left
behind. In doing so he had established himself as a powerful man, or, if not powerful, a man of consequence, one to
be reckoned with. Wolsey’s ruin was his gain. And from there he had maneuvered himself into my confidence.
How? By his unscrupulous manipulation of the Church. The undoing of the Papacy: Cromwell’s insight. The
domestication of the English clergy: Cromwell’s project. The dissolution of the monasteries: Cromwell’s grand
design. These moves had made me supreme over the Church, and monastic wealth had replenished what I had
wasted of my inheritance in French wars. But what had they done for Cromwell? No man does anything that does
not ultimately benefit himself most; I knew this now, although I had not always known it. In Wolsey’s case that
benefit was obvious; and showed itself ostentatiously. But Cromwell had garnered no titles, gloated over no
possessions, sported with no women, and exalted in no high rank or office. He was not Chancellor, and wore no gold
chain. He did not preside over Court of Star Chamber or over Parliament. What drove him? What did he want?
Whatever it was, finding himself in my confidence, making himself indispensable to me, and yoking me to the
Flemish Mare—all were part of his plan. Although I did not know that plan as yet, I knew Cromwell well enough to
know that he would have a plan, for nothing in his life was happenstance. So I would watch, and wait. And in the
meantime ... I glanced over at Anne ... I would have to pretend that we were man and wife. And catch Cromwell out.
In that, Anne would serve a purpose.

I let her sleep. I had no desire to be surrounded by people until I had my thoughts on course. Let everyone think
we slept late because the marriage was a grand success. It served my plans better.

Thus do we become old. It is not in our aching knees, or in our rheumCromwelles. No. It is in the transforming of
what in youth is a simple pleasure into something false and face-saving. The wedding night becomes a political ruse.
In this we betray ourselves, surprise our own selves in the distance we have already travelled on our life’s journey.

Afore noon, Anne and I, attired in our “second day” costumes, greeted Cromwell and the other Privy Councillors
before adjourning to a midday feast. In these short winter days, dinner was served when the sun was at its height. I
took care not to smile overmuch, lest it be misinterpreted. Let them puzzle over exactly what I felt; let them wonder
how pleased I was; let no one be sure of where he stood with me.

A rush of pleasure filled me at the situation. I enjoyed leaving men in limbo, uncertain as to what exactly was
happening to them—or was about to happen. It was an ugly feeling, and I was ashamed that I could relish it so. Yet
emotions and feelings were not sins, were they? Only actions were sins, and I had done no unkind action. In fact, I
was behaving in a most generous and kingly fashion toward them. I spoke vaguely of “our pleasure” in the Lady
Anne, and invited them to join us in “our dinner.”

Fifty members of the court dined with us in the Great Hall. Anne and her ladies from Cleves, all identically got up
in headdresses that reared up around their faces like the wrinkled ears of elephants, chattered away to each other on
the dais.

Cromwell, in his customary plain black robes, was seated just down on the table to the right, talking gravely to
Brandon. I noticed that he left his wine untouched. Brandon did not, of course.

Across, seated at the other table, were the women. Brandon’s new wife, Katherine. (I persisted in thinking of her
as his “new wife,” even though they had been married as long as Princess Elizabeth had been alive.) Bessie Blount
—now Lady Clinton. My eye lingered fondly over her, but she was no longer the Bessie I had known. She was thin
and coughed often, pulling her furs as close about her as she dared, for fashion’s sake. She was consumptive. I could
see it, mark it coldly in one part of me, whilst the other winced. Not Bessie ... she could not grow old. We want the
sharers of our youth to remain forever young, to remind us of what we were, not of what we are. Best to die young,
then? Certainly, for those to whom your existence is a touchstone, an affirmation.

Princess Mary, dressed all in purple. She loved the colour, and, as she was entitled to wear it, saw no reason not to
have her headdresses, her handkerchiefs, her shoes, as well as her gowns, the colour of squashed violets. No reason,
save that it was singularly unbecoming to her and made her face look yellow. Next to her was a rare, pretty creature
who knew everything about colour and how to use it. She had auburn hair and the fair skin that sometimes goes with
it, and wore dusky pink, which made her face and hair seem of sublime tints. She was chattering away to the
Princess Elizabeth on her left. Elizabeth’s startling red hair was drawn demurely back into a snood, and she was
attired in modest brown. Although only six, her manner was so grave and her demeanour so old that from across the
room she seemed to be old Margaret Beaufort, come again to taunt and judge me. Her black eyes—keen, sharp
buttons—were the very same. But the creature next to her—all froth and frills and foam—was making her laugh.
Who was the lady?
A splash of spittle landed before me. Anne was speaking. I turned. Yes, she was saying something, but I could not

“Tell the Queen”—how strange it sounded!—“that I will engage a tutor for her straightway. She must needs learn
the language of her people.”
Anne nodded vigorously, her headdress swaying. Again I thought of elephant ears. “They are in England now,” I
said. “It is time that they lay aside their native costumes and dress according to fashion here. I shall have the court
milliner measure the ladies of Cleves tomorrow.”
When they heard this, they were indignant.
“They say it would be immodest to lay aside their proper headdresses,” Hostoden said. “It is a wickedness to
display the hair.”
“God’s breath! If they cannot conform to English custom and costume, they should return to Cleves!”
They scowled at this pronouncement, then agreed that they would do so. I was flabbergasted, insulted. To quit
England so readily? Yet my indignation lasted but a moment, as I saw that in reality it was to my advantage to send
away as many of these foreigners as possible and replace them with Englishwomen. In my youth, the court had been
a bright place, as bright with youth and beauty as a summer field spread out with wildflowers and butterflies under
the sun. There was still youth and beauty somewhere beneath the English sun, and it must be brought to court.
Anne looked startled and frightened at the thought of being left alone. But I reached out and touched her stiff,
brocaded shoulder.
“As an English Queen, you should be served by Englishwomen,” I said, and Hostoden conveyed my words. “This
is your home now. And I shall employ—I shall send—” I motioned for Cromwell, a slight flicker of my eye and
finger, and he was instantly beside me.
“You have provided all things for Lady Anne, but no language instruction,” I chided him. “I desire straightway
that a tutor be found, a person so skilled in his craft that by Candlemas my wife shall speak to me in perfect
English.”
Having been given an impossible task, Cromwell accepted the commission unemotionally. He bowed, a stiff little
smile on his face.
“Yes, my Cromwell,” I said smoothly, “I am so anxious to hear my dearly beloved wife speak to me in my own
tongue. It will complete my happiness.”
A flicker of worry crossed his brow, that brow trained so well in Italy. Then he did his masters well. “As you say,
Your Majesty. In your pleasure lies my happiness.”
And your welfare, I thought. And your very existence.
I nodded expansively and chucked Anne on the cheek.
That evening, after the light supper of cold venison, pudding, and bread, a slim young man was announced. Anne
and I were once again retiring to the “bridal bower,” and the rest of the courtiers and attendants had withdrawn—
doubtless to jest and pity me. Well, their laughter and their pity would be short-lived.
flourished a basket of books, pens, and paper.
Crum—always daring in fulfilling a request. Who would have thought of sending someone to begin lessons this
very night? Only Crum.
I motioned the young tutor in, sat him down with my bride before a table.
“I ... am ... Anne.
“You ... are ... Martin.
“He ... is ... King Henry.”
I fell asleep to this refrain on the second night of my new marriage.
For the next week or ten days, Anne gave herself over completely to her English lessons. I was astounded by her concentration and diligence. Every morning when I left her, I kissed her on the cheek and said, “Good morning, sweetheart.” At night before going to sleep, I gave her yet another chaste peck and said, “Sleep well, my dear.” By the fourth morning she was able to say, “Good morning”; by that evening, “And you as well, husband”; and before many more days were out she was inquiring solicitously about my state business, my Council meetings, and the forthcoming nuptial tournaments and celebrations. Soon I would have a talking horse.

She was also (as befit a domestic beast) docile in allowing her women to be sent back to Cleves, in being assigned a whole new group of attendants, and in being measured and outfitted for a new wardrobe. Her “elephant ear” headdresses were cheerfully surrendered, and she showed a surprising taste for luxurious fabrics and fashionable gowns. She certainly had the frame to carry any extravagance in weight or colour. It was truly like trapping a great horse.

I spent my days closeted in meetings, poring over the latest diplomatic dispatches regarding the “amenity” between Charles and Francis. They must catch no wind of the lack of success in my new marriage, and rather than trust anyone, I must play my part so well that no one, not even Cromwell, would suspect. So I acted the happy bridegroom, watching myself as though I were detached, marvelling at my own ability to dissemble. It is a talent I suspect everyone possesses. Those who lament, “I can never lie, my face gives me away,” are the cleverest liars of all.

Forward went the plans for the great national celebrations. Protocol must be served, and on a windy day in late January the jousting barriers were put up in the tiltyard of Whitehall Palace; the brightly coloured flags were raised, and the spectator stands were hung with the Tudor colours.

Crum had employed an innovation: the royal boxes were enclosed, and heated with braziers. We were to gaze out at the contestants through glass plates.

The day of the royal tournaments was blustery and overcast, one of those days that seem grey throughout. But inside the royal glass boxes it was high summer, with all the chattering and uncovered necklines that accompany warmth.

Anne was wearing a square-cut golden velvet and cloth-of-gold gown, and on her hair she had a thin gold wire coronet set with emeralds—quite the latest fashion. She seemed exuberant to be attending this joust.

“In-a Cleves, ve haf no such tang,” she enunciated carefully.

No, I supposed not. What an insufferably dull place s tender and succulent as her foot. She still clutched the handkerchief, but tears glistened on her flushed cheeks, and her cushion-like lips quivered. She was the most sensual creature I had ever touched, the most fleshly and entirely of the senses, of this earth ... and I knew, in that instant, that I must possess her.

I said nothing. I stood up, made my way back to my royal seat.

It was settled. She would be mine. I had but to speak to arrange it. I lived in a world where all desires could be satisfied, but where the lack of desire had been the fearsome thing, the thing that weighed on me and made me feel dead.

Now I lived again. To want was to be alive. And I wanted Mistress Howard, wanted her so violently I was ashamed and breathless at the same time.

That night I could not sleep. Truly. For the first time since I had beheld Anne Boleyn at the investiture (June 25, 1525; I would never forget that date) and been bewitched, I had not had such a feeling. Was this, too, witchcraft? No, I knew better now. Anne’s witchcraft had come later. That initial feeling I had had was genuine and undeseccrated.

To experience it again! I had thought never to do so, and now to be given it, unsought, at my age!

I lay awake all night, enjoying the love yet to come, relishing the fact that I knew it would come to pass, for I had power to command, and what I wished, I could take. I was no Culpepper. But in the interval between the framing of a desire and the acting on it—therein lies the torture, and the bliss. A person is never more ours, yet never more unattainable, than in those hours.

Anne snored softly beside me. I felt fondly toward her, knowing that she was the odd means of having brought about my present and future bliss. Without the arranged marriage, I would have been content to languish forever, mourning and feeling myself dead. I had believed myself so. I even felt gratitude toward Francis and Charles. Without their enmity, I never would have had to make this forced marriage, then I never would have had a Queen,
and the Queen would never have had a household—

Enough! This was absurd. One might as well be thankful that one’s father lay with one’s mother on a certain
night, and that the midwife was saved from tripping on the stairs because of a fortuitous candle. The truth was, I was
gloriously in love—rebom, as it were—and that was all that mattered. Things were as they were, and to care
overmuch who brought them to this pass was to busy oneself wastefully. Any action not bringing a lover to the
possession of his loved one was wasted, unless it be savouring the moment to come.

Culpepper’s wounds were slight. He had been pricked by a lance-tip that somehow found its way between the
overlapping thigh-plates of his armour. The surgeon had cleansed his wound and bound it with pink satin.

“Her colours,” said Culpepper with a wink, as he reported back to my sleeping chamber for duty. He unwound
the satin carefully and placed it reverently on his night-table.

“What?” I forced myself to ask, casually ours.

“—turnips.”

They crowed with pleased laughter. I enjoyed hearing Anne’s delight. Without the shadow of my presence, she
seemed a lighthearted person, altogether at odds with her leaden appearance.

“Very good, sweetheart,” I said, strolling into the room. The laughter ceased. That hurt me.

“Come, come,” I chided. “Do not interrupt yourselves for my sake. What else is in the market? A fat hog,
perhaps?”

But they would not resume. Feeling let down, both in my original intention of seeing Mistress Catherine and,
unaccountably, in having intruded on Anne and being excluded, I made my way back to my own chamber. This was
the time when I would gladly have saddled a horse, gone hunting, left the palace and my feelings behind. But I was
not now capable of riding. Lately my leg-ulcer caused me such pain from being rubbed on a saddle that I no longer
could endure it. Moping about my chamber on this bleak February day, I called for one of the few pleasures left to
me—Will.

Will worked, still, when wine failed and company palled. Almost imperceptibly he had passed from being an
entertainer for my private moments, witty and full of scabrous gossip, to being a listener and a wise commentator—
especially after Jane had died and I simply could not abide fools about me, I mean true fools, not professional
jesters. Fools who murmured unctuous platitudes about how “time will heal all” and “you will rejoin her in heaven,”
and “she would not want you to grieve overmuch.” It was Will alone who was honest and brave enough to say, “I
know that you would trade the remainder of your life to speak to her for just a quarter of an hour on the most trivial
subject.” And I could answer, “Yes.”

Now I relied on him more and more, telling myself that I must not, as to place so much trust and need on a single
person was to court Fate overmuch. I had only to remember Wolsey, More, and Jane herself.

He stood before me in the work chamber, in his ordinary clothes. He seldom wore cap and bells anymore, as the
costume offended his sensibilities and was necessary only if he performed in public. Before me, at eleven in the
morning, it would have been absurd.

“Will,” I muttered, “I am utterly lost, forlorn.”

His dark quick eyes searched mine. “No, Hal”—he preferred to call me Hal, as no one else ever did—“you are
bored. Call it by its proper name.”

“What is boredom, then? Define it for me.” Already boredom had flown, at Will’s magic touch.

“Boredom is that awful state of inaction when the very medicine—that is, activity—which could resolve it, is seen
as odious. Archery? It is too cold, and besides, the butts need re-covering; the rats have been at the straw. Music? To
hear it is tedious; to compose it, too taxing. And so on. Of all the afflictions, boredom is ultimately the most un-
manning. Eventually it transforms you into a great nothing who does nothing—a cousin to sloth and a brother to
melancholy.”

“You make it sound romantic, and doomed.”

He shrugged. “It can be. The odd thing about it is that it is so easily cured. One need only force himself to
perform the ‘boring’ acti wood pattern that one had stared at when at a certain hurtful juncture at one’s life. Without
these, ghosts were flown. Katherine had been here; Anne, too. Jane as maid of honour. Each of them had made the
place so different, in her own time, that it seemed surrounded by different bricks; it seemed the windows should give
out on different views.

I glanced out the east window from the Queen’s Privy Chamber. The same Thames flowed by, rushing now and
swollen with the spring waters. I looked about me, rejoicing in the bare boards and open rooms. I always became excited at new beginnings, and that was what empty rooms meant to me.

Within my mind I heard music—vanished music from other rooms, other times. Such was my mood that morning that I did not question it but stood and listened. Slow, long, plaintive ... things that once had been, but were no more ... it had a sad beauty all its own.

They were real notes, though. A false one was struck, whereas a false one was never struck in memory....

I moved forward, turning my head. The sound was stronger in my left ear. It was coming from the rooms deeper within the Queen’s suite. I passed through the audience chamber, through the outer council chamber. The sound was richer. I stood in the entranceway that branched to both the left and the right, and I could not discern from whence the sound came. I waited some moments, holding my breath. My ears did not decide for me, but my intellect. I knew (being one, myself) that musicians always preferred natural light to artificial. Windows lined the left side of the Queen’s apartments, letting in God’s light. Therefore I went to the left, and—

Stopped absolutely, my breath frozen, movements arrested, while my mind recorded for all time the sight of a great, ivory-keyed virginal, all naked in a stripped room, with Mistress Catherine Howard leaning against it, picking out notes. I watched her labouring, alone in the room, an expression of pure delight on her face. I knew what it meant to be left alone for a whole day to play a new instrument, to learn and master it with no one listening. It surpassed sensuality, it surpassed almost all other experiences.

Each note sounded out loud and clear, flinging itself jubilantly into the spring air. I stood, hidden, as long as I dared. Then I felt it was deceitful, so to intrude and spy on an artist’s solitude, and I stepped out boldly.

“Mistress Howard,” I said simply, making my way across the worn floorboards toward her, “I see that you, too, delight in a well-tuned virginal.”

She gasped and drew back, like a child caught at something naughty. “Your—Your Majesty—” She stumbled up and grasped at her skirts. The pushed-back virginal bench fell with a crash behind her.

“Nay, nay.” I hated it when, in a private situation, I evoked embarrassment and fear. Officially, of course, it was different. “I myself enjoy practising in deserted rooms, where no one can possibly overhear.”

She bent over and pulled up the fallen bench.

“Pray you,” I said in what I hoped was my most soothing voice, “continue your playing. I always enjoyed hearing the Lady Mary play the virginals, and—”

Not Anne Boleyn. I shut out that horrible memory, of . I 221;
The lass smiled and smoothed her skirts. “At my grandmother’s. I had a tutor.”

“When did you begin? You must have studied for many years.” I seated myself beside her on the narrow bench.

“No. I”—she thought swiftly—“it was for one year only, when I was thirteen. Yet I studied diligently then. And continued to practise after my tutor had departed.”

“You enjoy music, then?”

“I love it.” She smiled. I was struck by her composure; but then, when artists come together, it often happens that their calling overcomes shyness, differences in station, everything. We speak a common language, and everything else is hushed. It happened, even, that my love and desire for her were set aside for a moment in the glow of her music, where we became equals.

I reached out and fingered the keyboard, remembering old melodies; she listened. Then she played, and I listened. Midway she laughed, and I glanced at her glowing skin and deep black lashes and was overcome with love, desire, all blended and heightened by the music and even, absurdly, by the virginal before us with its chipped old keys.

She turned to look at me, not averting her eyes, as proper maidens do, but looking me full in the face. Her eyes were ice-blue and rimmed in some darker colour, which only made her appear all the more remote and untouched, waiting for me.

“Catherine,” I finally said, astounded at how calm and unwavering my voice was, “I love to hear you play, and I fain would play beside you all my life. There is much of me that has been lost, misplaced—not irretrievably, as I had feared—but for a time. I would share that person with you, and in return I would give you—I would give you—whatever your heart longs for,” I finished weakly.

“A new virginal?” she asked. “The keys of this—”

She did not understand! “Certainly, that. But, my dear, what I am asking you—”

What I am asking you is this: Can you love an old man of near fifty? Can you be wife to him?

“—is whether you would be my—”

Whether you would consent to be Queen? One does not beg someone to accept a high state office! It is its own reward!

“—whether you would wed me?”

She stared at me as if I were mad. Then she said, slowly, “I cannot ... no ... it cannot be ... you have a wife
Anne Boleyn’s words! I felt flung into a vortex of time, where nothing had changed, and we were condemned to repeat the same mistakes and words forever and ever. Your wife I cannot be, for you have a wife already; and your mistress I will not be.

“I have no wife!” Those words, too, were the same. “I have the power to put her aside.” Different words, now. Words earned through six long years of testing.

“You mean—I would be Queen?”

“Little Catherine Howard size="3">And the chance to speak has gone to yours, I thought. Call Cromwell what you like, you fool, he never lets himself be flattered, and he never lets down his guard. He would never betray his mind so. I looked at Surrey contemptuously. “They come from good stock. It is upon such honest, decent Englishmen that the future of the realm depends.”

“Aye, aye,” he quickly agreed, eager to be as beguiling as he imagined himself. “Certainly they are not made of the same material as Cromwell, no—for they are honest, and have no secret plans of any sort, beyond recognition for themselves. But Cromwell, well, we don’t know his desires, do we? He does not seem to want any of the things any normal man would want. There’s talk”—he smiled a puzzled smile—“that he’s the Devil.”

I wanted to laugh, but it never came.

“There are those who, I’m told, can actually strike a bargain with Satan. They sit down and work out a contract with him, just as you do with the money-lenders of Antwerp. ‘So-and-so much interest to be paid on the loan of twenty thousand pounds, due on Whitsun of 1542,’ you say, and it is done. ‘My soul in exchange for such-and-such,’ they say, and it is done. Cromwell appears to have—I mean, there are so many signs—”

He meant it. All the playfulness and deceit was gone from his face.

“My dear son, you—”

“Catherine!” said Surrey, as if a spell were being broken. Catherine had seen us deep in talk, and come over. She tugged playfully at her cousin’s arm.

“They are taking seats,” she chided him, “and you will not be able to see.”

Her presence took us out of that dangerous realm where we had entered, just for a moment. She grinned up at Surrey. They were cousins, first cousins. I could see little resemblance between them. Surrey was slender and blonde, Catherine small and auburn-haired. Both had pale skin, that was all.

I reached out my arm to her, and together we found seats and prepared to listen to a series of compositions performed on a reed instrument by a young man from Cornwall.

He was small and dark, like all his people. The melodies were haunting, dreamlike, unlike anything I had heard before. They spoke to a soft, lost side of myself.

Afterwards I talked to him. I had a bit of trouble understanding his accent, as his mother tongue was Cornish. I complimented him on his musicianship and enquired after the sources of his melodies.

“I modelled them on native melodies, Your Grace,” he said. “There are similar tunes across the sea in Brittany,” he added. “Often my father and I cross there, and while he does his business, I do mine.”

“And what is his business?”

“He is a fisherman, Your Grace.”

“And yours?”

“A musician.”

“And only that?”

“Aye. It’s what I’m called to.”

“But what of your father’s trade?”

He shrugged. “Perhaps somewhere a musician/div—”

She reached out and slid her hand along my cheek. The faint light from the boatmen’s torches lit the left side of her face—a half-mask.

“You are a half moon,” I murmured, leaning over to kiss her. She returned that kiss heartily, hungrily, sweetly. I quivered, shuddered, erupted with desire.

“Nay, nay—” she was whispering, her voice rising in urgency. “My Lord!”

I was ashamed. I had frightened her, threatened her chastity. “Forgive me,” I said. My breath was still coming in short gasps.

She drew her cloak around her. Jesu, how could I have insulted her so? She was crying.

“Catherine, I meant no harm. But this—this is unnatural.” At that moment I knew it, felt it. “We must be wed straightway. It is meant to be. No more standing before the Thames, alive with longing.” Even the slap-slap-slap of the water against the riverbank sounded sexual to me. “I will speak to Cromwell tomorrow.”
Still she kept her face buried in her cloak, her shoulders hunched. I reached out a steadying hand. “Hush now.” I soothed her. When she had done crying, I put one arm around her and led her back to her waiting barge. She leaned against me all the way, and yet when the time came to play her part to her waiting uncle Norfolk, she smiled gaily and threw off the hood of the cloak as she joined him in the Howard barge.

Her cousin Surrey, the Lady Norris, Mary, widow of my lost son Fitzroy: all the Howard youngsters awaited her in the barge, and she outshone them all. As the rowers pulled away from the riverbanks, and the sound of music and the faint lantern light echoed and reflected on the water, I wondered what it was to belong to such a great tribal family, and how it felt.
I awoke well before dawn, savouring the spring sweetness. Every hour seemed precious now, every aspect of the day steeped in a rare perfume. The birdsong outside my window was finer tuned than any human consort of viols. Oh, how beautiful was the world! Catherine would soon be my wife, and I would have someone again to share these exquisite moments of life.

Culpepper stirred on the pallet at the foot of my bed and groaned. He rubbed his eyes and sat up, muttering all the while. His breath was foul. I looked at him, in all his youthful strength and beauty, enmeshed in a hangover; and suddenly it seemed to me a desecration, a perversion of what a man was meant to be. He marred the day, like a boil on a virgin’s cheek.

I must see Cromwell, if this thing were truly to come about. And so I sent for him, which I had not done in some time. He appeared so promptly I could almost credit young Henry Howard’s tale of diabolical power; only the Devil could travel with such speed.

Clean-shaven and obedient, he stood before me. “Your Grace?” He bowed smartly; only his rising voice betrayed eagerness and compliance.

“Things are breaking up on the Continent, like clouds on a March day,” I began.

“Sire?”

“I no longer need the alliance with Cleves!” I barked. “You erected it; you dismantle it.”

“Leonardo da Vinci—even he!—dismantled the arches and pavilions he created for Princess Katherine’s Coronation. He supposedly was a great artist —certainly Francis thought so, buying every small canvas he painted!—and yet he was not above cleaning up his messes. Now you do the same!”

“Sire?” He looked pained and confused. “Pray you, be specific. I am no artist, and have erected no arches filled with cherubim. Nor have I painted Madonnas in strange landscapes.”

“No, you have brought a travesty of a Madonna to my landscape!”

He looked blankly at me. What an actor!

“I mean the Lady Anne of Cleves! A Madonna—that is, a mother—she will never be, and the political reasons for the marriage are insufficient. Francis and Charles drift apart, like those March clouds, and my good coastal defence system will protect me better than an alliance with the Duchy of Cleves. It was a mistake, a ghastly mistake that robs me of the opportunity to happiness. So undo what you have so dexterously done!”

“I thought... that you were fond of the Lady... the Queen,” he mumbled.

“I am fond of my hunting dogs and of the first lute I had as a boy. But that is not enough for a marriage!”

Instead of responding with abject obedience, he walked about the chamber a bit—though I had not given him permission!—and at length turned back to me, musing. (He acted as if he actually had a choice as to whether to obey or not. Why did he try me so?)

His eyes were narrowed. “It is Norfolk who has put you to this,” he said coldly. “He seeks to use you for his purpose.”

“No one uses me!” I bellowed. The fool! “Least of all you!”

He started; I continued. “Yes, you! All over the kingdom they say you use me. Use me for your own schemes. Protestant schemes. Now prove to me that they lie. Undo this insulting Protestant alliance you concocted for me, that you erected just like one of Leonardo’s symbolic arches, all out of papier-mâché and paint. Tear it down. It is as insubstantial as a paper arch.”

He looked grim. “Your Grace—”

“Do it! What has been done can be undone!”

In a heartbeat he accepted the challenge. “What provision shall be made for the Lady Anne?”

I waved my hand impatiently. “A manor—a palace—a royal income.” Those were Cromwell’s concerns. I stopped. Anne was dear to me in a peculiar way. I even loved her, but it was a singular sort of love.

“She shall be my sister,” I said. “I will keep her and cherish her as if she were my dear lost Mary. I have no family,” I said, almost in wonder. “I would like a sister.”

“You must be more specific,” he said dryly.

I sat down and the words came. “She shall be titled ‘the King’s sister.’ She shall be given royal residences and ... shall be my friend.”

“A high honour.” D221; I laughed, but did not answer him. A deflection is no answer; it is not even a sop.

I knew deep inside that Crum was becoming dangerous, and had changed since first he came into my service. He had outlived his usefulness both to me and to England. There were signs—signs that even he could not hide: his
obvious partiality toward the Protestants on the Continent, his strange leniency toward heretics and Reformers, his uncharacteristic reluctance to enforce “the Whip with Six Strings,” and his determined maneuvering for the Cleves marriage.

Yet I hung on that human balance, liking the man, even while knowing he was bad. I lacked the courage to act on my intuition, to just... end Cromwell. Eliminate his presence from my government. Each time I would say to myself, “Next time—next time I’ll do it—” and yet each time he would walk from my chamber a free man, enveloped in his customary power. Power that I must needs revoke. Next time.

So. Now it would be done. I had no doubt of that. I had frightened him, and a frightened Cromwell was a sure servant. He would untangle me from Anne. But I was pleased at my decision to offer her a place in my family. Of course, such a thing was unprecedented, but then, so was our entire relationship. If Cleves were as dull as it seemed to be, Anne would surely have no wish to return to it.

I felt a contentment fuller than any in years. I paced the chamber a bit, trying to understand why.

Of course. I was being given something few men were ever gifted with: an opportunity to relive my life and have it turn out differently. What was Anne of Cleves but a second Katherine of Aragon—a foreign princess to whom I could not be husband? Only this time, instead of wasting years seeking Papal sanction, I had but to say “Do it” to Cromwell—and it would be done. Instead of appealing to foreign rulers and clinging to her “rights” to me, Anne would co-operate, and we would remain friends.

And Catherine Howard! She was Anne Boleyn before she became hard and heartless and corrupted. By some great miracle (for who can understand God’s mind?), I had been given a second chance.

That evening I was to dine with Anne, as I usually did on Thursday evenings; long, comfortable suppers before a hearty fire. I was not disappointed this time.

Anne greeted me affectionately at the door to her withdrawing chamber and pointed to a board set up before the open window, looking out on the summer twilight. My accustomed chair, well bedecked with velvet pillows, was drawn up.

“A new game?” I inquired. How she loved games!

“Ja!” She beamed. “It is called ‘Var.’ ” The board had a figure drawn upon it that was funnel-shaped—narrow at one end, wide at the other. To the side were grouped carved horses and men, and wooden coins of different colours.

“Pray explain.”

“Ah, ja. Vell, it takes ze income from the monasteries, ze New Worl, ze banks—wool produck-sion, all zose things, and zen buys men with zem, zat is, soldiers, and—zese nations var together.”

It was an elaborate and intricate game, based on sources of income for ten countries, and their national goFrance, while the Emperor stood on the sidelines with Scotland, and the Pope amassed land wealth.

“Leave it set up!” I cautioned. “I wish to conclude this game, see it through to the end.”

She laughed. “I am glad it pleasures you so.”

“Where did you find it?”

“I made it up.”

I was dumbfounded. “You? You created it?”

She was brilliant! A mathematician, a financier, a strategist. Oh, why was she a woman? Poor Wolsey. If only he had had one-third her grasp of these things.

“You are gifted, Princess. Would I could make you Chancellor of the Exchequer. Or War Minister.”

“Und vhy not?” she asked blandly.

“Because you are the Queen,” I replied. But will not be for long, I thought. And then, why not... ? No, impossible. But I would need someone to replace Cromwell.... No, absurd!

“Goodnight, sweetheart,” I said quickly, nodding and kissing her hand. I walked down the corridor to my own apartments swiftly, lest I suddenly act on my own impulse. Beheading a Queen had not alarmed the populace as much as appointing one Finance Minister would.

Within a fortnight Cromwell reported that all obstacles were cleared. The “cause” had been found: Anne’s precontract with the Duke of Lorraine, but, more importantly, the lack of consummation.

“The lack of consummation, or my inability to consummate the marriage? Be clear, Crum!”
He shrugged. “Of course it would be more... persuasive... if you attested to your inability to consummate it. But 'twill serve as well if you present it as a matter of policy that you simply chose not to.”

“It makes me sound as if my private parts wore the crown instead of my head.” He looked over at me, and I could almost read his mind: In you, Sire, they do.

Women groan from desire, too, I thought. You shall see.

Instead I smiled. “Good night, sweetheart,” I said, unwittingly giving the same farewell that I gave Anne every evening. What else was there to say to an untouched bride?

Cromwell I gave instructions to.

“You have prepared a statement for the Princess of Cleves to sign?” I asked.

“Yes, Your Majesty. It is all set down here, as best I understood your desires.” He produced a short document.

“If it said what the true nature of the complaint is, it would be even shorter.” The parchment said it, said something—what matter, as long as the game was ended? I laid it down.

“There is another matter, Your Majesty,” said Cromwell happily. “A matter pertaining to money.” He looked as if he expected me to salivate. Was I perceived as that simple, then? And that greedy?

“In the monastic suppressions, we overlooked one order. The Knights of St. John of Jerusalem.”

Ah, yes. The militant order of monks, the sword-arm of Christ. They had formed originally to protect defenceless pilgrims to Jerusalem. They had fought the Infidel and set up hospices all along the pilgrim routes. As always, competence and filling a need where no services existed had made them powerful and then wealthy. Today the order held land and privilege all over Europe. They were true knights, though, in the purest sense of the word. And their name stood for strength, honesty, compassion.

“... a profit of ten thousand pounds,” Cromwell was saying.

“But who will take their place?”

He smiled crookedly. “No one. Because they are not needed today.”
“Charity and protection, not needed?”
“Not en route to Jerusalem. Perhaps in other guises, at other stations.”
“But with no formal organization?”
“The Knights did not begin as a formal organization. They began with one man’s courage and charity. Other men of vision will see the needs today.”

I sighed. I was reluctant to sign, as if by signing I would at long last kill something lingering in myself.

“I shall leave it here for you,” Cromwell said at length, placing it firmly on top of a stack of lesser documents for my attention, things pertaining to rent-leases in Kent and shipping regulations for Alicante wine.

After he had left me alone, I reread the first parchment carefully. It stated, succinctly and reasonably, why the marriage to Anne was no marriage. It outlined the privileges Anne was to acquire upon becoming “the King’s most entirely beloved sister.” She would take precedence over all women of the realm, with the exception of my Queen (who was left unspecified) and my daughters. She would be granted a large annual income of about five thousand pounds, and two royal manors, Richmond and Bletchingly.

In exchange, she had merely to sign and acknowledge that we were in agreement on this matter.

Attached to the document was an envelope containing a terse statement by Cromwell: “It will doubtless be necessary for the King’s Majesty to speak personally to selected members of the Court and the foreign ambassadors on this matter, viz, to wit: ‘The marriage between the Princess of Cleves and myself has never been consummated, due to our inner conviction that this was no true marriage. The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth and Wisdom, communicated itself to us unmistakably, and we obeyed.’ ”

How neat and vague and high-minded. But what if questions were asked? Must a King open himself so personally to public knowledge? How much would people demand, and how far was I bound to answer?

I found I could not sign the paper. I would have to search the matter out more fully with Cromwell in the morning.
“I know not how, precisely. But it disturbs my conscience.” What disturbed my conscience, truly, was the putting away of a good woman for no other fault than not exciting me.

“It need not be done at all!” he said merrily. “Perhaps these pricklings of conscience are showing you another way, the most righteous way!”

Any chance that his handiwork would survive elated him. But it could not be.

“Nay, it must be done. It is necessary for the realm that I have a true Queen and perhaps other heirs. It would give Edward comfort, too, not to carry the burden alone.”

Cromwell nodded, as he had to; wondering if a new Queen on the throne would represent all manner of connections he had sought to quash.

I turned quickly and swung round to glance at the parchments spread out on his work-surface. They were innocent enough, or seemed to be. One never knew. They might contain codes; I knew he had devised some. To disguise his plans?

I then let my eyes search his chamber. The light was so poor it was difficult to see into the far corners. I thought I saw a shelf laden with odd-shaped vessels. Abruptly I made my way to it, taking one of the candles with me. Behind me I could hear Cromwell following anxiously.

Yes, it was a row of jars and bottles and little boxes. Some were evidently quite ancient; I could tell by the worm-eaten wood.

“What are these things?” I asked. I reached out and took one, a rounded container with a hinged lid. Inside was some sort of ointment. I took a smear of it. It smelt vile, like a decaying animal.

“I said, what is in these containers?” I repeated. How dare he not answer forthwith?

“I—it is—medicines seized from the monastic infirmaries,” he finally said. “That one you hold—it was used to help failing hearts... you remember ... as Carew had, that time in the cave—”

Carew. Yes. Unfortunately, his heart had finally ceased to beat due to his treason, not to his disease. But for others who had the same affliction... ?

“Is it efficacious?”

“Indeed! It saved many lives; the monks of that abbey were noted for that particular cure.”

“Why, then, have you not made it available to our own physicians?”

“The monks—it would reflect well on them if it were known that they had devised such cures. No, I prefer—”

“You prefer to hoard these medicines here! You prefer men to die rather than think well of the monks!”

“It is necessary to discredit the monks!” he insisted.

“Necessary for whom, Cromwell?” I murmured.

The clock outside struck the half hour. I used listening to the clock as a pretext to approach the window-seat laden with the mysterious books.

“Ah, yes,” I mumbled, opening the casement. I stuck my head out and rested my left hand on the sill, quite nds were raw. There, now they should be clean! I held them out to receive a coat of perfumed lotion.

I called for a Privy Council meeting in mid-morning. I wanted to give them their assignments, make my humiliating “confession,” and have done with it. By this time tomorrow, I kept reminding myself, it would all be over.

I sat alone in the chamber, awaiting them. I was all attired in sombre garments, befitting a less than joyous occasion. Brandon and Wyatt would carry the message to Anne, I had decided. As for the horrible acknowledgment —the entire Privy Council would have to hear it, to make it both official and binding.

The first man into the chamber was William Paget. Stolid and utterly colourless and reliable, he was Secretary of the Council. He coughed and bowed deeply to me, then quietly took his place and awaited the others.

Within three minutes William Petre arrived, clad likewise in colourless, drab attire. On his heels came Audley and Sadler. As they took their places, I could not help but think of wrens and poor winter birds sitting in dreary tiers on bare December branches.

Then came the Old Men, all resplendent in luscious colours and sumptuous fabrics. Norfolk, of course, as ranking
peer of England, draped in velvet; Suffolk, in cloth-of-gold; even Gardiner, as Bishop of Winchester and leader of
the churchly traditionalists, along with Wriothesley his hanger-on, were brightly attired.

At length the filing-in was complete and they all sat, obedient to the day’s business. As the King never personally
attended Privy Council meetings, they knew this was no ordinary agenda.

I rose. “My good Council and servants”—I stressed “good” and “servants” —“I am here to share with you a
secret matter of mine own heart.”

They looked uneasy.

“Yea”—I pulled the prepared statement from its cover—“I, having contracted a marriage in good faith and having
participated in a marriage ceremony with all good intentions, find now that my marriage is no true marriage in the
eyes of God and the laws of men.”

I looked up at their faces. They appeared frozen. Good.

“The Lady Anne of Cleves was not free to make such a marriage, so it seems. There was precontract, from
childhood, to the present-day Duke of Lorraine. This evidently is binding in every way.”

Now for the difficult part. God, how I hated it!

“Our bodies, in recognition of this, refused to join. We have remained chaste, and have not known one another.”

The Earl of Southampton tittered. Then the others followed suit, trying all the while to suppress their mirth. The
more they stifled it, the more it grew.

Damn them!

“So you wish to know the exact details?” I said sharply. Such a hush fell over them that a man scarce would have
credited it. “Very well, then!” Do not do this, one part of me said. Yes, do! another taunted. Outdo them in vulgarity
and embarrassment. “When I first came to the bed of the Lady Anne, I felt by her breasts that she was no young
maid; their slackness, and the looseness of her belly-flesh, so struck me to the heart and looked weary. But not
afraid. That was good. That meant they had not failed in their assignment. Somewhere in the welter of rolls they
carried on their persons (and it seemed they had more than a stag had antlers, so did they protrude all over) were the
signature and seal I craved.

“Well?” I rose from my chair.

“She agreed, Your Grace,” sighed Brandon, pulling out the one paper that mattered and handing it to me.

I grasped it and let my eyes run like a leaping child to find the requisite signature, down far at the bottom: Anna,
Princess of Cleves.

“Christ be praised!” I muttered.

Only then did I think to offer them stools to sit upon, and some nourishment. It had been a gruelling day for them
as well as for me. Gratefully they seated themselves and held out their dusty hands for bowls of water to wash them.
A page performed the duty.

“The Queen—Lady Anne—had a hard time of it,” spoke Wyatt in a hushed voice, as his hands were being dried.

It was to be expected. After all, she loved me, and had assumed she would remain Queen of England forever.

“Yes, I pity her,” I said. And I did. I knew what it was to suffer unrequited love, or to be deprived of a station in life
to which one felt called.

“She fainted when she saw us appear round the hedge to her garden,” said Brandon.

Fainted? Could it be? No, absurd! She was no Virgin Mary, to bring forth without knowing a man. Where had my
fancies taken me? She had done it out of love, out of desperate love.

“Poor lady,” I murmured.

“She thought we had come with her death warrant,” continued Brandon. “She thought to be arrested, tried, and
then executed.”

I chuckled contemptuously.

“She was clear frightened, Your Grace. You had shown your disfavour and lack of consent from the start, then
sent her away without you. She is no fool. I am sure she is well acquainted with the course of behaviour you took
with Anne Boleyn. The withdrawal, the disfavour—all was being repeated.”

“Save that she had no lovers!” I shrieked, turning round. “Save that she was no witch! Save that she did not plan
my death! Small differences, would you not agree?”

“Aye, aye,” murmured Wyatt.

“By all that’s in heaven, yea,” echoed Brandon. “She revived promptly,” he added.

Her strong constitution would see to that, yes. “She seemed delighted with the agreement, and the terms. In half
an hour she changed into the gayest maiden I had beheld in a season.”

Gay? Delighted? To lose me as a husband? I remembered Katherine’s agony, her insistence on keeping me as her
spouse.

“She sent you this token.” Brandon took out a velvet pouch and produced her gold wedding band.
“Well, well,” was all I could say. Anne had agreed. I had won.
I gestured toward the darkened window. “Tomorrow I’ll send Oatlands, just a high-ceilinged chamber on the second storey, hung with hunting trophies. Stags’ heads and boars’ heads stared at us with their glass eyes.

Catherine and I sat side by side and laughed at everything. We laughed at Brandon when he stood up, cup in hand, and made a solemn toast about matrimony. He himself had been married four times, and had been one of the chamberers on my wedding-night public bedding with Katherine. It all seemed to come together now, all was one. We laughed, and we touched. And touched. O sweet Jesu! That touch!

We smiled at Cranmer’s gentle well-wishes. (And touched.) We clapped at the Lady Mary’s. (And touched, under the table, lest she see.) We bowed gravely at little Edward’s. He spoke three words in Latin, memorized for the occasion. And all the while the sun was lowering, making shadows on the rows in the grain fields outside. At last it set, but the interminable summer twilight lingered on and on, until I longed to order it to disappear.

At long last it grew dark enough in the feasting chamber for candles to be lit, then torches. It was time for our guests to take their leave, and so they did, with kisses and well-wishes. There was to be no ceremonial bedding this time. Like any wool merchant or soldier, I was free to take my bride to my bed unaided.

It was a new bed, purchased from a local magistrate in the nearby village of Weybridge. He had commissioned it from a London artisan, meant it for a grand guest chamber he had had in mind for a manor that never came about. It was of good English oak and agreeably carved, and quite large, in aping the nobility. It stood now in the royal Retiring Chamber, its great four-posts scraping against the sloping ceiling.

I led my sweet Catherine into the chamber, closing the snug, dark door behind me. It was passably dark in there, and the one lighted candle on the wooden chest danced in the billowing summer air. Two dormer windows gave out on the ripening fields. I made to close them. Catherine stopped me, putting her soft hand on my arm.

“On this my wedding night,” she said, “I would not be shut up and closed, as in a tomb. I would have a little breath of heaven, of the world beyond.”

“Whatever you wish,” I said. The windows remained open, and the grain-perfumed air came in, along with the cries of labourers and travellers on the road below.

I wish I could tell exactly what happened in the next few hours. I said thus-and-so. She said thus-and-so. We did thus-and-so. Yet although my senses were fully alert (no wine for either of us that night), I became so transported by her very presence that everything was altered, and I cannot separate one action from another.

It makes me angry that it is so. These were precious hours to me, hours that must now stand after all the nasty tide has swept in against them, and yet I cannot remember! I cannot remember cold details, only my own feelings, which were as strong as Hercules, but formless.

I was with her. I possessed her. She was mine. The very touch of her hand was a gift. A gift which felt simultaneously natural and precious beyond thought. The ordinary me, the true Henry, was not worthy of such a gift, but this special Henry was, the Henry I became in her presence.

All this was entirely natural, was it not? To hold her in my arms, to kiss her lips, to hear those words of endearment gasped out in jerks? The special Henry, the Henry and endowed with extraordinary graces (this Henry who was both me and not me, stranger and ever-known) —he felt at ease in this bliss, this homecoming.

I know she responded, created the Henry of whom I speak. In the fleeting moments in which I existed as this extraordinary Henry, I felt I was ever thus: not fading, not temporary. I was bold with her, taking her to bed as this Henry wished. We did not remove all our clothes, so anxious were we to consummate our union and join as one. We left our upper bodies completely clothed, and our lower bodies, naked, sought one another. It happened so quickly, so completely, that the twilight had not faded altogether before our first union was done.

What a contrast was there: our lower selves still fused together in heat and sweat, and enfolded together, whilst our upper bodies touched not at all, save through layers and layers of linen and velvet and jewels.

We rolled away. But no self-consciousness yet: no, none.

I finally spoke, softly. “You are different from my fantasies.”

“How so?”

“I never thought you would know, so quickly, what it was you wanted.”

“Are you disappointed?” she said sadly. “Because I did not feign reluctance, as a virgin is expected to?”

“No, no,” I assured her. But did I speak true?
“I meant to. But the truth is, my desire took hold and I had no will or power to restrain it.” Did she speak true? “Nor I.” I leaned over and kissed her gently. The jewel-encrusted doublet I still wore restricted my movement, reminded me of its presence. “It is time to undress,” I said softly.

Together we unbuttoned and unclasped the bindings of one another’s garments. Then, although naked, we did not look directly at one another, but wrapped ourselves up in the bleached and scented linen sheets and began to talk, like children huddled together.

The talk was awkward, when the bodies had not been. I longed to speak of all my feelings, but sensed that was wrong. Catherine had recovered herself, and began chattering away in a high voice.

“... and then the most stinking groom in the Duchess’s stables, he made gestures toward me. Naturally I was sickened: he was repulsive. How could he ever have thought I would respond? I told my aunt the Duchess....”

Why was she sullying our time together, our first union, with these tales of men who had wanted her and whom she had refused? It made me angry, it hurt me. Yet I let her go on, tried to join in, in a jolly fashion.

From thence she went on about the most inane subjects. Her Howard cousins, Culpepper and Henry the Earl of Surrey; a book she had seen Mary Howard reading; a tale told the Duchess by a returning pilgrim from Jerusalem.

It was all entertaining, witty—and impersonal. Why did she choose to speak of these things on this sacred night? Was it just nervous chatter, the chatter of a maid who feared the unknown? Yet she did not appear afraid or frightened or shaken in the least. Rather she appeared self-possessed, soothing.

I did not understand. I only felt disappointed, somehow. Not in the love...”>Then she suddenly broke off her words and turned to me, flinging her arms around me. “Now I would be the bridegroom,” she murmured, pressing me on my back, positioning me just so, lowering herself upon me. As she felt me inside her, she leaned back: pulling, pushing, straining. I saw her fair white body, slim and yet big-breasted, in the candlelight, arching away from mine. Her lips were parted, and her chin jutted out. A mass of hair enveloped her, touched even my loins, tickling them. She worked, grunted, cried out. But I felt little. I could not lose myself, although her woman-parts engulfed me, seemed to suck me in. She fell forward, a sheen of sweat upon her back.

“Ah,” she murmured, a bubble of saliva forming, and bursting, on her plump lips. Her arms trailed out on either side like those of a drunkard upon a board. Lasciviously she pulled up her left leg, disengaging our private parts. She came away from me with a great sucking noise and a trail of moisture. The drops landed on my belly: small, round, gleaming, and oily. I watched them as they formed, like little pearls.

She gave an animal sigh of contentment.

“It must take a great deal to keep you satisfied,” I finally murmured. The drops on my flesh flattened and trickled off, and I felt cold. Outside there was no light. The brief summer dark had taken hold.
During the remainder of that unusually hot summer, I fluctuated between two poles of feeling. One part of me rejoiced in Catherine, in my new wife, and basked in her beauty and unrestrained sensuality. She said things I had never thought to hear a woman say. “I dreamed last night of your man-sword, and how it felt inside me, and I could not sleep, for both the memories and the expectations.” “The way you move is sinful, and takes me away in thought at embarrassing times. Today when the French ambassador stood before me, all I could think of was the way we had screamed out together at midnight last.” Now I myself would never be able to see Castillon, the French ambassador, without remembering Catherine’s midnight ecstasies.

On the other hand, it happened again and again—she did not react, did not feel, turned a solemn moment into a trite jest. When I said, “It has never been so good, never in my life,” she replied offhandedly, “Oh, it must have been good with the Princess of Aragon, with my cousin Boleyn, with Queen Jane—for there are Princess Mary and Princess Elizabeth and Prince Edward.” Smile. Laugh. When I told her of how I loved her, she murmured, “It is carnal only, Henry, pure carnality. I know not else why we find ourselves thus.” Giggle. “Have you done this often?” Smirk. And ever: “Tell me, what do you think I—?” Do. Think. Look like. She never tired of hearing how she appeared. Once, when she came upon me writing some music for the virginal, she asked, “Are you writing a tune of our love?” She assumed I was —that she should be my subject and muse and fixation. The fact that it was so was no surprise, no gift. She claimed it as a personal victory, lugged it home with her as the hunters had done the stag and boar heads decorating our wedding-lodge manor.

She was a child, I reminded myself. Children open their presents on the spot. I knew it, and yet I expected more. Or less. I hated her bragging and her strutting. Yet I longed for her kisses and enthusiasms. And her sweet flesh. We remained at royal country manors throughout the summerted, reborn, and reshaped.

When the time came for the summer progress to end, I found I had no desire to return to London and immerse myself in affairs of the realm, to read over the rolls of the shires and the tax compilations. There was the horrid task of sorting through Cromwell’s records, and this I did not care to do at all. I knew they would be orderly and not difficult to survey. But, oh! to touch them, and see that handwriting. It would be as if he himself stood grinning at my shoulder.

Day by day I was increasing in strength and endurance, both out of doors and between the sheets with Catherine. It was only October. What need to break it all off now? I could return to London, unite my private travelling Privy Council with the London-bound lot, transact essential business in a fortnight, and rejoin Catherine for a long, slow autumn. Then there would be the Christmas revels, and after that, I could return to life as it commonly was.

Or life as it was meant to be. The realm was quiet, at long last, after the murmurings and belligerence at the start of my Great Matter; after the outright rebellion against the closing of the monasteries; after the plots and counter-plots and treachery that went abroad in the realm, masquerading as “conscience” (Thomas More), the restoration of the “old order” (Cardinal Pole), the bringing about of the “new order” (Cromwell); after outside threats and sword-shakings (the Pope and his toady the Emperor, until at last their pawn, Mary, disappointed them by coming over to my side). Oh, it was all over at last, and I was weary, weary. I had fought so many years. Now a golden haze of satiation lay on the land I had harried so, and I would luxuriate in it.

In November, then, I rejoined Catherine at Dunstable. Small manor it was, and it suited me. I enjoyed snugness now, a certain warmth encircling one’s being; although I knew I should visit Nonsuch soon, I had at this moment lost my taste for palaces and outsized things. Perhaps I wished to live as a man after living so long as a god.

I decreed that until Christmas, and the obligatory return to London, I would keep only a few about me. Culpepper, of course; Will; Paget, Denny, and Wyatt; and Richard Harpsfield, the hunting-master, along with Edward Bacon, the horse-master. Horses were most important, as I intended to keep riding until well into December. The exercise had already wrought marvels upon my body. In three months I had been hewn anew. Now I would complete the process.

After only two weeks’ absence from Catherine, she seemed different—plumper, more pink. She was happy enough in the rooms of Dunstable Manor. “The windows of our chamber give off on the oaks!” she exclaimed. “I love them. They are my favourite trees. The leaves cling all winter, and they turn russet and make a lovely rustling
sound when the wind rises.”

The November sun was even now slanting through those leaves and shining directly into her eyes. I kissed her and pulled her close.

Was it my imagination? Or was she, truly, thicker?

“Yes,” she said, shyly.

I was delirious with joy. “When, sweetheart, when?”

“In October I missed my monthly courses. So it is early yet. Count back three months from October-September, August, July. In June, then.”

“Catherine, my Queen, my love—the joy this brings me—”

“Shhh.” She put a finger over my babbling lips. “We are but man and wife yet. The babe is not large enough to alter... anything that we might wish to do.” Her tongue in my ear. “My body is yours as it always was. Do you remember?” She touched me in a wanton way, triggering a flood of obscene desire in me. I responded as she knew I would.

It was dark when I awoke. I was sprawled out on a narrow bed. Where? My eyes sought for something familiar and found nothing. All was uniformly black. I reached out one hand, numb from trailing on the floor, and felt fur. Fur? A hunting lodge. Yes... at Dunstable. Catherine with child. Now, yes ... then flooded in the memories of our wild and fearless lovemaking. Shameless in the sloping upper chamber and the coveted privacy. Things we did, unthinkable things... yet unforgettable. Instinctively I crossed myself, then cursed myself. Popish superstition. What was? The feeling that lust with one’s wife was evil. Did not the Scriptures say that Adam, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob “knew their wives”? Yes, but not with such embellishments, or such relish. They knew them, yes, as nature required, but—

My back was exposed, and cold. I groped for a covering, but there was nothing loose. Was Catherine there? It seemed not. I heard no breathing, not even of the softest sort.

I was shivering. I must rouse and clothe myself. I leaned over and fished for garments, and they were there, crumpled at my feet. I drew them on, savouring the warmth they gave me.

By now most of my senses had returned. I knew I perched on the bed where I had lately sported with my dear wife. I was in Dunstable. Night had fallen. Doubtless it was time for supper, and Catherine awaited me in the small room appointed for meals.

I shuffled toward the door and ran my hand along its frame. A sliver of light outlined its edges. Through that crack I saw two profiles. One was Catherine’s; the other, a young man’s. He had a hawkish nose and a great deal of dark hair that fell forward over his forehead. Their lips were moving rapidly.

I flung the narrow double doors open, and they started.

“My Lord,” said Catherine, bowing a little. As if she should bow after what passed between us ... or was this a wicked sense of humour?

“Wife.” If so, I joined in.

“Your Majesty.” The young man swept low, then straightened. He was slim and quivering, like an eager rapier. Or something else, something I wished not to think upon.

“This is Francis Dereham,” said Catherine, smiling. “A kinsman from Norfolk. I have known him since my childhood, and he is trustworthy. So I have appointed him my secretary.”

I looked at him. He looked more like a pirate than a secretary. “It is not seemly to overuse one’s prerogative to appoint one’s kinsmen to important positions. The Queen’s secretary must fulfill certain duties—”

“Let him be my honeymoon secretary, then,” she laughed. “Perhaps you are right. In London he would not be adequate. And soon enough we shall returnand dissected them.

I interrupted his impassioned conversation. “The Queen needs you,” I whispered directly into his ear. “Bring your birthing instruments.”

Clearly puzzled, he left his companion and followed me out of the room. As soon as we were out of earshot, I said, “There has been a miscarriage. She needs you to examine her and tend her. Bring whatever instruments are necessary. Not birthing ones, of course. I know not the proper name for them.”

While he was with her, I stood in the outer chamber, pacing and staring at the fire. The dark and querulous Francis Dereham had stalked away, as if it affronted him to share a space with me. Before I could think further on the nasty Dereham, Butts re-emerged. “So quickly?” I was surprised.

“Aye.” He stood looking at me, his brown leather bag of implements and herbal potions dangling from both hands. “There was no child. This was just a normal monthly course. No heavier than usual. Apparently the Queen was mistaken.”

Mistaken? No heavier than usual? But it was six weeks ago that she had told me. “Would not a delayed course
like this result in a greater accumulation of blood?”

“Sometimes. It depends on why it was delayed. Whether by natural or unnatural means.”

“Unnatural? But a pregnancy is ‘natural,’ is it not?”

He shook his head, as if pitying me. “There are ways to alter that monthly function, to meddle with it.” He hesitated a moment, then opened his hand. In his palm was a small, smooth pebble.

“This was what the Queen miscarried,” he said.

Still I did not understand.

Sadly he explained, “Her womb expelled it. It had been put there to prevent a babe from growing within. ’Tis a custom in the Middle East much practised with beasts of burden, and perhaps with slaves as well. It makes conception impossible.”

“Could it have found its way there accidentally?”

“No, Your Grace.”

“How long had it been there?”

“Judging from its appearance, for many years.”

Jesu! Some evil Arab physician had done this to her as a baby. How? But there were Arab physicians ready enough to be found, even in England. I had found Al-Ashkar. The Duchess must have had one at her service, ready to do her bidding. She did not mean her poor niece ever to conceive—why? Was the old woman that bitter and angry at her charge? At having to bear the cost of raising her worthless stepson’s child? There may be children, had she thought, but I’ll assure there are no grandchildren? How cruel old women can be.

“Thank you, Dr. Butts,” I said. I would reward him well for his discovery.

I re-entered the chamber where she lay. My heart ached for her, so misused all her life. To be orphaned and neglected was one thing, but to be rendered artificially barren....

“All was well?” she asked anxiously.

“He said there would be more bleeding, perhaps heavy,” she said.

It was natural. The womb was rebelling against its misuse.

“It will soon be over.” My hopes for a child were even now staining the cloths beneath her buttocks. “Let us plan our Christmas together, now. Shall we keep court? Where?” I sought to distract her, cheer her.

“Hampton,” she said without hesitation. She could not know how unsettling a choice that was for me. But no matter—anything to make her joyful.

“As a child, whenever I thought of court, I thought of Hampton. All the great glassy windows, the Italian statues, the astronomical clock; I imagined royal barges all lining the river; oversized kitchen ovens cooking night and day ... all the world would be there....”

“Stop, stop,” I laughed. “You have seen all this in your mind?”

She nodded.

“Then you shall see it all in truth,” I promised.

I stood up and looked about the small room. Suddenly I had lost my taste for remote hunting lodges; happiness had proved as elusive here as anywhere else. It was time to return to Hampton.

She bled for a week, following the physician’s instructions and drinking a potion of ground dried pennyroyal mixed with red wine three times a day.

“The wine is to replace the lost blood, and the pennyroyal is to staunch the flow,” he explained.

When that danger was past, we set out for Hampton Court to keep Christmas, sending notice to all eligible members of court throughout the realm, and even to Scots nobles and Irish peers, to come and join us. All were welcome. Replies came quickly, and the allotments of rooms and servants’ quarters were spoken for so greedily that by St. Nicholas’ Day there was not a single chamber or even corner of a chamber free.

“You have your wish, sweetheart,” I assured her. “By my reckoning, fifteen hundred will lodge here for the entire Twelve Days of Christmas. The kitchen fires will blaze night and day. The Lord Steward requests five thousand geese alone to feed this mighty company. How like you that?”

She smiled. “And there will be balls, and masked dancing?”

“As many of them as you wish,” I said.
“Imagine everyone disguised—all fifteen hundred of us,” she said dreamily.
“Much mischief would occur.” Oh, the maidenheads lost, the husbands cuckolded! All in honour of Our Lord’s birth.

I proposed for Will to go about in an Infidel turban and pantaloons, but he refused. As I said, he was most dour and out of sorts these days.

“Costumed or not, you shall not hide yourself away, Will. Too many idle people must be entertained, lest they get into fights. You know the problem of keeping men indoors too long. It transforms them into be-ee-easts.” I sucked my stomach in for the tailor who was measuring me for my masquing-coat. All of clothas reclaiming so many others. And so I would dance, on Ninth Night, for the first planned full evening of ensembles and suites. I practised in my chamber, rehearsing old steps and mastering new ones.

O ! I had missed dancing, in those dead, hollow years, as I had missed so much, so much that I had not allowed myself to dwell on, or even to recall. I thought I had liked being dead.

There! that was it, the proper turn of the galliard. They called it a “shocking” dance, but the younglings loved it....

My leg seemed submissive, although it had, all during the past fortnight, been sending out ominous tingles. What that betokened, I did not know. Perhaps nothing. I intended to regard it as nothing.

The Great Hall was cleared, and my finest consort-ensemble gathered together, with their woodwinds—recorders, crumhorns, and shawms—and their stringed instruments—viols, lutes, and harps. I had instructed them to begin with popular measures, so that everyone present might join in; only gradually were they to progress to the more demanding dances. I myself would refrain from joining until the saltarello near the end. My entrance would take the company by surprise, as I had long, long ago....

I chatted, and circulated among the celebrants, pretending I had nothing more on my mind, pretending that I planned to stay swathed in my heavy robes, presiding like an old man.

“Yes, yes!” I nodded and clapped. The rondo was ending.

Next was my dance. I unfastened my cloak, laid it by. I readied myself, enjoying the pretence of talking, all the while flexing my calves and rising up and down on the balls of my feet, pointing my toe.

The first beat ... I moved, thrusting out my leg. And felt excruciating pain in the thigh, suddenly, like a thunderclap. I was frozen with a paroxysm of pain.

The ensemble played on. One would never know that I had missed my entrance cue. Frantically I massaged my leg—the cursed traitor! With each touch I felt fluid ooze up, as if I were pressing on a sponge. Was my leg, then, become a sponge? A sponge of disease? I was wearing black tights, so the stain did not show. Very well. As I formed the words in my mind, a hatred greater than any I had ever felt flamed through me. This was an enemy! An enemy like Anne Boleyn, like Cardinal Pole, like the Duke of Buckingham. It was sent by Satan, like them, to destroy me. But this was more subtle: it would attack from within, rot me out from the inside.

I would dance, despite it. The ensemble reached the entrance point again, and I leapt out on the floor. As I landed, a nail of pain ran up my thigh and into my groin. People backed off to make room for me, to watch the King dance. And dance he would. And did. I spun and leapt as athletically as a stag, executed all the steps of the galliard perfectly, with a precision usually reserved for clockworks and sword-masters. This particular dance demanded the grace and dexterity of a hummingbird. In this I did not fail.

After the first few beats, I took a mad, savage pleasure in the pain that fought back at me. It was a gladiatorial contest, and I, armed with net and trident, had ensnared and humiliated pain.

The moment the music ended, I was encircled by men and women extolling my skill. They were surprised, oh, yes, they were. The last time anyone had beheld me dance athletically was a decade ago, and many of those faces were gone. robe—'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do’—He did not say, ‘and thou also, Pilate, and Caiaphas,’ although surely in His heart He included them....”

Was this her holiday talk? What, then, was her serious talk?

“Madam Latimer, you are far too joyless,” I chided her. “Surely at Our Lord’s birth, when He came as a babe, as God’s gift to mankind, it is morbid to dwell on His coming betrayal and death.”

Her dark eyes danced with excitement. Theology, then, was what inflamed her passion. “Ah, Your Majesty! But it is all one, that is its perfection, its mystery. The Kings brought frankincense and myrrh—shadows of His future
death and burial. ‘Mary took all these things, and pondered them in her heart.’ She ‘pondered’ them, she did not
rejoice, or sing; no, it was a heavy thing. I have often wondered,” she said dreamily, like Culpepper stroking a
particularly fine piece of velvet, “what Mary did with the gold, frankincense, and myrrh.” I noted that she did not
say “Our Lady” or “the Blessed Virgin.” “Did she store it in a cupboard, somewhere amidst the linen, and look at it
once in a long while, or by accident after she had finished her ordinary tasks after an ordinary day, waiting for
Joseph to stop work and return? Did she touch it then, and feel the miracle all over again, have an epiphany of her
own?” The widow Latimer was the most unabashed romantic I had ever encountered, but only for things unknown,
unseen.

“She doubtless sold the gold and spices to pay for the trip to Egypt.” It was Elizabeth who spoke, in her practical
way. But why was Elizabeth amongst these intellectual matrons? What would attract a child here? Did she long for a
mother that much? “After all, the gold would have been heavy to transport, and the exotic spices would have
attracted too much attention. However, selling them in Bethlehem might have alerted Herod. Probably they waited
until they were in Egypt. The Egyptians would have been more blase about those items.”

The women looked at her, then nodded. “The child speaks true,” said Lady Herbert.

Elizabeth laughed. “The Holy Family were people, with all the considerations of any other people.” She turned a
guileless, smiling face to the widow. “Would you sometime be so kind as to check my translation of Proverbs? I am
attempting to translate it into Greek.”

The flattered widow nodded.

Charles’s wife, the Duchess, produced a small book of devotions. “This I have found so helpful.” The others all
bent their heads over it, like chickens in a henyard when fresh grain has been heaped on the ground. I cursed my leg,
to have confined me in this clucking flock of secular nuns.

“Ach! Zere you are, my child!” A fluster and rustle of material, along with a fine spray of saliva, announced the
arrival of Anne, Princess of Cleves. “Und Henry!” Her voice rose with genuine gladness. Standing before our group
was the great dray-horse herself, all shimmering in yellow satin, spreading her particular brand of good cheer. And I
was delighted to see her. Rising slowly (in deference to Sir Leg), I greeted her.

“Sister!”

We embraced warmly. Her sturdy arms almost swayed me off my balance. I was astonished at how glad I was to
see her. “Pray join uth a fine legedly abjured them.

In my inner chamber, I had my leg surreptitiously checked and re-bandaged by Dr. Butts. He wrapped it in fine
silk, so although it was tightly bound it would not be bulky.

“For tonight only,” he cautioned. “Silk is not an agreeable bandage. It does not absorb. So, should the sore weep,
it will leak and be visible. But it looks dry for now. It should keep for a few hours, at least.” He nodded. “Take a
good dose of the soothing-syrup.”

“Nay. It dulls the. pain but it also befuddles me, and I must needs remember all the dancing-steps.”

I turned to look at myself in the mirror. I was unrecognizable, a vision from the East.

The Great Hall, too, was unrecognizable, utterly transformed from our eating-place of only an hour earlier. A
throng of strangers milled about on the floor. A harem-girl. Merlin the magician. Several nuns. There was Pope
Adrian, the only English Pope, looking remarkably like myself. (Who had done this?) There was a headsmen with a
hood and bloody axe, Friar Tuck, painted savages from the New World, werewolves, crusaders. At the far end of the
hall, Jezebel. She was wearing a scanty costume that revealed three-quarters of her body, and next to her was a man
dressed as Elijah, ranting and raving. As she moved, I knew her—Catherine!

I was appalled. The Queen of England! How dare she appear almost naked in public, dressed as a harlot and an
evil queen? Jezebel was wicked, a symbol of wickedness, and an enemy of the Lord. I watched carefully as Elijah
harangued her, pointing his fingers sanctimoniously at a mock Torah. Behind them came a pudgy, greasy-haired
King Ahab, licking his fingers and giggling. Who were her accomplices? The onlookers laughed and cheered them
on, clearly delighting in the sacrilegious display.

No one took notice of my elaborate costume, even with the camel trailing behind. No, they were too enthralled
with Jezebel.

A Cleopatra entered the hall, with snakes coiling around her belly. They cosied up to her and slithered into the
private reaches of her costume. A drunken Mark Antony followed, and then Julius Caesar, falling down regularly in
fits. Foam spouted out of his mouth (replenished from a container of whipped egg whites he carried). The crowd
cried, “Fall, mighty Caesar!” Every ten feet he obliged.

Troilus and Cressida made the next entrance. They hung upon each other, these lovers of ancient Troy, kissing
and caressing. Then a large company of oiled athletes grabbed hold of Cressida and, before Troilus’s weeping eyes,
pulled up her skirt and made sport of her, fingering her private parts, whilst she swooned in ecstasy and jerked spasmodically in mock fulfilment.

What had become of the gentle, knightly disguises of my past? Was this what Twelfth Night had turned into? I looked round. A few old-timers were decked out in the beautiful, intricate costumes I had expected, whilst all around them rioted obscene youth.

The Abbot of Misrule appeared on the dais, to a great gasp. He was a human-sized private part, complete even to a ring of circumcision. Around his feet sprouted black wires, to mimic pubic hairs, which shook and swayed. The organ itself stood upright, turgid and blushing. The Abbot wiggled back and forth to command attention.

“D to ughter. “I stand before you, at your service.” Screams of laughter. “Some of you have seen me often. To others I am as yet unknown.” He bowed toward the “nuns.” “Or perhaps not so?” More laughter. “Now you are all agreed to do exactly as I command you. I desire, therefore, that everyone with a bodypart like my own gather at the far end of the Hall. Those who are cloven between the legs, stay here.”

Eager to see what he had in mind, the entire company rushed to obey. I was pushed along in the company of men, so that I lost my camel. But what matter? My costume, my entire idea, was passé. No one cared about the Wise Men, or their camels.

Game after game followed, under the direction of the Abbot. Obscene, silly games. When the youngsters tired of them (for obscenity runs its course, like any other novelty), they were ready to dance.

The dancing would begin with the basse dance, a stately, slow entrance step designed to show off elaborate costumes and set a tone of solemnity. Set in the midst of this rowdy, bawdy evening, it seemed out of place. But perhaps it would help turn the mood, let me recapture the ambiance wherein I felt most at home. I looked round at the glittering company, all animal-masked and yet half naked. Somehow it made me shiver.

“And so we dance, to bring the days of Christmas to a close. Each man choose a partner, for reasons of his heart,” said the Abbot. He sounded weary.

Until now I had refused to speak to Catherine, because I was so offended by her costume. Now I said, “I, the wise astrologer, the magus, would fain dance with ... Jezebel.”

Feeling like a fool, I willingly submitted, feeling no other choice. From the midst of the company, Jezebel came slowly and insolently forward and took her place by my side.

As the rest of the men took partners, I looked round. Catherine had chosen the Phallus-Abbot. He tilted somewhat. Was he wilting? As if he could read our thoughts, he bent over and said, “The end draws nigh.”

The Phallus-Abbot tilted and stumbled, and collapsed into a chair. The Abbot turned abruptly to Catherine.“Jezebel was evil,” I whispered. But it was only words; I did not care that she was evil. She beguiled me. (Or was it merely desire for the moist ecstasy that lay beneath her gauzy skirt? To this day I do not know.)

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Timing was perfect; there was no fault in my performance. I landed precisely as I should, and stood rigid, my arms outstretched. Applause, as manners dictated, filled my ears. As I stood, slippers clinging to my perfectly positioned feet (and no wetness within), I heard the clock tolling midnight.

“Christmas—Christmas departs,” mourned the Phallus. “Our costumes we must lay by, our everyday lives take up.” He bowed, shuddered, swayed. “We must unmask.” He ripped off his head-covering, that impudent, rounded protuberance. It was Tom Seymour. The company gasped.

The pox-infested Francis I removed his mask. Bishop Gardiner!

When my turn came, I peeled off my own silver visor carefully. “I, Balthazar, King of the East, happily existed for one evening amongst you. Now I am consigned to darkness again, to await another resurrection.” People clapped and pretended to be surprised. “There is yet another gift and surprise to be revealed,” I announced. “It is this.” I held aloft a velvet-lined box, wherein nestled a golden coin, minted but a fortnight past. “A gold sovereign, in honour of my beloved Queen, Catherine. On this side is her likeness. On the other, the seal of England, with her own motto, the motto I have bestowed upon her: Rutiles Rosa Sine Spina. The Rose Without a Thorn.”

Now true silence fell upon the company. To mint a special issue of coin, in honour of one’s bride ... such a token of love robbed them of speech. As it robbed Catherine.

“O Your Majesty—” she began, then her words died.

I encircled her waist. “Unmask,” I commanded.

Stiffly, she obeyed. She peeled the mask from her eyes, said softly, “I disguise myself as what I am not—a Jezebel.” She stretched out trembling fingers to grasp the coin of honour. “Thank you,” she whispered.

It took over two hours for all to unmask, and after the first few moments it grew tedious. But it was an integral part of the ceremony, and I would not cheat anyone of it. I stood, as if I thirsted to know every identity, and laughed as lou#8212;God, how they wandered. Cromwell ...

“The Lutheran revolt goes on,” he said. “All the Low Countries and half of Germany have been seduced. The other half of the Empire fights back, like a man taken with plague. The heretical outbreaks are the black pustules which weaken and drain the entire system. Spain is the patient’s mouth, wherein the medicine—orthodox Catholicism—is poured in full-strength to combat it. Alas, all it does is burn the mouth—as the Inquisition is blistering Spain—without ever touching the buboes themselves.”

“My, my. Such poetic analogies. I now understand where your son gets his wild conceits and fantastical metaphors. And to think I thought you merely a tough and literal-minded soldier. But what of the Scots? You have fought them; you know them best of anyone. What news from our spies there?”

“The North mocks you,” he said plainly. “They are a nest of traitors you must needs clean out again and again.” His eyes danced. He loved killing Scots, riding over the River Tweed and burning their simple homes and terrorizing them. “But they have no truck with the Emperor,” he had to admit. “They are not at the moment in league with any of Your Majesty’s enemies.”

“May I speak?” young Lord Clinton, all bursting with power and prowess, asked politely. I gave him leave. He stood slowly, and as he rose, his physical presence dominated the table—except where it met my own presence. There it stuck.

“I am Lincolnshire born and bred,” he said. “A Northman of the realm. You know not, any of you, what it is to be a Northman. We live and take our selfhood from the moors, the wild mountains, far from London and courtish ways. We are conservative, it is said. Those on the frontiers are always conservative. They believe in werewolves and saints. There are no half-measures about them. Percy of the North—Northumberland, to be correct—was called Hotspur. We are either hot or cold, and our loyalties outlast our lives. We believe—”

“What is it, Clinton?” I cut off his inferior poetical ramblings. “Is there something I need g at the floor. I wanted to be alone; I did not want to be alone. There was only one person for such a mood—Will.

“You have sent for me?”

I scarce was able to look up. “Yes. I need you.” I had never spoken those words before to any man.

“I am here. What troubles you?”

I told him, then. How death had me and those I loved by the throat. How I felt his very fingers on my windpipe, until I scarce could breathe. I named those he had already claimed, and those he was even now in the process of possessing.

“I feel him, too,” admitted Will. “Of late I have had to note that there is something chronically wrong with my body. I never have the whole functioning of it any longer. There is always something I must favour, some part I am waiting to have healed. It is disheartening. We are not what once we were. But that is not a signal that death is at hand. Merely that we are being granted a long life. Deaths of those we love en route are also signs we are being spared. Philosophers who discuss the possibility of long life always say that old people long to die, because they are so lonely, having outlived everyone they have had links with. Why is that? Why are they lonely? There are as many
people about as in their youth. But the ability to form strong links apparently ceases after a certain age. Affinity arises in youth, and, if we are lucky, endures through to old age.”

I nodded. Brandon. More. My sister Mary. Bessie. Will himself. But Catherine, my sweet Catherine … her I loved, and that was a new thing. I was still capable of forming bonds. I was not past that stage.

Just as suddenly my unhappy mood was gone, and this melancholy talk annoyed me. I did not think, then, to trace the source of my reactions. I had grieved because Bessie, the love of my youth, was dying, but became indignant when Will suggested that my capacity for loving and being loved was being exhausted. You see, there was the problem of Catherine Howard, and fitting her into all this.
Only a few hours later I lay on the silken sheets of the great royal bed, toying with Catherine. I had drawn the embroidered gold-threaded curtains about us, until we could play at being in a tent on the plains of France. Candlelight leapt up and down in the errant drafts of air seeping under the bed-drapes, but that made it all the more eerie and otherworldly, a playhouse for adults....

Catherine giggled as I touched her throat. I traced its curves and hollows, finding the skin slippery and moist. How was that possible in the dry days of winter? “For New Year’s I was given a cream from Syria,” she said, as if reading my thoughts. “It was compounded of substances we have not here in England.”

From Syria? “Who has been to Syria?” I could not help enquiring. No one traded openly with the Infidels these days.

“For Francis Dereham,” she laughed. “He was a pirate in the Irish Sea for a time. Pirates ‘trade’ with everyone.” I frowned.

“My cousin,” she whispered, tickling my ear with her tongue. “You rsickbed in January; lingered, hacking, through February and March; died in April.

Suddenly it was very important that I talk to someone. I called.

No sound came.

My throat was swollen, blocked up from disuse. I cleared it, rattling all the membranes. Now! I called.

Silence.

I was dumb! God had taken away my speech.

I strained all my muscles. Still, silence.

I was so stunned there was nothing for it but to fall back limply onto the pillows.

It could not be permanent. It must be some laggard part of my healing. When first I had fallen, I could not move my hands. Now I could. This dumbness, too, must fade. It must.

The fire exploded with sparks and hissing. Then it subsided into sighing. Like a woman, I thought.

But what had happened? There had been the morning, getting dressed. Then the seizure, the paralysis, the fall. My nose crunching. I put out a hand and touched my nose. It was heavily bandaged, with two wooden supports down each side. I had broken it, then.

Why had I pitched forward? What malady had seized me? I threw all my will and might behind my throat, and called again. Silence.

I had been struck dumb. Like John the Baptist’s father, Zacharias. Why? God never acted without reason.

Zacharias had been struck dumb because he had argued with the angel Gabriel, when the angel came to announce the Good News.

My Scriptures were in their customary place, and I sought them out, turning to the portion about Zacharias.

_Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John._

_And Zacharias said unto the angel, Whereby shall I know this? for I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years._

_And the angel answering said unto him, I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God; And behold, thou shalt be dumb, and not able to speak, until the day that these things shall be performed, because thou belieuest not my words, which shall be fulfilled in this season._

Had I, too, received a messenger or a sign, and refused to believe?

No. There had been no sign, no message. Of that I was certain. I would welcome a conversation with God, or his angel. All my life I had awaited it. But He had never spoken directly to me.

The door creaked open. Someone was checking on the royal patient. I made gestures for him to come forward. It was a page. I mimicked writing motions.

The lad looked clean frightened out of his skin. Perhaps, after all, they had expected me to die.

Dr. Butts followed, looking grave and curious. He carried his leather pouch, crammed with potions and flasks. He sat down on a footstool bean may own. The seasons. Sleep. Dreams. Memories. Music. Then I thought of specific things about those things. I imagined one leaf on one tree, saw it through its entire life, from its swelling as a bud, to its sticky pale green unfoldings, to its flat, dark, dusty prime in high summer.

As I did this, first with the leaf and then with other things, I entered a sort of trance. I began to talk to God
directly, yearning to open everything to Him, because only then could I be united with Him, only then could He reach into whatever was diseased in me and heal it. My speech was wordless, if that is possible for you to understand. I gave myself to God as nakedly as little Edward gave himself up to his nurse every evening, and with the same complete abandon.

I felt an odd bliss, a peaceful ecstasy. My eyes were closed—or were they open? I was not in any worldly place. My answer came, too, but in wordless form. This palpable sense of peace meant that complete surrender was what God required of me: to continue to give myself to Him without reservation, as I had just done. It would take learning, but those moments would have to come more and more frequently. God would keep me dumb until I had learned to pray with my mind and whole being, rather than just with my lips.
Whilst I waited to be led further into this rich and baffling relationship with God, my earthly body must needs lie on the fur-warmed couch and endure the wait. It must be beguiled, for earthly hours are long to our earthly clay, even though they pass in a trance for the mystic.

Evening was coming on when Timothy Scarisbrick, a chamber-groom, entered with a tray of food for me. Where was Culpepper, I wondered, open every a woman. “This is a diatonic harp, gut-strung. We use it either alone, in single lines of melody, or else in what we call Cerdd Dant, where we sing poetry in counterpoint to the harp.” He swirled a bit in preparing himself to play.

“We have, in Ireland, special triads.” He began plucking the harp-strings, so sweetly that they seemed to caress the air.

“Three things that are always ready in a decent man’s house: beer, a bath, a good fire.

“Three smiles that are worse than griefs: the smile of snow melting, the smile of your wife when another man has been with her, the smile of a mastiff about to spring.

“Three doors by which falsehood enters: anger in stating the case, shaky information, evidence from bad memory.

“Three times when speech is better than silence: when urging a king to battle, when reciting a well-turned line of poetry, when giving due praise.

“Three scarcities that are better than abundance: a scarcity of fancy talk, a scarcity of cows in a small pasture, a scarcity of friends around the beer.”

I liked it not. It was gloomy; there was something ominous even about the “happy” triads. I shook my head.

He shrugged, clearly not understanding why I did not want more of it.

He struck a chord and began a new poem.

“Lovely whore, though,
Lovely, lovely whore
Slept with Conn,
Slept with Niall,
Slept with Brian,
Slept with Rory.
“Slide then,
The long slide.
“Of course it shows. ”

What peculiar sentiments the Irish had! Why would they celebrate a whore in verse and achingly poignant melody?

I smiled. The music was exquisite, that I acknowledged. I nodded vigourously, so that he might play on.

From his harp came a sparkling sigh, a whispered wave of beauty.

“Ebb tide has come for me:
My life drifts downward
Like a retreating sea
With no tidal return.

“I am the Hag of Beare,
Five petticoats I used to wear,
Today, gaunt with poverty,
I hunt for rags to cover me.

“Girls nowadays
Dream only of money—
When we were young
We cared more for our men.

“But I bless my King who gave—
Balanced briefly on time’s wave—
Largesse of speedy chariots
And champion thoroughbreds.

“These arms, now bony, thin
And useless to younger men,
Once caressed with skill
The > Wha
“Why should I care?
Many’s the bright scarf
Adorned my hair in the days
When I drank with the gentry.

“So God be praised
That I misspent my days!
Whether the plunge be bold
Or timid, the blood runs cold.

“But my cloak is mottled with age—
No, I’m beginning to dote—
It’s only grey hair straggling
Over my skin like a lichen oak.

“And my right eye has been taken away
As down-payment on heaven’s estate;
Likewise the ray in the left
That I may grope to heaven’s gate.

“And I, who feasted royally
By candlelight, now pray
In this darkened oratory.
Instead of heady mead

“And wine, high on the bench
With kings, I sup whey
In a nest of hags.
God pity me!

“Alas, I cannot
Again sail youth’s sea;
The days of my beauty
Are departed, and desire spent.

“I hear the fierce cry of the wave
Whipped by the wintry wind.
No one will visit me today
Neither nobleman nor slave.

“Flood tide
And the e>
When all one has to do is lie abed, one quickly loses the normal rhythm of the day, the one that governs everyday life. There is a great wisdom in the orderly arrangement of the hours and the daily passage of light and dark. An invalid can rearrange those units to suit himself, like a child playing with blocks, and he soon
makes a jumble of it.

So I lay awake half the night, because I had had no occupation during the day to exercise and tax me. “Christ prayed all night,” it says in the Bible. I tried to do so, but fell into that eerie suspended consciousness that bordered on rapture, communing with the Holy Spirit and then waking, or sliding into full awareness, as the dawn stirrings began in the adjoining chamber. By the time Culpepper had appeared with my newly warmed bedjacket, and the beaming young Scarisbrick approached my bedside, grinning, with the laden tray of breakfast food, I was already sleepy, worn out from my night of wrestling with the angel, so to speak. When other men’s blood was stirring, mine was settling. O cursed life, an invalid’s! No wonder they never mend.

Culpepper was busy and preoccupied. He brought in my clothes, he attended to all my needs, but in a rattled, distracted way. Once he brought a delicately embossed leather envelope to hold all the correspondence from our ambassadors abroad, made with marvellous flaps and pockets, with a special container for wax and the Royal Stamp. He had designed and commissioned it.

I grasped his arm and nodded thanks. I hated this dumbness. Even though I knew it was—must be!—temporary.

Catherine came in directly after Mass, which she attended daily at eight. She had a devout soul, which, like most physically attractive people, she attempted to hide, as if it were a shame, or would cause others to regard her differently. In the young, that is of paramount importance.

But when she came to me, directly after receiving her Maker, she glowed with a beauty beyond the worldly, could she but know it. I smiled at her, reached up and touched her cheek. The evening previous (when the wood was burning and my body settled), I always wrote out a little letter to her, telling her of my thoughts, my love for her, and my observations on her beauty. Each morning she gladly received it, blushing. And each morning (or was it my imagination, my thwarted, lusty imagination?) she seemed more highly coloured, more skittish.

Thus I pretended to be the patient patient. In truth, I longed to throw off my furs and blankets and take my place once again in the councils of men. How long, O Lord, how long?

Whilst I languished, of course I was visited. Will came in regularly to amuse me. Council members called to appraise me of their complaints. It was indeed the New Men versus the traditionalists these days. Churchmen came to read lists of appointments to me for approval. There were many places to be filled. I busied myself filling in those empty lines.

It was all very neat and ordered. When my churning head wished for sleep, my attendants pulled the draperies and converted the chamber into soft night. The sun was barred from my presence like a prattling child. But that ordained a sleepless night to follow. O Lord, how long?

Note that I did not practise upon my throat-instrument every few hours, hoping to find it restored. Each time I blew upon it, I was rewarded with a resounding silence.

The Book of Common Prayer, he meant to call it, although he was bogged down within its windings.

“‘There’s an uprising,’” Cranmer said, in child’s English. “‘In Lincolnshire.’

I gestured for him to continue. “It seems some desperate men conspired to meet at Pomfret Fair,” he apologized. As though it were his fault! “There are many wretched men in the North, their needs unanswered—”

How many? was all I cared to know. I asked, in my throat, but nothing came. Angrily I grabbed a pen and paper and repeated myself in writing. How cumbersome it is to have to rely on these manual means of communication!

“‘Three hundred or so. But the reports are garbled. Hourly they change.’

And others may join them, I added to myself. There is a nest up there, a nest of malcontents. With the Scots sitting like a crown on their heads.

I flailed about, anger overtaking me. I beat on my pillows, and tore them with my teeth. I was helpless, helpless—a prisoner of my own body! Furiously, I beat even on it. Take this, I thought as I raised both fists up high and brought them down on my thigh. The muscles shifted underneath like stirring dogs. I opened my throat to roar, and demanded that it obey. No sound came forth.

Defeated, I wrote Cranmer instructions: 1. Find out their leaders. 2. Send Suffolk to me. 3. Begin preparations for possible action against them. He bowed and was gone. I lay back, feeling like Prometheus in chains. In our day, the voice-box has more power than muscles. And mine was bound, enchained.
I promised myself that I would not test God by repeatedly checking during the long hours of darkness. But when the first light broke through the iridescent frost covering the windows, that would be a Sign.

The first light broke, and I raised my voice. Silence.

Now I was truly frightened. I needed my voice restored; this was an emergency. It was not for myself I needed it, but for England. Still, God did not heed. And if He did not heed now ...

Mid-morning, Brandon appeared. He looked old, I thought. How detached we are in observing the aging of our contemporaries, as if we were somehow exempt from the same process, or as if it were applied unequally, and our poor friend got a double dose, whereas we ourselves got off lightly.

I had already prepared a list of questions, which I handed to him. His baggy eyes skimmed over them quickly.

"Yes, there are more rebels. That is what this morning's dispatch said. Of course, it is four days old ... the roads this time of year ..." He shook his head. "All told, they are still fewer than five hundred. They are playing an old tune, Your Grace. Those who wished to dance to it already did their jig during the Pilgrimage. And afterward—in chains and in the gibbet."

Still, they have enough recruits to begin again, I thought. A never-ending supply of malcontents, traitor Grace?" A simple request.

I nodded. Kill the thing now. Pluck the plant up, roots and all. And this was supposed to be the place where I must venture forth, taking my Queen. Suddenly I was ferociously hungry to see this mysterious area, the North, which bred mists and rebels in equal quantity.

"Shall I use the utmost force? Shall I kill swiftly and brutally?"

I nodded. The softer way was often, in the long run, the crueler.

He bowed and took his leave.

Brandon. I could rely on him. For half a century now, or almost that, he had been my right arm. But when he failed, as my voice had—what then?

The frost on my windowpanes was melting as the sun rose higher. The days had lengthened noticeably since Christmas, although not enough to put winter to rout. And in the North it would be bitter, icy, and locked in darkness and cold until April. Brandon, the old soldier, would have difficulty penetrating the area. Curses upon the ungracious traitors, to call out my dearest friend, whom as King I could not spare from England's service.

I began to scratch off the obscuring frost with my fingernail. I felt impaired all round, but this one thing I could correct. I could at least see out of my window.

It needed a cloth to wipe away the frost-shavings and watery melt. "A cloth," I muttered, and the page stuck one in my hand. I wiped vigorously at the messy pane, until it glistened free and showed me the white world outside as clear as though I were seeing it through my unobstructed eye.

"Ah," I said. Then I started.

I had spoken, and been heard. My voice was freed.

"Thank you," I said quite naturally to the page. He nodded. " 'Tis lovely." I could hear my own voice, as if it were another's. "You may go now." He bowed and obeyed.

Alone, I blinked in stunned excitement. It was back, my voice was back. I crossed myself and whispered, "Thank You. You have answered my prayers." I crossed over to my prie-dieu and looked up at Jesus on the cross. I looked directly into his eyes, and they seemed to smile at me.

Why had God capriciously decided to restore my voice over such an unimportant command? A cloth to wipe off a frosty window: he had loosened my voice for that.

God frightened me. I understood Him so much less than I had always thought I understood Him.

The page told everyone that I had spoken, and I was soon dislodged from my praying station.

Now that I was able-bodied again, my councillors presented me with all the ugly details of the northern rebellion. The traitorous statements—"the King is the Devil's agent"; "the King is an Anabaptist"; "the King is haunted by the souls of the monks he killed"—bordered on the blasphemous. What sort of people did I rule?

"I have an evil people to rule!" I shouted in answer to myself. "An unhappy people who harbour sedition in their
“I looked round at all the smug faces surrounding me. What of them? What secret malice lay in their hearts? “I’ll soon make them so poor they’ll nedience!” And you, too, I thought. Any one of you youngsters, if your youth and health give you fancy ideas, I’ll put a stop to that. It’s Brandon and I who are in control, the old soldiers who know how to rule.

“They’ll die for their treason, and we’ll go up in the summer to comfort their widows. The grass won’t even have grown on their graves yet! But their sons will welcome us with adulation, whatever else lies coiled in their secret hearts. They’ll—”

“Your Majesty!” Dr. Butts entered and looked betrayed. His royal patient was up off the sickbed and behaving as normal. “I had heard of your recovery. Why did you not send for me?” He looked hurt. I had insulted him by calling upon him in my need, clutching to him in fear, and then jettisoning him once I recovered. As men do to God.

“I apologize,” I said. “Come, let us be alone.” The others took their leave, with relief.

“I could hear your voice halfway down the gallery,” he admonished me.

“God restored me.”

“So it would seem. And in full volume. Is it wise to run a horse at full gallop who has lain ill and languished in his stall a fortnight? Gradual, and by degrees—that is the way to sound health.”

He checked my throat, my chest, my leg. The wound had all but disappeared. Drained and healed over, it looked so inculpable and innocuous. The rotten traitor! Traitor no less than my northern subjects!

“Your heart started up suddenly,” he said in alarm. “You must avoid exciting thoughts.” He put away his listening tube. And smiled. “But I must say, the Lord in His mercy appears to have healed you.”

With a few more instructions regarding my food, drink, and rest, he was gone. I was free of my body-bondage once more.

By the time Brandon reached Cambridge, word came that the rebellion had burnt out, having consumed its own fuel. There was no need for him to apply the stern measure of the law, and so he returned by Easter, when spring was breaking on the court.
CV

Spring and Easter were enveloped, for me, in a web of preparations for our northern progress. As the grass brightened and exploded in green, and the bare branches of every tree and bush suddenly turned into feathery brushes, it was hard to believe that there were places in the realm of England where winter still held the land and reigned. Children shrieked and played out of doors—I could hear them from the opened casements—at marbles, skip-rope, and pace-egging, where they cracked their Easter eggs together. Their cries rose lean and eager, like a wild animal kept too long indoors and now celebrating its freedom. Before nightfall there would be skinned knees and lost scarves. That, too, was part of the celebration.

By day I studied dispatches and made up orderly lists of supplies and courtiers for the journey. There was so much protocol to be observed. There must, of course, be a striking difference between how the remnants of the traitorous rebels were recerestored to health, as if those horrible days in March had never occurred. The leg was behaving itself I handed her the rose, the unique, commissioned rose.

“Yes?” She took it without looking and smiled, still eagerly.

“You hold it.”

Only then did she examine the rose, exclaim over it. When I explained its symbolism, she wept.
Departure day was to be July first. God thought otherwise and sent deluges from the skies. All told, it was three weeks before the rains stopped and the roads dried sufficiently to permit travel. That gave the Scots extra time to decide how to respond to my invitation to a parley, and gave us longer to ready the great abbey hall of St. Mary’s in York to receive them.

I shall not recount the long journey in tedious detail. With so many of us travelling—there were one thousand retainers, officers, and companions—our lodging was of the greatest importance. Even the wealthiest nobles did not have accommodations for so great a company, so we provided two hundred of our own luxurious tents to make up the difference. Yes, the journey itself, the protocol, the lodgings, the obligatory entertainments (which should be renamed “borements”) were dull. But the countryside!

Oh, why had I not seen all of England before? I was captivated by the landscape itself, yes. But more by the people. Each population retained the stamp of its origin and past. As we travelled northward, the people became taller and fairer. On the border of Norfolk, their eyes were as blue as a clear October day, almost to a person. “Dane blood,” said Dr. Butts, who made a hobby of studying this sort of thing. “This is the side of England where the Danes settled, where Norsemen raided. From the Danes you get the blue eyes, from the raiders the red hair.” He pointed to a fiery-haired lad perched on a market cross to glimpse us as we passed. “Sweet child, to bear the marks of such a brutal past.”

They talked differently, too. At times I could not make out certain words in the courteous little speeches the locals gave us.

As we passed farther north, settlements fell away and we rode through longer and longer stretches of forest. The days lengthened, too. Twilight seemed almost as long as the afternoon.

“The farther north, the longer the day,” said Wyatt, who was fascinated by oddities of geography. “At the highest latitudes, as in very northern Scotland and the Orkney and Shetland Isles, there is no night at all in June. Just a sort of purple twilight.”

Wilder and wilder it became. There was so much game that after the first novelty of it, we did not bother to hunt. Besides, the surrounding forest was so dark and extensive it seemed unwise to chase far into it. We were near Robin Hood territory, and now the sheriff of Nottingham’s reluctance to pursue Robin Hood and his merrie men into the fastness of Sherwood made perfect sense. I would have let the outlaw roam, too.

Lincolnshire, which I had once called “one of the most brute and beastly shires of the whole realm,” was the beginning of the territory of traitors. It had taken us forty days to reach it from London, travelling at our slow ceremonial pace, it was so remote. Small wonder Lincolnshiremen considered themselves beyond our grasp, a feudal kingdom of their owoss I said lamely. “I shall await him. In the meantime, the ceremony distinguishing between the traitors and the true subjects must be carried out.” I was not looking forward to this, but ragent size="3">As I approached the door to her apartments, a dark shape rose from a chair nearby, and glided toward me. A spirit ...

or at first I thought so. I was infected by the wild strangeness of this whole region. For it was a face I had thought never to see again: Jane Boleyn, George Boleyn’s wife. She who had betrayed her own husband and testified against him at that sordid time of Anne’s downfall.

“Why, Jane—” I whispered.

“Your Majesty.” She bowed low. It was truly she.

She stood. A hood of the new fashion framed her face, but otherwise it was the same. An ugly face, with a long, bulbous nose and dark, shining, feral eyes too close on either side.

It seemed that she was guarding the doors. But there were yeomen for that. It must be my own imagination, I remember thinking then.

I tapped on the door, and Jane reached out a hand as if to restrain me. There was no response within; everyone must be dead asleep. Perhaps my Catherine was, as well? I produced the proper key (for we always carried our chamber locks with us to protect us from assassins who might have procured a key to the built-in lock), but Jane stayed my hand.

“The Queen sleeps,” she said. “She asked me to keep watch in the outer chambers, lest she be disturbed.”

“I will not disturb her,” I assured her. “I will sleep on a pallet at her bed-foot, if need be. Her presence will aid me to sleep.”

“Very well.” She nodded stiffly.

The key worked well enough, but the door was barred from the inside as well. I could see the metal rod passing across the door-crack, and a great coffer pressed against the doors. I could not gain entrance without causing a great
Disappointment flooded me. I had not realized until that moment how much I longed to be with her. I had wanted to tell her how proud I was of her, how my heart was near to bursting as I presented her as my Queen. These recalcitrant northerners had always loved Katherine of Aragon, and remained her partisans. But now there was a new Queen, another Catherine, whose gentle ways and pretty manners had charmed them, a Catherine who bore no taint of Protestantism such as Anne Boleyn, Jane Seymour, and Anne of Cleves had. She had reconciled me with my wayward subjects, as well as with myself.

“She is afraid of assassins,” Jane, Lady Rochford, explained in a whisper. “These tales of bloody Scots have frightened her.”

Poor, gentle child. I nodded. They were enough to frighten anyone. I understood her concern. “I would not disturb her,” I said. “Let her sleep, sweet Queen.”

The next morning she was in my inner chamber, stammering and embarrassed at her makeshift defences. She covered me with kisses and swore that she, too, had been troubled with sleeplessness and would have relished a visit from me. Nothing else could truly calm her or rout her fears. She was chagrined that I had discovered the extent of her childish fear of the Scots. I assured her I was in sympathy, and loved her as much as ever, and no, I did not think less of her for taking those precautions.

“Your Grace—my dear Lord—forgive me,” said Cranmer, thrusting a rolled letter into my hand. He looked ill.

“What? No other greeting? I have missed you, Thomas, in our separation.”

“And I you, Your Majesty. Truly.”

“I will plough through all the notes you took in my absence, I promise it, tonight. You did well.”

“The letter—read it first, I beg you, I—” He looked so agitated I knew immediately that he suffered from rebellious bowels.


I seated myself on a wooden bench in the Long Gallery outside the Chapel and unfolded the letter, just to humour him.

It was a joke. It reported the claims of a certain John Lassells that his sister, Mary Lassells Hall, had told him that Catherine Howard was a whore, that she had behaved wantonly from a young age with men of the Duchess’s household, giving herself to a “music master” when she was but thirteen and then living in open sin with a cousin until her departure for court.

Who was this Mary Hall? I reread the letter carefully. She was, before her marriage, a servant at the Duchess’s Lambeth establishment. When her brother, who was a fervent Protestant, had asked her why she did not seek a position at court, as the other Lambeth servitors had done, she had replied with disdain, “I would not serve that woman! She is immoral, both in living and in conditions.” And then she had named “Manox, a music master” and “Dereham, a gentleman,” as Catherine’s lovers.

Nonsense. It was nonsense. So the Protestants were on the move again. Since the head of the heretical serpent, Cromwell, had been severed, it writhed on its own, in meaningless thrashings. A flush of resentment spread through me. I had spent the summer quashing the pretensions of the Catholics, I thought, and now I must spend the winter curbing the Protestants. I was amused that Cranmer should have been taken in by this bait. But I had left my Protestants in charge in London, I reminded myself. Cranmer, Audley, Edward Seymour ... they would be approachable by the extremists.

Well, I would have this investigated, and have this Mary Hall silenced. She would regret ever having uttered this slander. Wearily I ordered William Fitzwilliam, the Lord Privy Seal, Anthony Browne, the Lord Admiral, and Thomas Wriothesley, Secretary of State, to round up Mary and John Lassells, and question Manox and Dereham. The slander must be stopped.

In the meantime I enjoyed Catherine heartily, as if in defiance.

Three days later my men returned, and in the privacy of my work chamber they said they had questioned the Protestant brother and sister, the music master, and Dereham, and had been unable to disprove the story. Quite the contrary.

“I fail to believe this!” I muttered. “They must be lying. Oh, why do Protestants abandon their falsehoods only over the lighted fire? Damn their fanaticism! Very well, then—torture them! Force the truth from them!” Torture was illegal, except in cases of treason, sedition, or suspected treason.
Catherine had planned a sus illeg; for me that evening. But suddenly I was not amused; suddenly I did not want to see her or share an amusement. Abruptly I sent word that she must take to her quarters and await the King's pleasure, that it was no more the time to dance.

The King's pleasure had been shattered, and nothing but a full retraction by those blackguards would restore it.

I slept poorly that night, if at all. At my bed-foot pallet, Culpepper was likewise sleepless. I could hear it in his breathing. Ordinarily I could have passed time with him, lighted a taper and set up a chessboard. But a deadly fear had got hold of me, and I did not wish any company. So we passed the long night, each acutely aware of the other's presence, but each alone in an absolute way.

I was relieved when dawn came and it was time to go to Mass. I needed God; I needed some comfort. I dressed hurriedly and made my way down the Long Gallery to the Chapel Royal. There were few people about, as most preferred a later Mass on Sunday morning.

Kneeling there, I poured out every incoherent thought and fear I had, and offered them up to God. The candles flickered on the altar and the Divine Service went smoothly, but I received no answers, no peace of mind.

"—Thee, for that Thou dost vouchsafe to feed us who have duly received this holy mystery, with the spiritual food—" Outside the chapel doors there was a scraping, a scuffling. Then a shriek, piercing and like a banshee's.

"No! No!"

"—of the most precious Body of Thy Son our Saviour Jesus Christ, and dost assure us thereby of Thy favour and goodness towards us; and—"

"Henry! Henry! Henry!" screamed the voice, each naming of my name growing fainter, as from a greater distance.

I shook, even ten feet from the altar and with the Body of Christ inside me.

Another scream, muffled now.

"—that we are very members incorporate in the mystical Body—"

Was I dreaming? Was I the only one who had heard the bloodcurdling calls? The priest mumbled on, the worshippers mouthed the responses.

When I stepped out, the passageway was empty.

There was to be a Privy Council meeting at Bishop Gardiner's residence in Southwark that evening. I called it that afternoon, as Fitzwilliam came to me with still more evidence and depositions. From a field outside Hampton, where I had gone on a pretext of hunting, but in reality to be alone, I issued a command to all the councillors to return to London to attend this emergency meeting. It was to be kept secret, and so I went directly to the royal barge without ever returning to the palace. Rumour had infested Hampton, and now everyone knew something was amiss. Catherine was confined to her apartments, on my orders.

Sitting before me in Gardiner's fine Council Chamber were Audley, the Lord Chancellor; Thomas Howard, ordered back to London for the occasion, looking pleased and important; William Petre, the Principal Secretary; Brandon, Cranmer....

I ticked off their names. Yged ahead—"to consider certain things, evil charged against the Queen." I rattled a paper before my face, the original deposition of the informers. "Whilst we were away, the Lord Archbishop and the Council in absentia"—I nodded toward Cranmer, Audley, and Seymour—"were apprised of alleged misdeeds of my ... wife. These were sufficiently grave that the Archbishop saw fit to report them to me in writing. Since then, we have investigated further. But these matters are confusing, and so, before proceeding further, we would lay the entire matter before you. The witnesses—defendants—shall speak openly where all can hear."

It was unorthodox. I could scarcely credit my own words. Since this frightful business had begun, it was like a fantasy, and everything seemed like a sleepwalk.

"We shall retrace each step," I said. "John Lassells, speak first."

They led in an elderly man, who seemed the very soul of reason.

"State your name and title."

He bowed. "I am John Lassells, resident of London."

"State your occupation."

"I know what you aim for, so let us be honest and disclose it straightway," he blustered. "I spoke of what my sister Mary, who had served as a nurse in the Duchess of Norfolk’s household, told me when I asked her why she did not seek a position at court. It seemed to me that anyone who had known the Queen came requesting a place.
There was Joan Bulmer, writing all the way from York; Katherine Tilney, who became her chamberer. Why not my Mary?”

I rapped upon the table before me. “Continue.”

“She replied, ‘I would not serve the Queen. Rather, I pity her.’ I questioned why, and she said, ‘Marry, because she is light, both in living and in conditions.’”

I glanced round. The faces were stunned.

“And what did she mean? Did you probe further?” I asked detachedly.

“Aye. And she said”—he hesitated, his voice winding down like a toy doll’s—“that there was a music master, Manox, who bragged that he used to feel her body, knew of a private mark on her secret parts—”

The little ladder-mark on her uppermost thigh, a gash stitched together when she was but a child. I used to climb that ladder, it was a game we played, my lips mimicking feet, going rung by rung until they nibbled on the gates of her private parts.

—and then he was sent away by the Duchess, who found them fondling one another when they were shut up together with the virginals.”

Music... a music master... Mark Smeaton... The pain, which I had thought gone forever, now tore my body apart.

Mary Lassells Hall was now brought in. She was as I had envisioned: tall, hard, plain. She quickly told her story.

“After the music master was banished, there came another. A Francis Dereham, some sort of cousin, a gentleman-pensioner of the Duke of Norfolk. He quickly joined the revels in the girls’ attic sleeping quarters, became a popular vihix vourself.” Norfolk squeezed each painful word out. He was frightened.

“The young maidens were to sleep in a dormitory at night. The Duchess ordered that they be locked in at eight o’clock. But she slept in another wing, and was half deaf, besides. As soon as she’d retired, what a picnic! Every lust-ridden male in the county converged on that ‘maidens’ chamber.’ They climbed in the windows, and brought strawberries and wine, and then spent their lust on the woman of their choice. Their only concession to modesty was to draw the curtains round the bed itself whilst they sported themselves.”

“Disgusting,” muttered Norfolk.

“Your cousin Sir William Howard had his own key,” she said stiffly. “Now this Manox, when he found himself barred from these pagan indulgences, wrote the Duchess a tattling note about them. The Lord William Howard was dismayed, lest he be caught by his wife. He had enjoyed his fifteen-year-old hussy, indeed he had! He scolded Manox and Dereham, saying, ‘What, you mad wretches! Could you not be merry but you must fall out amongst yourselves?’ His game was spoilt, and he regretted it.”

I waved my hand. “Enough.” I did not care what Lord William Howard had done. My heart did not break on account of him. “You say others from the Duchess’s establishment requested positions from the Queen?”

“Yes. Joan Bulmer, who was her confidante in the old days, now serves as her privy chamberer; Katherine Tilney, as her bed-maid; Margaret Mortimer, as her wardrobe supervisor. They feathered their berths well, to assure their future.”

So. She had brought foul reminders of her past life with her. To aid her evil plans. But perhaps it was not her choice, perhaps she had been threatened by them....

“Edward Manox,” I called. He came forward and stood before me. I had not expected him to be so handsome.

I repeated the testimony against him. “What say you to these reports?”

“They are true, but it is not as it appears! I was the son of a neighbouring nobleman, brought into the Duchess’s household to teach her charges music. Catherine Howard was just thirteen at that time, a very ... forward virgin. She had genuine talent in music”—yes, I knew that, I had rejoiced in that talent, cherished it—“but she was wayward, wanton—and beautiful. She promised her maidenhead to me, but before I could make good that promise, the Duchess caught us kissing on the stairs. She screamed and boxed Catherine’s ears. She said she was a fool to waste herself on me, that I was unworthy of her. Then the Duchess dismissed me.” He hesitated. “Before I was sent away, Catherine walked with me in the orchard. She said she loved me and would always be true.”

I hated the words, hated seeing him, so straight and young and honest.

“I make my living as a musician,” he said. “I was living in Chertsey when I was brought here to ‘answer certain charges.’ Please, my lords. When I knew her she was but Catherine Howard, a girl in the Duchess’s household, and I did nothing wrong. She may have promised me her maidenhead, but I never took it. And I have never mentioned to anyone, sincsor.

They led him away and dragged Dereham in. Handsome, cocky Dereham.

He, too, was read the accusation and called upon to clear himself.

“The Queen is my wife,” he said boldly. “She was promised to me two years ago. We lived as husband and wife, and then she went to court and I to Ireland—both to make our fortunes, that was the plan. Well, I had some success in ventures there”—yes, piracy, I remembered—“but imagine my surprise to find, upon my return, that my little...
wife is now styled Queen of England. Naturally I hurried to reclaim her, and she was most amenable to appointing me her secretary. But, alas, I found I had been replaced in her affections ... by a Thomas Culpepper."

No. No.

“You say you ‘lived as husband and wife,’ ” said Cranmer dryly. “In what precise sense?”

“In that we coupled often, and had intentions to marry.”

Coupled often. I looked at the long-legged pirate, imagining him lying on my Catherine, quivering above her, searching out her secret parts and then depositing his seed within her.

The stone. The stone in her womb ... that was what it was for.... It was Catherine herself who had sought out a practitioner to put it there, to protect herself from her own sexual indulgences.

I felt vomit in my throat.

“Did she promise herself to you?” asked Cranmer reasonably.

“We called one another ‘husband’ and ‘wife.’ I entrusted my money to her while I went to Ireland. I remember holding her whilst she said, in tears, ‘Thou wilt never live to say to me, “thou hast swerved.”’”

But she had, she had. O God—why did not the pain stop? Why could I not feel anger? Come, clean anger, sweep this agony away!

“Look to Tom Culpepper if you want more!” he cried, as he was taken from the chamber.

Culpepper.

A dozen eyes blinked back at me. I thought my heart would break, I thought myself torn into shreds, as I whispered, “Arrest Culpepper. Question him.” A stirring, and my servants went to carry out my bidding.

It was all coming now, the recall, in brutal and torturous detail. Her pretend-chastity, which I had been so loth to violate that I rushed forward the marriage in such haste; her lewd behaviour on our wedding night, appropriate to a jade who was long past sweetness; Dereham’s Syrian love-cream; Culpepper and Catherine’s absence during my illness, and her skittishness; my attributing her high colouring on those mornings to her religious experiences at Mass; the locked doors on the great Northern Progress, with the trumped-up story about the Scottish assassins, and her kisses and assurances the next morning. O God!

I wept, putting my head down on the Council table. My hat rolled off, revealing my balding scalp. I was naked as I had never been, and I cared not, so great was my grief. I had loved Catherine, had believed her chaste and loving. It was all a lie. She was a whore, a scheming whore, who had gone to court “to make her fortune.”

I swayed up and screamed, “A sword! A sword!”

No one shorhow that you do. For I never longed so much for a thing as I do to see you and to speak with you, the which I trust shall be shortly now.

The which doth comfort me very much when I think of it, and when I think again that you shall depart from me again it makes my heart to die to think what fortune I have that I cannot be always in your company.

My trust is always in you that you will be as you have promised me, and in that hope I trust still, praying you then that you will come when my Lady Rochford is here, for then I shall be best at leisure to be at your commandment.

I thank you for promising to be so good unto that poor fellow, my man, which is one of the griefs that I do feel to depart from him, for then I do know no one that I dare trust to send to you, and therefore I pray you take him to be with you, that I may sometime hear from you one thing.

I pray you to give me a horse for my man, for I have much ado to get one and therefore I pray send me one by him and in so doing I am as I said afore, and thus I take my leave of you, trusting to see you shortly again and I would you were with me now, that you might see what pain I take in writing you.

yours as long as life endures
Catherine

One thing I had forgotten and that is to instruct my man to tarry here with me still, for he says whatsoever you bid him he will do it.

Catherine. Her frantic, muddle-headed “arrangements.” This could be no forgery, for it reflected all too perfectly her personality.

It makes my heart to die to think what fortune I have that I cannot be always in your company....

The “fortune” that kept them apart, that “made her heart to die” was me, my existence, my presence.

Oh, why did it stab me so hotly to realize it, to savour the full meaning? Why did not the full meaning—she was an adulteress, a traitress—cancel out the pain of the little, petty particulars? Yet it was these little things that had the sharpest barbs....

For I never longed so much for a thing as I do to see you and speak with you....

As I had written Anne so long ago, almost the same words-what was it I had said? “her absence having given me
the greatest pain at heart that neither tongue nor pen can express”?
Catherine had had the same madness for Culpepper, then.
No, with her it was not so enduring. It was mere lust, not bewitchment.
Yours as long as life endures, Catherine....
She had never written me a single letter.
“Thank you, Cranmer,” I said slowly. “I think it best that you go to her, take her confession now.”

It was the next day, while I was awaiting word from Cranmer, that Will received a message from Lady Baynton, Catherine’s married sister.

“Dereham did what he did by force,” How like Catherine, I thought. She said one thing and now wishes to retract it, like a child choosing trinkets at a summer’s fair. “I like this—no, I’ll have this instead.” But it was no more the time to dance.

At length Cranmer came, so nervous he was trembling. “’Tis done,” he murmured. “She has given a confession. Take it.” He thrust it to me, the odious task performed.

“What ... state was she in?” Oh, tell me something of her, what she wore, how she looked—Sweet Jesu, did I still love her, then? I all but spat.

“In a frenzy of lamentation and heaviness.”
Play-acting! As she had play-acted all along. But what if she were changed? No, impossible. “What said she of Dereham?”

Cranmer reluctantly opened the page of his personal notes. “Of Dereham she said, ‘He had divers times lain with me, sometimes in his doublet and hose, and two or three times naked, but not so naked that he had nothing upon him, for he had always at least his doublet and as I do think, his hose also, but I mean naked when his hose were put down.’ ”

She remembered every detail, she cherished them! Odear God! And the doublet still on—I remembered our wedding night, when she had had me do the same ... it excited her....

I thought the top of agony had been reached, but each day brought new heights, and this confession most of all. I would read it, then, read it and die. And be done with death, as I was already done with living.

It was addressed to me. So she wrote me a letter at last.

I, Your Grace’s most sorrowful subject and most vile wretch in the world, not worthy to make any recommendation unto your most excellent Majesty, do only make my most humble submission and confession of my faults.

Whereas no cause of mercy is deserved upon my part, yet of your most accustomed mercy extended unto all other men undeserved, most humbly on my hands and knees I do desire one particle thereof to be extended unto me, although of all other creatures I am most unworthy to be called either your wife or your subject.

My sorrow I can by no writing express, nevertheless I trust your most benign nature will have some respect unto my youth, my ignorance, my frailness, my humble confession of my faults, and plain declaration of the same referring me wholly unto Your Grace’s pity and mercy.

First at the flattering and fair persuasions of Manox, being but a young girl, I suffered him at sundry times to handle and touch the secret parts of my body which neither became me with honesty to permit nor him to require.

Also, Francis Dereham by many persuasions procured me to his vicious purpose and obtained first to lie upon my bed with his doublet and hose and after within the bed and finally he lay with me naked, and used me in such sort as a man doth his wife many and sundry times, but how often I know not.

Our company ended almost a year before the King’s Majesty was married to my Lady Anne of Cleves and continued not past one quarter of a year or a litigance and frailness of young women.

I was so desirous to be taken unto Your Grace’s favour, and so blinded with the desire of worldly glory that I could not, nor had grace, to consider how great a fault it was to conceal my former faults from Your Majesty, considering that I intended ever during my life to be faithful and true unto Your Majesty ever after.

Nevertheless the sorrow of my offences was ever before mine eyes, considering the infinite goodness of Your Majesty toward me which was ever increasing and not diminishing.
Now I refer the judgment of all my offences with my life and death wholly unto your most benign and merciful grace, to be considered by no justice of Your Majesty’s laws but only by your infinite goodness, pity, compassion, and mercy—without which I acknowledge myself worthy of the most extreme punishment.

She lied! She lied even here, even in her “honest” confession, she lied. Where was Culpepper in this, eh? “I intended ever during my life to be faithful and true unto Your Majesty.” The effrontery, the brazen deceit, in her very crawling phrases revealed that she did not know yet that Culpepper was taken. Her duplicity was stunning.

All my love for her ceased upon that instant. I saw her entire, for what she was.

I nodded to Cranmer, who was standing by, near to whimpering.

“Thank you. You have done well,” I said. “A faithful servant is not one who leaps to attend to joyful tasks, but one who takes it upon himself to shoulder the doleful ones. There are many to serve the bridegroom, but no one to lay out a corpse.”

“I am grieved for you, and wish only to help.”

“You have proved yourself over and over, but at no time more than now. I had so many to help me marry the Princess of Cleves. Where are they now?”

“The chief one is dead, Your Grace.”

So he was brave as well as true, I thought. Not one in a thousand would have voiced that, although all would have thought it.

“Cromwell.” I laughed a mirthless laugh. “Oh, how he would have relished these days, to have seen his enemies, the Howards, brought low. To have seen me shamed by that slut! My just reward for having chosen her over Cromwell’s Lady Anne.” Cromwell must be laughing—if one can laugh in hell. I know that demons cackle and jeer, but the damned?

“No one with any heart or goodness could laugh at these circumstances,” Cranmer insisted. Because he was good himself, he could not imagine its absence in others.

“They must be brought to trial,” I said, my mind leaving Cromwell in his shroud. “First the men, then Catherine. See how she feels when Culpepper denies her. As he will. He will swear he loved her not. How will she like that, to be denied publicly by the lover for whom she is giving up everything? That will hurt her worse than the sword which is to follow. He will deny her, you know. He will deny her and throw himself on my mercy.”

I rubbed my forehead. My head was pounding. “The men must have an open trial. Admit everyone at court, and their friends, to attend. Foreign cruel or bloody, but see for themselves how deceived and betrayed I have been!”

He nodded unhappily.

“Do not look so miserable. The worst part is over. Now only formalities and legalisms remain.”

He bowed.

Suddenly I thought of something. “Oh, and Cranmer—bring me back the original letter that Catherine sent Culpepper. I would have it in my safekeeping. Such pieces of evidence have a way of disappearing just before a trial or hearing. As the original Papal dispensation for my marriage to Katherine of Aragon did just prior to the opening of the legatine court; as my letters to Anne Boleyn vanished and reappeared at the Vatican. I shall keep the Queen’s letter upon my person, so that anyone wishing to steal it must steal it from my very bosom.” As my wife was stolen.

But no, she had not been stolen. She had stolen away on her own.

Alone again, I sat down and opened the “confession.” I reread it slowly, word by word, as if this time I would see something that had not been there before, something that would redeem and negate the whole of it.

Instead I found more sorrow than ever.

First at the flattering and fair persuasions of Manox, being but a young girl, I suffered him ... which neither became him with honesty to require....

Francis Dereham by many persuasions procured me to his vicious purpose ... and used me....

The subtle persuasions of young men and the ignorance and frailness of young women....

The tone stank, the wheedling attempt to excuse herself and shift all the blame onto the men. How much more becoming if she had stood up for herself, shouldered the responsibility! Better a proud Delilah than an excuse-making Eve.

And why had she wanted to marry me?

I was so blinded with desire of worldly glory....

The fool! She was too stupid even to flatter! She just stated flatly that she coveted the jewels and gold.

O, I had loved a stupid harlot. Bad enough a harlot, but a fool as well. A girl too unschooled to write a grammatical letter, and too uncelever not to insult the very one from whom she was begging mercy! Evil and subtlety, such as her cousin Anne Boleyn employed, were grand snares which could catch any mortal man. But stupidity! I had been ensnared by the surface charms of a simpleton!
CIX

The ugly secret was out and scampering about the realm like an army of rats. It would undoubtedly reach York and Lincoln far more quickly than the progress had, undoing all the good I had accomplished there for the majesty of the Crown. The trial would clarify and satisfy every morbid curiosity, for I cared not if every foul fact were exposed. Let the full abominations be known. I cared not for my own pride; but let no one afterward accuse the state of injustice, or a trumped-up trial, as they had over the Witch.

Catherine was given orders to surrender her royal apartments at Hampton and move, under guard, to Syon House, a former monastery. Her presence there would certainly deconsecrate it, if the Church had not already done so.

Since her hysterical confession, I had sent Cranmer back to>

Faced with Culpepper’s admission, and the evidence of her letter to him, she fainted.

“He could not—he dared not—” she murmured, collapsing. Upon opening her eyes, the first thing she demanded was, “The letter! The letter!”

“It is taken, Madam,” she was told. “The King’s Majesty hath it.”

She keened and wailed. She then confessed to meeting Culpepper in pre-arranged secret places and by the backstairs of palaces; that she had called Culpepper her “little sweet fool” and given him a velvet cap and ring for love tokens.

“But there was no sin between us, I swear!” she wept, with one breath, while with the next blaming Lady Rochford and Culpepper for having pressed her for these meetings.

Lady Rochford had a different tale to tell, one that exonerated her. She had arranged these meetings at Catherine’s mysterious urgings. Furthermore, she swore that “Culpepper hath known the Queen carnally considering all things that I hath heard and seen between them.”

Enough. Enough of this. Now the entire truth must be driven out. Dereham and Culpepper and Lady Rochford and Catherine Howard and all the other Howards must be brought to trial. The preliminaries, the investigations, were over.

Guildhall, in London. The entire Privy Council, and the foreign ambassadors—the French envoys Marillac and Castillon, and the venerable Chapuys—were in attendance when the men were brought before the company of jurors.

I was told that Dereham was charming. His arrogance was gone and he traded on his background, his good family, and his love for Catherine and honest intentions. He cherished her, he said, and his only thought was to make her his wife. He had been heartbroken when he returned from Ireland (whence he had gone only to make his fortune so that he could offer her the luxuries she so deserved) to find that she spurned and scorned him. She was no longer a simple maiden at the Duchess’s, but a girl with a court position, which had quite gone to her head. Her other suitors—particularly a certain Thomas Paston and her cousin Thomas Culpepper (Thomases again!)—did not worry him. It was the King who was his rival, the one before whom he must reluctantly give way. Nevertheless, “If the King were dead I am sure I might marry her,” he had claimed.

If the King were dead. He had imagined my death, wished it. Evil intent, malice in the heart. And then—he had requested a position in Catherine’s household. Clear proof and evidence that he had wicked intentions.

The Duchess had sponsored him in this request. She, too, had a stake in all this. She was involved.

Culpepper was less abject and co-operative than Dereham when first he was brought in. Clearly he disdained to share the floor with a commoner like Dereham. But in a flash of pride he blurted out that all along the progress they had met secretly, with the connivance of Lady Rochford, and always at Catherine’s hot insistenceivryand with the reckless nonchalance that was his trademark, he threw away his life, and Catherine’s. There could be no mercy now, no mercy for any of them. They were a nest of traitors, traitors who had crouched in the royal apartments planning and wishing my illness and incapacity: Dereham seeking a place in Catherine’s household, and Culpepper conveniently near to “serve” me. Yes, serve me poison, as he had done in March, when I was taken so ill. It was not from God that this illness had come, it was from human hands, in Satan’s service. I had been stricken, had almost died, so that he could have access to the pleasures of my wife’s body.

Die. These instruments of evil must die.
On December tenth, they were taken out of the Tower and transported to Tyburn, the place where commoners were executed.

The Privy Council had advised me that Culpepper’s offence was so “very heinous” that it warranted a notable execution, despite his petition to be permitted the kindness of decapitation.

Culpepper. The pretty, lusty boy whom I had loved, as only rogues are lovable. The serpent I had nourished in my bosom, protecting him from the penalties of his own folly and evil. He had raped a gamekeeper’s wife and then murdered one of the villagers who tried to save her. This was deserving of the death penalty, but I had been dazzled by his beauty and words, and therefore I had pardoned him. In so doing I had done wrong. He had taken it only as licence to continue his evil, not repent it. In showing misplaced mercy I had created a monster.

The traitor’s death: as excruciating a death as human ingenuity could contrive.

Culpepper had earned it. Nonetheless I wrote out on parchment, “Sentence to be commuted to simple beheading,” and sent the message straight to Tyburn to meet the executioners.

Let them call me softhearted, womanish. Could I help it if I had a tender conscience and desired to show mercy?

Christmas. There were no festivities, and Catherine was still a prisoner at Syon House, while I kept to my own apartments and read and reread her letter to Culpepper until I knew every wrinkle on the paper, every ink blot. Why did I do this, like a monk repeating a rosary? Why did I torture myself so? If I thought to make myself insensitive to the wound, it had just the opposite effect: I never allowed it to heal, and by my constant probing, I kept the wound open.

Further investigations, dreary as they were, revealed yet more treason. I was forced to imprison the Duchess because she destroyed evidence relating to Dereham. She had hastily opened his trunks and destroyed his memorabilia and burnt his incriminating letters just before my commissioners arrived to confiscate them.

In truth, the entire Howard clan had conspired to hoodwink me and conceal Catherine’s true character, so that they could seize power. They knew the little whore for what she was, but would pass her on to their King, to satisfy their own greed. Now they would pay the price: to the Tower with them all! They were all tried and found guilty of misprision of treason, and thus must forfeit their goods and possessions to the Crown and their bodies to perpetual imprisonment. All of them: Catherine’s lascivious uncle, William Howard; her aunt, Ladfont size="3">

Most noble and gracious Sovereign Lord, yesterday came to my knowledge that mine ungracious mother-in-law, mine unhappy brother and his wife, with my lewd sister of Bridgewater, were committed to the Tower, which I am sure is done for some false and traitorous proceedings against your Royal Majesty; which revolving in my mind, with also the most abominable deeds done by two of my nieces against Your Highness, has brought me into the greatest perplexity that ever poor wretch was in, fearing that Your Majesty, having so often and by so many of my kin been thus falsely and traitorously handled, might not only conceive a displeasure in your heart against me and all other of my kin, but also abhor in manner to hear speak of any of the same. Wherefore, most gracious Sovereign Lord, prostrate at your feet, most humbly I beseech Your Majesty to call to your remembrance that a great part of this matter has come to light by my declaration to Your Majesty, according to my bounden duty, of the words spoken to me by my mother-in-law the Duchess, when Your Highness sent me to Lambeth to search Dereham’s coffers, without the which I think she had not been further examined, nor consequently, her ungracious children.

Which my true proceedings toward Your Majesty being considered, and also the small love of my two false traitorous nieces, and my mother-in-law, have borne unto me, doth put me in some hope, that Your Highness will not conceive any displeasure in your most gentle heart against me, that God knoweth did never think a thought that might be to your discontentation.

It was true that no one in the family liked the Duke, which was now to his credit. His ungracious and traitorous nieces—oh, he spoke well, and described them perfectly! What was worse than to be uncle of a witch and a whore—unless it was to be husband of them? The Duke was not to go to the Tower with the rest. I would spare him. But would I spare Catherine? That was what the people wondered as the days passed and she remained at Syon House, under guard but not without certain comforts. Her jewels had been taken, but not her attendants. She still had four ladies for companionship. She had not been tried, nor had any trial date been set. Already six weeks had passed since the treasonous disclosure; by this like time Anne Boleyn had been in her grave three weeks already, and I remarried. Some laid the delay to respect for the Christmas season; others said it betokened a still-lingering love for her. Wagers were that she would live, even though her paramours had perished as felons.
There was a part of me that wished that. And there was a way, there was a way ... if she would acknowledge her marriage to Dereham, admit that she had been his wife.... True, then she would have committed perjury and bigamy by going through a marriage ceremony with me, but that was not treason; the only treason was to the human heart, to have trampled so on an old man’s heart. But if she repented, and as a widow retired to a quiet and virtuous life ... yes, then she could live.

I sent such an offer to her, along with a paper for her to sign. Before it had even reached her, I regretted it. How could I have forgotten, even for an instant, the rest of it? She and Culpepper imagining my death, poisoning me in March, so that only God saved me? Oh, fond old man’s fancy, doting so! I had forgot. I had forgot. I had willed myself to forget, as if forgetting made it not so.

She s eleventh, the Queen's death warrant became law.

The Bill covered more than just the Queen’s high treason. It gave Parliamentary sanction to the trial and condemnation of Culpepper and Dereham and the sentence of misprision passed against the Howards. It also made it a crime, in the future, for any unchaste woman to conceal her state from the King, once he showed an interest in marrying her.

This latter made me a laughingstock. Jokes were circulated to the effect that no woman in the kingdom would be eligible; that only a widow could pass the test; that the competition for my hand would be negligible, and so on. If I had cared any longer about such things, I would have been offended. But I did not intend to marry again. Women disgusted me, and I counted myself fortunate to be at last beyond the need of them.

As I had grown older, my needs grew fewer and fewer. At one time it had been important to me that I have a powerful body and a pretty wife. Both these things were now taken away, and their possibilities were gone. I had wanted riches and beautiful palace furnishings, but now I had them and they delighted me not. Building Nonsuch Palace was a chore, not a pleasure, and I decided on the instant not even to bother to finish it.

All I wanted now was the respect and love of my subjects, and a modicum of health. Dwindling needs, but fiercely coveted nonetheless.

On February twelfth, Catherine was transported by water from Syon House to the Tower.

I saw them when they made their way upstream, past my windows at Whitehall. A doleful little flotilla, the Queen’s boat being guarded between a galley full of Privy Councillors in the fore, and a barge with the Duke of Suffolk and his soldiers to the rear. Catherine’s vessel was curtained and closed and—Jesu be thanked—I was unable to glimpse her, although I tried. Darkness was closing in, as I had forbidden them to start until I was certain that in the short winter afternoon London Bridge would not be reached before total darkness enveloped it. I would not have Catherine see Dereham’s and Culpepper’s heads impaled above the bridge, and I knew she would look for them, even as I had looked for her as she passed.

The barge stopped at Traitor’s Gate, and Catherine, dressed all in black, was taken from the water-stairs to her prison chamber. Her short cold journey was over.

There were curiosity-seekers on the landing, all gaping at her. One of them wrote this ballad:

Thus as I sat, the tears within my eyen  
Of her the wreck, whilst I did debate,  
Before my face me thought I saw this Queen,  
No whit, as I her left, Got wat, of late,  
But all bewept in black and poor estate.

“To be a Queen fortune did me prefer,  
Flourishing in youth with beauty fresh and pure,  
Whom nature made shine equal with the stars,  
And to reign in felicity with joy and pleasure,  
Wanting no thing that love might me procure,  
So much beloved far, far beyond the rest,  
With my Sovereign Lordhe pay of my decay  
That I shall get no pompous funeral,
Nor of my black, no man the charge shall pay;
Save that some one perchance may hap to say,
‘Such a one there was, alas! and that was pity
That she herself disdained with such untruth.’

She appealed to poets. All bewept in black and poor estate.... Seeing her mounting those stairs had snared yet another man’s heart, got her another partisan.

That was her last outside appearance. Within the Tower there was none to be swayed by her beauty and wistfulness.

That evening she made a startling request: that a block be brought to her cell so she could practise laying her head upon it. She was determined to make a pretty showing before the assembled witnesses on the morrow. I was told she practised daintily upon the thing for upwards of an hour, approaching it from many different angles and laying her head sideways, left and right, and hanging straight down, enquiring of her unhappy attendants which made the better composition.

And how did I pass that night? I lay awake all through it, and in February, the nights are long. It had been night already when Catherine reached the Tower, and it would be still night when she mounted the scaffold to have her head struck off.

It was the same scaffold that Anne had climbed, and More, and Fisher, and Buckingham, and Neville and Carew. Some fancy had arisen among the common people that “indelible stains” marked the spot on the flints below. This was nonsense; I myself had inspected the flints and they were ordinary enough, and nothing remained on them. As for the scaffold, it was still serviceable, and building another one because of squeamishness would serve no purpose.

Nights in February are also cold. This night in particular was damp, with the damp that paralyses you. It was worse than the clean cold of snow and ice. I could scarce move my limbs, even underneath all the furs mounded to warm me. The blazing fire did nothing to aroint the cold. What did Catherine feel, in the ancient Tower? She had always been so sensitive to cold. I remembered how she had sent those furs and blankets to Reginald Pole’s traitorous mother, the Countess of Salisbury, in the Tower, lest she take cold. I had chided her for being softhearted. Aye, softhearted she was, toward everyone—the aged, traitorous Countess; the unemployed former secretaries and relations of the Duchess, her accomplices in sin. Toward anyone in need she was melting. She stopped not to question whether they had brought that need upon themselves.

It lightened somewhat in the east—a poor excuse for dawn. Outside my chamber window the vexed Thames slapped more furiously. I could not imagine how chilling those waters must be.

So: it was come. The day of the sentence, the day another Queen of England must die.

I had done my grieving, and arose determined to spend the day with my children. They were the only comfort left to me, the only things I had produced that nothing could mar or sully.
I had notified them by way of their governesses and chamberlains that February thirteenth was to be reserved for me, their most royal father. They were to spend the entire day in my company, doing what they most loved doing. For I would fain k day ano>They were to come to my chamber at eight o’clock, prepared for this day of recreation.

Mary arrived as the very stroke of eight began. She brought a large satchel, and I assumed it contained books. But I was delighted as she pulled out a viol, a viola da gamba, and a recorder. “My greatest pleasure,” she said, “is to play music all day long with no one to tell me ‘tis time to attend to other things.”

Music. I, too, would have music all the day long. I grabbed Mary and kissed her on both cheeks. “You cannot know how that pleases me!” And I spoke true.

Mary pushed herself away and began to ruffle through her music-notes. So much like Katherine ... I found, to my astonishment, that my fond memories of Katherine had resurrected themselves. Mary was twenty-six now. A woman, four years older than my silly, false wife. She had never liked Catherine, and I had resented that, but brushed it aside as an old maid’s envy of a young wife. But Mary had evidently seen things I had not...

Edward now came, brought by his nurse. The sweet-cheeked boy waddled in, so swathed against the cold he was as bloated as a man four days in the water.

“And what would you like to do this day?” I asked him.

“Faith, he has a puppy he loves well,” started his nurse.

“I would have the snake,” he said quietly.

“A serpent?” I asked.

“He has collected them, Your Majesty,” she apologized. “In the fields near Hampton. He seems to have ... to have a way with them.”

He nodded. “Yes, fetch my snakes!”

The nurse brought in a large box. Now I became curious and lifted the lid. Inside were many dark shapes, which did not stir.

“They are sleeping!” cried Edward. “They have no eyelids, so when they sleep it must be dark, and they tuck their heads down, so.”

“He found some eggs,” said the nurse. “And is trying to hatch them.”

“And I shall succeed!” he said.

“Good boy.” I chuckled. “I should like to see you succeed.” I touched his golden hair. He was so delicate. The fat of the previous autumn had melted away, leaving him luminous and lean-bodied. His skin was so fine it glowed.

“And what of your pup?”

“He takes little interest in it,” admitted the nurse. “He seems to prefer serpents to true loyal animals.”

I shrugged. He was but four years old. The important thing was that he had an interest.

Mary was settling herself with her music and instruments, and Edward was playing with his snakes, when Elizabeth arrived.

“My Lady Elizabeth,” I said. “And what have you brought?”

She straggled in, dragging a large box after her. With a sigh, she let it rest. “Materials to make Valentines. Red and white paper, and two volumes of poetry.” She ripped off her fur cap. “Tomorrow is St. Valentine’s Day.”

“And to whom shall you send them? Do you already have a Valentine?” I must keep things at a child’s level.

“Perhaps,” she said, “but I must make my message cryptic, or sacrifice my pride.”

She was wise. Would that it would stay with her as she grew to womanhood, and not be scattered before the look in a man’s eye.

“So settle you down, and we shall spend a day together doing as we all like! And at dinnertime, you shall all have your favourite dishes—whether they are healthy or not, or go together or not.” I had taken great pains to find out their favourite treats.

“And Father,” said Elizabeth, “what shall you do? What is your favourite activity?”

Music. Above all, music. “I shall compose a new ballad. And force myself to be ready by nightfall. Then I shall perform.”

We began our tasks, and the sun rose, coming into the chamber. The cannon sounded from the Tower. It was not easily heard, in midwinter, with all the windows shut tight and stuffed with lambswool against the cold. Mary’s playing all but drowned it.

Elizabeth rose, putting aside her red cuttings. “What was that?” she asked quietly, laying her hand on my arm.

I looked into her eyes. “It was the cannon,” I said. “Announcing that the Queen is dead.”
The Queen was dead. Catherine’s head was gone.
“I shall never marry!” cried Elizabeth.
The others looked up: Mary too old to react, Edward too young.
“Elizabeth,” I said, reaching for her. I would explain it all to her, explain it to this intelligent child.
She was gone from my reach. “Nay,” she said, pretending there were no tears in her eyes. She had cleverly placed herself beyond scrutiny. “Marriage is death,” she shrugged. “I would have none of it.” She gestured toward the Valentines. “This, and no further. Valentines are pretty.”
I went to put my arm around her. When I did, I felt a stiff unyielding thing. She wanted no comforting. It was I who wanted some comforting, some warmth. But that was beyond reach as well.
The Queen was dead.

Catherine had been led forth onto the scaffold just before dawn. She had worn no mantle against the chilled air. The audience assembled was, for the most part, indifferent. Catherine had had no partisans, no champions. That in itself was curious. There was none of my Queens who had gone undefended. Katherine of Aragon had had her violent defenders, churchmen who had been willing to die for her, the northern men who had fought on her behalf. Anne Boleyn (due to her witchcraft) had had those who willingly sacrificed their lives and political careers for her. Jane was mourned by the entire realm. Even Anne of Cleves had inspired loyalty and become beloved in certain circles.

But why go over this so intellectually? Yes, it was telling and surprising that Catherine was left naked of supporters at the scaffold, but ... The scaffold. She had mounted it, helped up by others. This is the part I delayed recounting, this is the grisly part. To omit it would be dishonest, yet ... oh, would God it had not occurred!
She stood still in the frosty air, all in black. About the scaffold were all the court, and foreign ambassadors. She had everyone’s ear, and every word she uttered would be remembered and whispered and repeated abroad.
Before her was the block upon which she had practised the night before. (Curious that she had not asked for a special swordsman, as had been granted her cousin Anne. But then, she had practised upon the block. Both Queens sought to turn a state execution into a showcase for themselves—to make themselves legends.)
She said, clearly, so that all might hear: “I die a Queen, but I would rather die the wife of Culpepper. God have mercy on my soul. Good people, I beg you, pray for me.”
Then she put her head on the block—expertly—and the axe severed it. It rolled but a little way in the hay. Functionaries gathered it up, and spread a black cloth over the body trunk, still kneeling in the black dress beside the block. Blood was gushing from the severed neck, but the cold air quickly congealed it. They lifted her body away, but did not put it in the coffin yet. Let the blood drain out first, else it would foul the coffin.
Two pages scrubbed off the block, to cleanse it of Catherine’s mess. The space beside it was rinsed with steaming water from pitchers. I was told that the smell of the water mingling with blood made many bystanders ill.
Then Jane Boleyn, Lady Rochford, was pulled toward the scrubbed-up block. She was allowed to speak, in accordance with custom.
“Good Christians,” she said, “God has permitted me to suffer this shameful doom, as a punishment for having contributed to my husband’s death. I falsely accused him of loving in incestuous manner his sister, Queen Anne Boleyn. For this I deserve to die. But I am guilty of no other crime.” Seeing Catherine’s black-covered lump, she began to scream. Then, shaking, she laid her head and submitted to the axe.
After all the blood had run out of her, they put Catherine in the coffin, and buried it in the Chapel of St. Peter-ad-Vincula within the Tower, only a few feet from her cousin Anne Boleyn. And it was done. Her corpse lay in a box, neatly covered over.
Mercifully I did not hear their scaffold statements until nightfall, when the children had gone. Then I heard them. Then I lay in bed (not warm, merely pretending to be) and heard them.
I die a Queen, but I would rather die the wife of Culpepper.
She had said that. She had actually said that. Was it true? I hurried past that, which was beyond understanding, since her bloodless form now lay buried. I could never ask her, could never wring from her an explanation: Why did you in“3”>“No! No!”
The wood registered the vibrations. Only a few inches between us—
I flung open the chamber door, opening on the darkened Privy Chamber.
“No! No!”
The voice was behind yet another set of doors. I opened the Privy Chamber doors, leading to the Audience Chamber, but it was empty, vast, alien.
“Henry!”
It came from the gallery, the Long Gallery connecting the royal apartments with the Chapel Royal.
I fumbled at the door latch. It was carved and heavy, to impress petitioners with the gravity of majesty. The doors themselves were great panels, the height of three men. Pulling them open required considerable strength; I felt my belly muscles tighten at the strain.
The passageway outside was deserted. Then I saw it ... the white figure, being dragged backwards, receding before my eyes. Mournful cries came from it, sorrow beyond telling....
There was nothing there. It had quite vanished, and all its presence with it.
I returned to my bed. Since Culpepper, I had had no intimate of the bedchamber, and I slept quite alone and unattended. In one sense I savoured it. It was tiresome always to consider another’s needs in the night, not to dare to light a candle for fear of waking him.
The ghost—for ghost it was, and I might as well name it as such—shrieked and cried in a way no mortal ever had. Would others see it? Or was it meant only for me? I settled the covers about me. I would not sleep, that I knew. But I expected to pass the night in solitary meditation.
It was in the very darkest part of night, when the sun is gone and thinks never to return, that I first saw the monks. They were standing in the shadows of the far reaches of the chamber. I could see straightway that their habits were varied, and that they belonged to different orders. On the left was the light-coloured habit of the Cistercians. I had not dealt kindly with them, that I knew. They were a strict order, living isolated, arduous lives, and a good order, in the beginning. Well, we are all of us good in the beginning. But we must be judged on what we become.
Next to him, a dark habit. Surely a Dominican. This was a hard order to love, just as many in Jesus’ time must have found it hard to love a disciple. They were too astute, too caustic, too clever.
Standing a little to the side was a grey-habited figure. Greyfriars, the people called the Observant Franciscans: they had had a priory right outside the palace gates at Greenwich. Once they were my friends; then they became my enemies. Well, I had destroyed that obstructionist order.
Then, in the middle, a dun-coloured habit. Oh, those Carthusians! I had had to take sternest measures against them. They had proved most recalcitrant to my enlightenment. Therefore I was not surprised when the tan-habited one came toward me.
How did I see him? It was dark. His habit did not glow, as country folk would claim. Yet I saw him.
He nodded gravely toward me. I could not see his face, yet I believe it was that of John Houghton, the London abbot whom I had hanged for refusal to take the Oath.
“Howdy,” he intoned—no, whispered. “You were wrong in what you did. The monks were good="3">“They were evil, did evil.” Did I speak these words or merely think them?
“No.” The sound was soft. So soft I could not quite discover whether it was true or my imagining.
The monks shimmered. Their habits waved and seemed to change colour. Then the sun—only a tiny ray—shone into the chamber. There were no monks.
There were no monks. There was no Catherine. (Yes, there was, only it was a corpse, a corpse without a head. If I bade diggers to dig her up, she would be there, two days rotted now. In winter it is slower. She might yet be beautiful. Her face, that is, printed upon the severed head.) I had fancied it all, in my sick fantasy. “Fantasy” ... what a powerful word. The King did cast a fantasy to Catherine Howard....
Soon they would be coming into the chamber—the attendants, the doctors—having heard about my behaviour the night before. (Was it only the night before, when I had confronted the Fiend in all his degrees?) What exactly had happened? Was there any man who would dare to tell me?

The breakfast over, the shaving over, the reading of the daily dispatches over, now the day must begin. Brandon came to me in my sunny work chamber.

“My behaviour last night,” I said straightway. “Describe it as you would if under oath.”

“Well . . .” He fidgeted, shifted back and forth on his feet. He had become portly of late.

“Pray seat yourself.” I gestured toward a chair, one of two against the wall.

He brought it over, closer to me. “Your Grace.” He smiled. “Do you not think it meet that these chairs come to this use?”

I was silent. I did not remember the chairs. Collapsible U-shaped wooden things, inlaid with mother-of-pearl. Some gift from the Patriarch of Jerusalem?

“They were in the Spaniards’ tents when the Princess of Aragon first came to England. When your father was not allowed admittance.”

In that very tent? When I first saw Katherine, and loved her? I was angry, and I knew not why. Why had they survived? They should have perished, along with all those things of that world.

“That was ten thousand years ago.”

“Aye.” His grin faded.

“What did I do last night? What did I do and say? And what truly happened? I know you will tell me.”

“There was a Valentine’s banquet. All was as it should be, all dishes served in order, the colours red and white, the Valentine’s box distributed and sweet-hearts allotted, the red-coloured courses served.”

“But?”

“But it was the day after an execution. No ordinary execution. The Queen, my Lord—you executed the Queen. And so the Valentine’s feast was a funeral feast. At least, those attending felt it so. Theont size="3">“I saw Catherine. She was sitting in her seat, with a thornless rose before her golden platter.”

“No one else saw her. She was for your eyes alone.”

“Did the guests . . . know I saw her?”

“They knew you saw something.”

“So they assume I am mad.” I jerked out the words. I had paraded my obsession, my hauntings, in front of the company.

“They assume you were conscience-stricken.” His deep brown eyes, the only youthful feature in his lined face, gazed directly into mine. “How you act from today forward will determine whether they judge you as mad.”

“I am not conscience-stricken!” I muttered. “She deserved to die.”

“That—or mad,” said Brandon calmly. “Those are the only two explanations they will allow you. People are simplistic, my Lord.”

“You know I am not mad,” I began.

“Too strong a strain, for too long, can drive anyone mad.” He was cautious.

“I have never been mad, and I never shall be mad! But you are right, it was foolish to plan such a festivity following an execution. Better just to grieve, and admit one’s grieving. I should have locked myself up in my chambers and wept all day. Then I would feel clean, not more besmirched than ever.”

“Death does not cleanse. Sometimes the loved one—or the hated one—never leaves one’s side. I still miss Mary. Katherine is no comfort. I, too, was a fool.”

I embraced him. “I misjudged you.”

“As others will misjudge you,” he said. “Unless you are careful.”

At once it was important that I tell him all of it. “I was not alone in my chamber. I heard shriekings outside, in the Long Gallery. And then, in the back of the room, there were monks. Whispering together, huddling, pointing, judging.”

He started and looked uneasy. “Shrieks? As of a woman? In the Long Gallery, you say?” Suddenly he flung himself up out of the Spanish chair. “Do you remember when you heard Mass at Hampton Court, in the same Chapel Royal, when the first news of Catherine was coming out?”

“Yes.”

“No one would tell you, then, as they acted on their own authority and feared your anger. When you were at your
prayers, Catherine escaped from her guard and sought to find you at Mass. She eluded her watchers and came down
the Long Gallery at Hampton. She reached the very doors of the chapel, where she meant to throw herself on your
mercy. But just as she was turning the great door-fastener, she was apprehended. Then—”

“She called for me,” I said slowly.

“Trusting that you would hear her. She was so bold she even used your first name, the one forbidden even to me.
She dared all. But failed in her attempt. She was dragged away before she could open the doors and intrude on your
worship.”

“Was she wearing maiden.”

So she would appear, for all eternity. The virgin-whore. I had seen true.

“She attempted to appeal to your sense of sentimentality.”

So my “sentimentality” was well known, a weakness for users to play upon. Was there nothing of a king that
others did not seek to use? From my “sentimentality” to my time on the evacuation-stool after dinner?

“I will always see her as a maiden.” That was true, that was the aching of it. But what of the ghost? Had others
seen it?

“I was visited by this sight last night,” I confessed. “The same shrieks, the same calling of my name. This time I
opened the door, and looked down the gallery myself. I saw it.”

Brandon frowned. “Were there any other witnesses?”

“None.”

“Set a watch, then. Else you will go mad, and she’ll have done what she set out to do.”

I nodded.

“She hates you,” Brandon said. “She wishes you to come to ruin. Remember that. Thwart her.”

“But why Catherine?” I burst out. “Why not anyone else? I swear, no one else has risen to walk!” I dared not

“They were not possessed of the Evil One,” he said smoothly. “Only the Evil One gives power beyond the grave.”

“He could not answer. “Perhaps her soul reincarnated in her cousin Catherine.”

I shook so profoundly I could not stop. Brandon encircled me with his great, heavy arm. “Your list of regrets is no
longer than that of any other man,” he said slowly. “We live with them. We do not go mad, or sink into
melancholy.” Still my shaking went on, gathering force. “Regrets. No one sets out to have a list of regrets. It is a
mortal condition.”

Father, amongst his bloodied handkerchiefs-how I had despised him.

“What now?” I shook my head wildly. “So I now find myself where ordinary men do. But what does a king do?”

“A king spits on the regrets,” laughed Brandon.

Then I, too, began to laugh, and the trembling stopped.

I set six unimaginative Kentish soldiers to stand guard in the Long Gallery. I especially noted how dull of wit and
irreligious they were, and posted them with the simple instructions that they were to keep watch all night, relieving
one another at two-hour intervals. On no account were they to sleep, and they were to report to me any noises or
stirrings they even suspected.

“For it has been said that this cold winter has forced an unusual number of ra—”

“They nodded. Did they truly understand?

I thought my story quite clever. No madman could be so clever. It sounded quite logical and would net me the
information I sought.

On the second night I heard the ghost. Its shriekings were quite clear. I cracked open the great doors and looked ...

and saw the apparition, like Catherine but not Catherine. It merely used her externals. The guardsmen were flailing
at it; one stabbed at the air as if to pierce her breast. The other just leapt about like a dazed frog.

I closed the doors. Others had seen it work. I was not alone. I was not mad.

The next morning the guards claimed they had seen nothing, heard nothing, and had passed a tranquil night.

Then I, too, began to laugh, and the trembling stopped.

I thought my story quite clever. No madman could be so clever. It sounded quite logical and would net me the
information I sought.
I thanked them and bade them remain on duty for yet another week, just to be sure.

“For if there be rats, we must exterminate them.”

They agreed. “One quiet night does not guarantee that they are not present.” I looked into their eyes. There was no reluctance there to pass another night on the gallery. Where had this generation got such hardened hearts?

Every night I heard the ghost. Every morning the guards reported an uneventful night. At the end of the eighth day I paid them, thanked them for their honesty and perseverance, and let them go.

“No poisons, then,” I said merrily.

“Nothing to poison,” they agreed.

No. One cannot poison a ghost. One can only poison others’ opinions, and my behaviour at the Valentine’s banquet had done that. Well, no matter. I would set about sweetening them. People’s minds were like wells. First they run clear, then become polluted—but one can always counteract the pollution. Just choose from.” Before the meal even appeared, I was issuing disclaimers for it.

“Five loaves and two fishes?” she laughed.

“About that,” I admitted.

The bread, made from late-winter rye, was thick and heavy. The drink, made from the same, was nourishing. And yes, there was carp: universal late-winter dish.

“Who minds the carp pools now that the monasteries are abandoned?” she asked, matter-of-factly. It was the monks who had developed elaborate fish hatcheries, and made carp a standard part of the winter diet.

“Villagers. But we are not so dependent on carp any longer, now that there is less fasting.”

“A foolish Popish custom,” she said briskly. “I am happy that you abolished much of that, my Lord.”

“But I have not abolished enough?” I chose my words carefully.

She chose hers with equal prudence. “Things are progressing. True things must build on a foundation.”

“What were you reading?” I asked abruptly. “Or, rather, attempting to read?” I indicated her book.

“Private devotions,” she said, handing me the book. “Some of the meditations were—I composed some of them myself.”

I glanced at it. Key words—“faith,” “Scripture,” “blood,” “justification”—branded it Protestant. “Have a care, Kate,” I warned gently, handing it back to her.

She winced at the name. “No one has ever called me Kate,” she said stiffly.

“No? But it is a happy name, as you are happy. A young name, as you are young.” Was I the only one to have ever seen that side of her? “But if you prefer, I shall return to ‘Lady Parr.’ ”

She did not contradict me. “You invited me, Your Majesty, because you had something for me?”

The Valentine’s present: a section of Ovid, and his treatise on love. I had thought she would enjoy translating it. I saw now how utterly inappropriate it would be, how boorish.

“You are my Valentine,” I said, thinking as quickly as I could. “We should exchange tokens, and I was remiss in withholding mine.”

“You were ill, my Lord,” she quickly reminded me.

“Yes, yes. Well, I have here”—sweet Jesu, what did I have?—“a jewel. A ruby ring.” Red. Valentine’s. Yes, it would do.

“I am in mourning,” she said.

“We had agreed, as Christians, you were not.” I delved into the leather pouch I kept in my private chest, my fingers searching for the ruby. “Here.”

Reluctantly she took it. “This is not from a shrine?”

“It is not Becket’s ruby, if that is what you fear! A ruby cannot be divided and retain its roundness. Surely you knew that? No, if you must know its origins—this is the girlhood ring of my dear sister Mary. Take it, and wear it in innocence, not as a reminder.”

“Yes. At last.”

“The sun will warm you, will heal you. I know it. You have waited a long time.”

“I have forgotten the sun. In truth, England feels like home to me. I came here briefly, so I thought. I would serve my time and then go back to the sun, the flowers, the black-and-white of Spanish noon. But I made the mistake of
coming to love the Princess of Aragon. I could see her as that young girl, setting out for England—and I wanted to serve her.”

“That you did.” I released him, old bony man. “You saw her as that Princess when to everyone else she was a dowager. Well ...” I closed my eyes, bade the images go. “We all need our champions.” I had none, but no one need know that. “Your master, the Emperor ... think you he will implement the Papal bull against me? Heed the call to holy war?”

“You and I both know that if he did not rise on behalf of his aunt, he will scarce stir now. Although he has become more pious and religious of late, that is offset by the turmoil in Germany and the Low Countries. Protestantism there ... it is that which he will battle, not England’s. You are quite safe from the Emperor;’’ he conceded. “Only pray do not tell him I said so.”

I embraced him again. “Naturally not.”

“One thing more, Your Majesty.” Chapuys pulled back. “The Princess Mary. Is she to be married soon?”

“I cannot see how that may be. Until the French and the Emperor recognize the importance of an alliance—”

“She is distraught. She needs a husband. I speak as a friend, not as an ambassador or as her conspirator. She is twenty-six years old, Your Grace, no longer a child, and soon will pass her childbearing years. Oh, have mercy on her!”

I was astonished at this outburst. “But to whom shall I marry her? A prince of—”

“A duke, a count, anyone! His orthodoxy does not matter! Only see her as a woman, a woman in desperate need of a husband and children. My master, the Emperor, would be irate if he heard me speak thus. But if you loved her as a child ... Your Grace, her needs are no less now! Only you can free her. She needs to love someone, something. Else her natural goodness will grow all crooked.”

Mary. For so many years, an enchanting child. Then a pawn in the war between Katherine and myself. Then—a nothing. I had not thought of her needs, I had been so assiduous in meeting my own. I had thought she would keep, keep until I was at peace.

Nothing keeps. It grows grotesque, or it withers.

“You speak true,” I said. “She is terribly alone.” Strange I had not realized it. I had ascribed strength and happiness all about me where it did not exist.

Mary. I had loved her so, but when she took Katherine’s side I had thrust her aside. What was missing in me, to change allegiances so swiftly? Perhaps the madness reached far back, in an absence of normal feeling.

Madness. No, I was not mad. But these pounding headaches! Where was my head-medicine, the syrup that quieted these ragings? I would have a draught now. The servitor brought it. The pretty emerald syrup. It would course through my veins in time for the next audience.

“Monsieur le Ambassador, Marillac, awaits his audience.”

So he was here already? Very well, then. “We are ready,” I said.

Monsieur Marillac came into the Audience Chamber. He was virtually a stranger to me, having come to England only a few months previous. Francis did not allow any envoy to remain long enough to form a personal bond with me. Was it because he feared my charm, my influence?

“Your Majesty.” He dropped to one knee, then raised his face toward mine, smiling. Such a pretty smile he had. Wolsey had had a pretty smile. Oh, and such a servile manner, all flattering and obsequious at once.

Wolsey ... there was no more Wolsey.

“We welcome you, Monsieur Marillac. ’Tis pity we have become so slightly acquainted with you, in all these weeks you have been on our soil. Come closer, Monsieur, and let me see you.” I examined his face, his costume. He was stout and placid, that much could I determine. The sort of man with whom I could make no headway. Rather like assaulting one of my new fortifications near the Isle of Wight—I had designed them massive, round, impregnable, and entirely modern, that is, given over to gun-defence and cannon-strategy. No romance or chivalry about them. So, too, this Frenchman.

“How does my brother Francis?” I asked quickly.

“Not well, I fear,” he said. “He is stricken with the sorrow that has afflicted Your Majesty.”

Yes, I had received Francis’s “condolence”—a letter wherein he had intoned, “The lightness of women does not touch the honour of men.” I had not known whether to take it as commiseration or taunt. Whatever it betokened, I did not wish to discuss it with this stranger.

“Ummm.” I grunted. My head yet throbbed. When would the syrup take effect?

“When you left him, what were his instructions? Were you to woo me as his friend, or raise porcupine-like quills against me?” There, that would startle him, make him cough out the truth.

“I—that is, he—”
I had guessed correctly. The rough-spoken English way had unbalanced him.

“When I left France, he was distant toward you. However, that was prior to—Your Majesty’s misfortune—”

“Lies!” I leapt up from my throne and slammed my fist on the arm of it. “It was prior to his own lover’s quarrel with the Emperor!” I swung round, then, and glared at him. “Is that not right, knave?”

It was all theatrics. Chapuys would have laughed. This greenwood knitted his brows, then did exactly as I had hoped: he blurted out the truth. “There has been a chilling of relations, since the Emperor has failed to recognize—”

“Aha! Yes! The Emperor always ‘fails to recognize.’ He fails to recognize his nose at the end of his face, eh? Eh?”

Marillac drew back. “Your Majest—” I said casually, swinging round once more and sliding into my seat. “He knows he will have to do battle against me. Is he biding his time? Is that his game? Baiting me with foolishness like the money and support he sends the Scots, to incite them against me? Does he think I know not who prevented James from meeting me at York? Does he think I will forget the insult? Well? What does he think?”

Marillac stared back.

“Can you not speak for him? What sort of an ambassador are you, then? Have you no powers of representation? What, did you get no letters of instruction?”

He was pitiful. Not even worth sparring with. This was not sport, it was cruelty.

“Tell me this,” I finally said. “Is Francis in good health, or not?” I tried to make my tone gentle and disarming. “Indeed he is,” replied Marillac haughtily.

“Liar. I knew Francis was eaten up with the Great Pox, and it was beginning its deadly final assault on his mind.”

“I am grateful to you for being so truthful.” I smiled. “Francis is doubly blessed, then, in both his good health and his true representative. You may tell my brother of France that ...” I had had a glib remark ready, but what came out was, “I hope we meet again on the plains of Ardes. Yes, if he would be willing, I would come again to the Val d’Or. No fantasy-palaces this time, no tournaments, merely ... Francis, and myself. You will write him this?”

“Your Majesty.” The Frenchman bowed low.

That evening what he wrote was, “I have to do with the most dangerous and cruel man in the world.” The double-dealing Frenchman! (And how did I know this? I had made use of Cromwell’s legacy: his spies and secret police. They served me well. I would not have formed them myself, but as they already existed ... I had found them useful, and using them myself prevented others from using them against me.)

Spies. There had always been spies. Julius Caesar had his, so ‘tis said ... although they must have been singularly ineffective, since they failed to warn him of the coming assassination. Spies were necessary, I suppose, to run a state. But I disliked the idea, the very fact of their being required.

I preferred to believe I could read a man’s visage, could sum him up all by myself. I had realized the French ambassador lied. I did not truly need to have the contents of his letters espied, copied, and presented to me. It demeaned him and added nothing essential to my operating knowledge. But these new times required such machinations as a matter of course.

At four o’clock the Scots envoy was to pay me a call. I sat and pulled out the lengthy chronology I had myself constructed of all our relations, going back to my father’s negotiations with Je Scots steadfastly set their faces against us? We were their neighbours, we shared a common isle. Yet they preferred to ally themselves with France. When we fought France in 1513, they attacked us from the backside. When I sought a bride on the Continent, James V had entered the same contest and snatched Marie of Guise right from under my nose. And then there was the little matter of the York jilting.

“The Earl of Arbroath,” announced the page. I seated myself just in time for the jaunty Earl, who strode in as if he always came to see the King of England.

He was dressed in his formal Scots attire: yards and yards of swirling patterned wool, a dagger in his sock, a great overworked silver brooch holding a sash of some sort.

Daggers were not permitted in my presence, since the Duke of Buckingham’s attempt on my life. I nodded to my
Yeomen of the Guard, and they ceremoniously removed it.

“Do you truly represent Scotland, Robert Stuart?” I inquired. “Is there a Scotland to represent?” That was the true question.

“As much as it is in any man’s power to represent that glorious land, I do so.” His voice rang in the very mouldings of the ceiling.

“Then you have many questions to answer, questions that have caused me sleepless hours.” I motioned him closer. “What is that tartan you wear?” I asked. It was a rather pleasing interweaving of shades and designs. Unsophisticated, but pleasing. “I notice it has white in it. Does that have a special significance?” I was curious.

His great, fishlike mouth broke into a smile. “White is what we wear for dress occasions, woven into the rest of the cloth. It signifies that we will do no hard riding while wearing it. Riding would throw mud.”

How primitive! How simple! Dark colours for riding. A stripe of white meaning, “There will be no riding, everything will be indoors and clean, upon my word of honour.”

“Aye. I understand. Now, I would you answer me questions which are puzzling me about your master. The Scots King refused to meet with me in York, and I know not his mind. I have received no messages of any sort from him.”

“He was afeared of kidnapping.”

“Did he think me so little a man of my word?”

“Not from Your Majesty, but that others, antagonistic Scots who oppose him, they would take advantage of his absence.”

“Who exactly are these antagonistic Scots? I keep hearing their names invoked, like a charm. There are Lowland Scots and Highland Scots, and chieftains, and Lords of the Western Isles. What sort of country is this?”

“A divided, unhappy country, Your Majesty. The Highland Scots, as you call them, are great families that own certain tracts of land, and have done so since time out of mind. They reside in their little valleys and glens and seek primarily to be left alone. The Border Scots are another matter entirely. They are bandits and extortionists, betraying the English for the Scots, and vice versa, at the same time. Then, the Isles—ah, they are something yet again. They are part Norse, settled by the Norsemen, and don’t see themselves as part of any country. They live on those barren, cold rocks out in the Irish Sea, and claim to be Christian, yet ...” He spewed—I held MacDonald, son of the chieftain of the Isle of Rum. I might as well hold the wind hostage, from what this man said. “In such a topsy-turvy country, how came there to be an ambassador selected? What, and whom, does he represent?”

“I am a cousin of King James, albeit from the wrong side of the blanket. I believe I can speak for him. I know his mind.”

“But does he have a mind?” I barked. “And is it consistent? You knew his mind when you set forth from Edinburgh. Do you know it now?”

“I believe I do. I understand its workings.”

“Its turnings, you mean. Very well, then, how turns it in regard to me, his English brother, his uncle?”

“He wishes peace.”

I stifled a laugh. That outworn old phrase! One might as well say an Ave Maria, for all it meant in real terms. “I know a way to peace,” I declared. “Unite the countries. It is unnatural that one island should contain two realms. Let us combine. Through a marriage, at first. Then the two Parliaments would unite—”

“A marriage has been tried, Your Majesty. The Princess Margaret Tudor of England and King James IV of Scotland, in 1503.”

“It failed due to the persons involved. My sister Margaret was”—she was lust-ridden, shortsighted, unimaginative—“unequal to the high calling before her. She was but a child when she came to Scotland.” And was still a child, at fifty-three. “How does she?” I asked.

He looked dismayed. Margaret was an embarrassment. Betrayed by her lust, her impulses ... they were all played out now, and no one wanted her. She had many indifferent custodians. Even her son regarded her as a burden—like an old pet that soiled carpets and slept all the time in the sun, its owners just waiting for it to die.

“She is ... recuperating. At Methven Castle. She suffered a—a—something in her head.”

“What of her husband—her so-called husband—Lord Methven?” She had divorced Angus thirteen years ago to marry him, and now sought to divorce him to remarry Angus. The foolish, lustful woman!

“He ... remains behind, at Stirling.”

“The truth is, he has left her,” I said brusquely. “He has more important things to attend to than a dying, powerless old woman.” I snapped my fingers. The Scot’s attention had wandered.

“Your sister,” he demurred.

“Aye. My elder sister. Well, I was speaking of a marriage between Scotland and England, one that would do what my father’s experiment failed to do.”

“Your sister,” he insisted.
“What, am I supposed to mourn for her? I wrote her in 1528, the year of the Sweating Sickness, when first I heard of her folly in divorcing Angus to marry that fop, Methven. Did she heed me? No! Is it any surprise this has befallen her?” Margaret had been stupid. I hated stupidity. I could forgive any sin, any shortcoming, but that.

He blinked. “It is true, then, the way they paint you.”

“Then your master, the Pope, is a prime example of misdirection. For he has always tried to do both, and failed in both. His spiritual leadership was at such a low ebb that even common men repudiated it. His worldly leadership has been so misdirected that half the countries of Europe fight against him. Let him heed his alleged Master’s words himself!”

“His alleged Master’s?”

“He claims Christ for his master. Yet do we see Christ in him?”

“No man can see into another’s soul, Your Majesty.”

I had meant a smart retort. But he spoke true. I could not see into Pope Paul’s soul; he could not see into mine. “Only God can see,” I finally said. “And we must leave it at that.”

“Aye.” He bowed, then crossed himself. When he stood erect again, we faced each other in silence, as if the interview had just begun.

“The excommunication still stands?” I finally asked. Someone had to speak.

“Nine years late. I begged the Pope for one in 1533. My plea was ignored.”

“There is to be one now. In Mantua, outside the Emperor’s reach. It was an inspired idea to hold one, and surely the Holy Father will recognize your farsightedness. There is so much to be deliberated upon....”

“Yes, how to halt the slide of Europe into Protestantism! But it is too late.”

“You will be in a position to name your terms.” His voice was crisp and unemotional. “You are not rebellious in doctrine, only in title. A reconciliation between you and the Holy Father would be worth a great deal to him. He needs allies.”

“He has Francis, and Charles.” I deflected the thrust of this offer for offer it was. And, oh! I was tempted by it. To be recognized by Rome, to wear my hard-won titles by consent....

“Inconstant, fluctuating fools,” he sneered. “They are not the men you were, to stand firm amidst temptations from all sides. No, they are men of the hour, of the day....”

“Not men of the Light? I fear none of us can claim that title. Nay, nay ... if Rome and I embrace again, your master and I must agree on several things, none of which has been solved by need or the moment. I will not tolerate meddling, and your master will not tolerate insubordination, and therein we disagree, and disagree mightily. Tell him I’ll serve him, if he recognizes my sovereignty over all aspects of England.”

That he would never allow. Less I would never agree to. There it lay. The envoy bowed and took his leave.

Was it true that the two countries would never be united? I had always assumed that someday they would be. It seemed natural. In the back of my mind I had already married one of my children to one of James’s. But my father had followed the same scheme, and it had come to naught.

What constituted a country, then? That its inhabitants were of like natures? But the Normans and the Saxons were not of like natures. By that criterion they should have never melded to form England. The Celts—were they as unabsorbable as their spokesman made out? Would Wales never become truly a part of England? And what of the Irish? I meant eventually to absorb that island as well.

If ever I felt decent ... if this cursed leg would ever heal....

But did one wait to do things until one felt “decent”? Did one order one’s life upon a leg? Or did one go ahead anyway, regardless of his personal feelings?

My head-throbbing had returned, and along with it, confusion....

I hated the confusion, hated it worse than any pain I might endure. The confusion was my enemy, the real enemy. It unhorsed me like a challenger in a tournament....

But I would fight it. Or, at the very least, disguise it. None must know.

Now I would take myself to bed. I would call no groom, no servitor. They might sniff out my weakness, hear me
call for a candle when I meant for a fur.
Throughout the spring my remorse decreased and my confusion increased. The ghosts died away. No more did I hear the shrieking outside my chamber; no more food ran red blood and clots. Mercifully, my memory of Catherine, her true physical being, began to recede and fade. I was thankful that I had never commissioned the portrait to be made that I had longed for. Holbein—whom I had forgiven for his Cleves portrait when he explained it was customary to omit pockmarks—had been occupied at the time in executing sketches for a mural for my Privy Chamber, a dynastic one that included my father, myself, and my children. Now there was nothing remaining to recall Catherine’s exact features to me.

But I thought of her often. In some way I longed for her—for what she was, had been, to me. And hated myself for it.

All that was human, controllable. But the confusion, the transposing of events and order—I knew now it was not madness. Madness meant not knowing the real from the unreal. Was Wolsey dead, or was he not? No, that was not my affliction. Rather it lay in remembering whether I had put my hand on his shoulder at Grafton, the last time we had met? I hoped I had. But hoping was not the same as knowing.

It continued thus, all the months following the executions. I remember it as a time of continually fighting the adversary, my confusion. Boredom, loneliness, remorse—all these took second place to the urgent need to reestablish some control over my mind, although (pray God!) it was not readily apparent.

WILL:

I received word from Audley that the beast, in its cage, strapped to my best transport wagon, was due to arrive at the Tower on Thursday next. Along with the beast was a special sealed cylinder, from the Turk himself, for which he wished “all dignitaries” to be present for the opening and reading. The crocodile business was to be state business, then.

In the meantime, Master Quigley had been alerted. Consequently I received a request from him to have access to certain monastic manuscripts which the Crown had retained, so that he might peruse them to ascertain the crocodile’s feeding habits. I granted it, very impressed with him ... and pleased that I had retained as many monastic manuscripts as I had done. They would prove of great benefit to future Quigleys.

The beast awaited us. There, in its monstrous crate in the shadow of the Tower’s outer walls, it stood. I myself, and the Privy Council, were curious and eager to behold it, although they pretended to be merely performing their duty. I had invited Elizabeth and Edward along to see the spectacle; Mary proclaimed herself above “trips to the zoo.”

This was foolish of her. In faith, a trip to the zoo was a coveted experience, and one I rarely granted, upon Master Quigley’s advice that human visitors were unhealthful to the beasts.

As I have said, Father had had a zoo, a menagerie. He was attracted to beasts of all sorts, but only in a symbolic sense. A beast was not a creature in its own right, but only insofar as it stood for an abstract trait—honour, kingliness, or some such. He received presents from noblemen and rulers conforming to this fancy. When he died, the poor beasts almost all died with him, having outlived their dynastic symbolism.

Over the years, newcomers had joined the Royal Menagerie, out of happenstance and ill luck: a wounded wolf, a three-legged turtle, a blind snake. Thus the Royal Menagerie had gradually turned into an Animal Hospital, run by Rufus Quigley, where sick creatures recovered and became friends of man. Suleiman’s crocodile was the only ferocious, whole beast we had received in years.

Gathered round the ornate crate, we looked respectfully at Master Quigley. He had several muscular men grouped about him, all clad in leather suits (to withstand the crocodile’s teeth, so it was thought), holding nets and great prodding spears. From the crate there was only silence.

Standing close by me were those most eager to hear the words of Suleiman—my Privy Councillors, and others concerned with matters abroad. To put it neatly and quickly: there were those who thought action abroad was necessary sport, good for the character and morale; others believed that England should avoid all foreign
entanglements and devote herself to home matters, specifically the religious disension which was growing daily. I held the reins of both factions, keeping them both under control, but they snapped and snarled at each other with increasing fractiousness. As long as I was here to restrain them, all would go merrily. But Edward? What would he do, how could he manage these contentious men?

She turned away, embarrassed; and in truth, I sounded like a suitor. The only persons I wished to woo now were my children. No more women. I was done with them.

Others were listening. “If you wish to attend to the beast,” I finally said, “it could have no wiser or kinder nurse. Only I pray you, be careful—as once its strength returns, it will grow vicious. Never approach it alone, without Master Quigley.”

I turned to the gathered company. “Well, we have seen it now. Truly it is a formidable beast, but in need of nursing. Let us leave it.” I shielded my eyes against the ever-hotter sun. “’Tis no time to be out of doors in direct sun. Come—join me in the banqueting house at Hampton. We shall pass the summer afternoon as summer afternoons are meant to be passed.”

This impromptu gathering would be the first heartfelt social gesture I had made since Catherine’s ... since the winter. Hitherto I had gone through the motions, in hopes of feeling something; today I longed to luxuriate in the intensity of high summer. A long afternoon in the banqueting house—the banqueting house which had not been used for several summers—appealed to me, appealed with no thought of whether it was right, whether it would help me, or whether my physicians would recommend it. It appealed on its own terms.

The banqueting house in question crowned the manmade “mount” at the far end of the Hampton gardens. Anne had laid out all the plans the year Elizabeth was born, but as they were elaborate and called for a great deal of labour, the construction had required another year or so, and the growth of the plants even longer. Only now was it all as we had envisioned it, that summer so long ago, when I had thought Anne Boleyn would always be beside me, and the banqueting house would hear her ringing laughter....

Ghosts, ghosts. I wafted my hand before my face as if to clear the way of cobwebs. They blocked everything, everything, entangling me, dimming my vision of what lay ahead.

The mount, then: it was raised on a brick foundation, and then, atop that, the great sixty-foot mound of earth heaped there by workmen to make an artificial hill. It was now covered with a carpet of thick, fine grass, planted all over with fruit trees—cherry, apple, pear—and with myrtle, box, bay, and laurel cunningly clipped in topiary fashion to resemble beasts and other fancies. Scattered amongst these was a collection of rare sundials I had acquired from the monasteries, as well as gaily painted wooden beasts—dragons, lions, unicorns, greyhounds, griffins—holding shields and vanes for royal arms. The pathway up to the top wound gently round the mount and was planted with daisies, marigold, snapdragon, rosemary, camomile, and lavender. The gravelled path was only wide enough for three or four abreast, and so, as we climbed it, the party stretched out far behind me, like children trooping through the woods.

On top stood the summer banqueting house. It was built on a stone foundation, with wooden trelliswork sides; already, climbing vines and flowers entwined themselves on the inviting ladders, so that inside the house it was all greenish light, and the faint stirring of leaves, which served as a cool filter for the glaring sunlight. Here we would pass the afternoon, supping on strawberries and drinking Verney, a sweet white wine.

I had sent word back to court that some ladies should join us. The only ladies left at court were the wives of my councillors, and some who had official functions, and a few of Catherine’s leftover attendants.

No more could the Queen;
They sent for the wise men
From out of the East,
Who said it had horns,
But was not a beast.”

The King ... the Queen ... horns ... horned beast ... oh, how could he mock me so? Did no one respect or fear their King?

“I marvel at your scurvy wit!” I snapped. “And we shall have no more riddles!”

“’Twas an oak tree!” he blurted out, trying to absolve himself.

Oaks. They are my favourite trees. Oh, foul, foul! That day in the little chamber ... oaks would forever be ugly for me, soiled by the Howard whore.

“I think we all tire of riddles,” said Thomas Wyatt. “Let us turn to poetry instead. Shall we try a rhyming round? I will begin with a verse, then someone else shall add to it, until we have a complete story in verse.” He looked round, a great poet himself, but an equally great diplomat. I had sent him on many missions abroad.
I nodded assent. The mood had grown ugly; I hoped this would sweeten it. He began,

“Within this tower
There lives a flower
That hath my heart,“

Francis Bryan continued easily,

“Within the hour
She pissed foul sour
And let a fart.”

There were ladies present! Genuine, honest ladies like Joan Dudley, Joan Denny, Katherine Brandon, Anne Seymour—no unwholesomeness amongst them.

This was enough. I stood up slowly, and let the full force of my displeasure rest on him. “Be gone,” I said. “Come no more to my table. And look for no more favours at my hand.”

He knew enough not to argue, or attempt to excuse himself. He nodded and quit the bower.

Once his small-minded, obscene presence was gone, it was once more a fair summer’s day. We sang songs: “Death and Burial of Cock Robin”; “Mouse and Mouser”; “The Milk Maid”; “The Carrion Crow.”

“Bessy Bell and Mary Gray
They were two bonnie lasses,”

sang Elizabeth in a thin little voice. I had almost forgotten she was there, at the farthest end of the table.

“Bessy kept the garden gate,
And Mary kept the pantry;
Bessy always had to wait
While Mary lived in plenty.”

I was stunned. That Elizabeth would challenge me so publicly about her rights, accuse me before the entire court of withholding her due as a Princess. When all the world knew she was may keep your garden gate at Hatfield House,” I said softly, “by returning there by the morrow. I am grieved that you have not proved fit for the royal bowers at Hampton.”

No one else, up and down the long table, murmured a sound. It was only Elizabeth and myself, some fifty feet apart.

“May I take Robert?” she asked. “To take turns with me waiting upon the garden gate?”

I looked at young Robert Dudley, a comely lad, a blue ribbon tying up his pretty brown hair.

“No,” I said. “For that would make it play, not work.”

His face fell, but hers betrayed no sign of disappointment. So they meant something to one another. Good. Then not seeing each other would hurt.

“Very well,” she said. “I am saddened that I must miss tending to the crocodile. For exile from one’s source of life and those in sympathy is hard. Nonetheless I shall pray for his survival. May his thick hide and craftiness protect him from all evil-wishers.”

By God, she pushed me too far! She was no child; no, she was as political and dangerous as any Pretender of three times her years. As such, she was a danger to my Edward. “You are excused,” I said. “No further leave-taking is necessary.”

Yet my heart ached to see her go. Who can explain the human heart? Mary was my firstborn, my only child for so long, and nothing could ever alter that. Edward was the gift I had prayed for, so long withheld. Elizabeth? She was a disappointment from the first, she was naught, she was the wrong sex, from the wrong woman, and in the wrong order of birth. Nevertheless she was the most intriguing to me, and I could not fathom why. Perhaps because she was the only one of the three children not afraid of me. As indeed why should she be? She alone, perhaps, of all persons in the realm, was untouchable by my wrath. I could never execute her; I had already illegitimized her, but I would never disclaim her; in short, I had already done to her the worst of what I could do, and she knew that. And I knew that.

All the guests were looking intently at their strawberries. Domestic quarrels are always embarrassing when they spill over into public, but royal ones especially so. No rhyming or Rhenish could rescue this fading afternoon. Best
that it end now.
The summer dragged to its weary, wilted conclusion. By late August here were droughts in Warwickshire and
Northamptonshire, and certain priests wanted to form "Mary processions," as they had done in times past, imploring
the Virgin’s intercession. Should I forbid them or not? Were they Popish or not? Cranmer and I conferred and
reached the decision that a procession in Mary’s honour was permissible, while one in any saint’s name was not.
After all, Christ Himself had honoured Mary from the cross.

“And how is your Book of Common Prayer progressing?” I asked him. He had been working on it for so long.

“It progresses. It progresses. And your Primer?”

I had set my hand to composing prayers to be said in the vernacular—or, if the person felt more at home in it, in
Latin—and I would issue it with my own Imprima="3">“It is almost done,” I said. “I think next year it shall be
printed.”

Cranmer shook his head. “Your industry and speed are truly gifts. Ones that I envy.”

“As I envy yours, Thomas.” I spoke true. For his way with words and his purity of heart were rare things.

Others envied Cranmer, not only his gifts but his friendship with me. They sought to bring him down, out of sheer
spite and malice. Others saw him as a danger, a gangplank leading to rampant Protestantism. They thought if they
tossed that gangplank down into the sea, no radical would ever board the secure ship of England. But Cranmer, who
was so naive about the Original Sin in men’s natures (although he described it poetically in his Book of Common
Prayer), never thought to be on guard against his enemies, or even acknowledged that he had enemies.

“I have but one garden to tend, the Church. You have many. How can you oversee the coming war with the
French and write prayer books and education books at the selfsame time?”

He referred to my ABC’s as Set Forth by the King’s Majesty, a little reading-instruction book I had prepared.

I could not answer him honestly, for I knew not how I was able to think and attend to many things at once. Only
that one gave surcease to the other, and while I laboured on Englishmen’s prayers I did not think of how many tents
would be needed for a European campaign. “I know not,” I admitted. “But it is fortunate I can, else England would
need six kings.”

Six kings. A council of kings. That is what I was forced to consider, for Edward’s minority. My pang of fear with
Elizabeth had made me face the worry that had been lurking for some time: Would I live until 1555, when Edward
would be eighteen, the same age I had been when I became King? He was only five years old now. And Mary and
Elizabeth were tall, rooted plants that threatened my Edward. Mary was a grown woman and could yet be made
much of in Catholic circles, in spite of her formal capitulation to me. Elizabeth was clearly clever and winsome, and
might harbour secret ambitions for herself. Edward was not safe; no, he was not safe.

I must protect him, must make sure that, even in my absence, he could grow to maturity unmolested. There was
no denying that the “New Men,” the gentlemen of learning and service whom I had honoured and titled, leaned
toward Protestantism. Certainly Edward would have to understand the new ways, the New Learning, in order to deal
with those men. And so, with some misgivings but with resignation, I appointed Dr. Richard Cox and John Cheke—
Humanistic scholars—to be his tutors.

I also began secretly to draw up a list of those I would appoint as councillors to govern for and with Edward, until
he was a man. I knew already that I must leave no Lord Protector, such as Richard Plantagenet had been, for I knew
what fate Protectors dealt out to those they “protected.” My Council would be composed of equals. My will would
insist on that. My will ...

The idea of my not surviving another thirteen years was chilling to consider. I did not like it, did not care for the
queasy, weak sensation it aroused in me. I told myself that making these provisions was the prudent thing to do, that
it did not mean I was acquiescing in my own death. Young kings had died in battle, and I myself might yet venture
forth in battle—“hazard my person,” as they say....

Dare I confess it? I wished to take the field again3™vst Francis, to do again what I had done so long ago, but this
time do it as I wished, and not be balked and cheated of my spoils by a Ferdinand or a Maximilian. No, I was my
own master now, and I would return to that place which had hung, unresolved and insulting to me, for thirty years. I
would take the cities in Picardy I craved, add them to Calais, and expand the English holdings into a strip extending
along the Channel coast.

I confided this to no one. I would wait for things to roll that way, as roll they would. I enjoyed the power it gave
me, keeping my thoughts and plans to myself.

In the meantime, preparations for our chastisement of Scotland went ahead. That was no secret. We would wait
until their grain was gathered in, until their livestock was wintered, and then we would strike.

In August I had sent troops across the Border, and they had been beaten at Haddon Rig, near Berwick. Nearly six hundred prisoners had been taken, including the commander, Sir Robert Bowes. This was, I must confess, a surprise. The Scots were ever full of surprises. Every time one thought they were quiet, quiescent, beaten—they struck and stung, like an adder.

In retaliation I dispatched Norfolk to persecute them. It was the first communication I had had with him, the first assignment I had given him, since the disgrace of—I cannot write her name again—his niece. He, and his hothead son Henry, managed to burn the lowland towns of Kelso and Roxburgh and about thirty others. But it was an inconclusive, womanish reprisal. I was most displeased. I had given them orders to defeat the Scot, not pinch his toe or tweak his nose.

But Jamie, for his own reasons, took the burnings as a call to arms. His honour must be satisfied. He gathered an army, but the nobility would not fight willingly for a King who excluded them from his councils; the Border lords, barons like Argyll and Moray, were smarting from harsh treatment from the unstable, fickle Jamie; and the outcome was that his army refused to march farther south than Lauder, where it disbanded itself.

Another army must be raised, and the industrious Cardinal Beaton managed to gather a force of ten thousand men in only three weeks. Oh, the Cardinal, the Scots Cardinal! He had been commissioned by Pope Paul III to publish the Papal bull excommunicating me, in Scotland. How I despised him! Cardinals, I believe, were created by Rome expressly to torment me in this life.

This Cardinal’s army was to be led by Oliver Sinclair, King Jamie’s “favourite.” He loved him more than he had ever loved any woman, thereby incurring the disdain and derision of his subjects. The hated Sinclair was no soldier. At the edge of the Solway River, in southwest Scotland, Jamie suddenly decided to leave his troops, declaring that he would cross into England from Lachmaben, when the tide ebbed. So that Sinclair could have the battle to himself, and thereby acquit himself? Who knew what he was thinking?

Across the Solway I had three thousand Englishmen, hastily drawn up under the command of the Deputy Warden of the Marches, Sir Wharton. Although outnumbered, Sir Wharton led boldly and scattered the Scots, driving them into the bog, where his men killed them with spear and sword, or left them to be sucked into the muck or drowned in the river. Twelve hundred were captured, including Oliver Sinclair. The Borderers—who had largely composed the Scots force—took a perverted pleasure in punishing their King by surrendering to us with God still a greater one reserved for us. When he heard of the defeat, King Jamie wilted and died. “Fie, fled Oliver?” he said. “Is Oliver taken? All is lost!”

He drooped at Falkland Palace whence he had crawled in abject defeat. His wife was in her last days of pregnancy, but that held out no hope for him. His other sons had died, and any child born at this hour would be foredoomed.

It was a girl, in any case. When he heard of her birth, he said, “Is it even so? The Stuarts began with a lass, and they shall end with a lass.” Then he turned his face to the wall, and said, “The de’il take it. The de’il take it,” and died. Jamie was thirty-one years old. He left a week-old baby girl, christened Mary, called Queen of Scots, as his heir.
What a windfall! What extraordinary fortune! I could scarce credit it, other than that at long last I enjoyed God’s favour and basked in His rewards!

Scotland was mine, and for the price of a border skirmish! Sir Wharton and his three thousand men, with no elaborate war machinery, no field provisions, had delivered Scotland squarely into my hands, as if by divine edict.

I was suzerain of Scotland. I was grand-uncle of its infant Queen. I would marry her to my Edward. It was perfect; it was all part of a Divine Plan, I could see it now. Before, it had all been masked in murkiness, and I had floundered like a man in a mist, but still trying to discern the will of God, still trying to follow it when I received no external sighting, relying only on the steerings of my conscience. Now I had my reward, now all the mists were cleared away, and I had steered true. I found myself in a marvellous place.

Scotland and England would be one. Edward would be Emperor of Great Britain: ruler of Scotland, Ireland, Wales, and England. I, who as a child had had to take refuge in the Tower against a rebellion by Cornishmen—I would leave my son a throne that incorporated three other realms. In one generation the Tudors had gone from local kings to emperors. Because of me.

Scotland was mine! Scotland was mine! I would be a kind and gentle husband to her, as I had been to all my wives. I would honour her and treat her with respect. No mistreatment of the prisoners of war, and no (public) gloating over King Jamie’s death. Instead, I gave the Protestant-leaning Border noblemen we had taken as prisoners instructions to “woo” the Lowland and Highland Scots upon their release, to convince them their future lay with England. They were to return to Edinburgh and act as our agents there.

As for the infant Queen: I issued an order (as her uncle and guardian) that we would draw up a treaty at Greenwich, arranging for her marriage to Edward.

Things always come round a second time; history never exactly repeats herself, but sets up the pieces of the game the same way. In 1286, the Scottish King Alexander had died, leaving his six-year-old granddaughter, “the Maid of Norway,” as his heir. King Edward I of England, who already claimed overlordship of Scotland, immediately moved to have the Maid Margaret betrothed to his son Edward. But the girl had died travelling between Norway and Scotland, and thus the peaceful and natural union of the two countries was averted. But this time there would be no death, this time all “would go merri steerrievances against the King of France, and my tentative battle strategy are all outlined within this document.” I handed him a tightly rolled parchment, which I had written myself, past midnight, and which no man had read or witnessed—nay, not even Will. “I have sealed it well, on both ends, and secured the outer case. Tell Charles to ascertain that the seals are unbroken. I know that you will guard it well en route, and no spies will glimpse its contents.”

“Cromwell is dead, Your Majesty,” Chapuys’s dry little voice said. In old age he resembled a scorpion: brittle, desiccated, but still dangerous.

Pity. I could have used Cromwell now; if not the scoundrel himself, at least his methods. Under my direction, Cromwell’s leftover spies were quite slipshod and inefficient. I lacked their master’s diabolical genius. “Aye. And so letters are safe again.” I laughed.

“Is this farewell?” he asked, quite simply.

“Possibly,” I said. The Emperor might decide not to send him back to England. It was likely a new ambassador would return with Charles’s reply, while Chapuys would be pensioned off to spend his latter days near the Mediterranean, soaking up the sun like a lizard. “I shall miss seeing you, my friend.” Farewells hurt, always more than one expected. I hated them.

“Have you considered what we spoke of, regarding the Princess Mary?”

I did not correct him to “Lady.” He had earned the right to call her Princess. “Yes. I had made negotiations with the French, to marry her to Francis’s second son. Now—” I twisted my belt, wishing to rend it, as if that would cure my rage. “Now that selfsame son is to marry Mary, Queen of Scots. You see how they betray me. And my Mary is left once again husbandless, unwanted—”

“A Frenchman was unworthy of her,” said Chapuys. “But it was loving of you to attempt to arrange it. Perhaps someone from the Spanish royal house ... even someone younger ...”

“Or one of His Holiness’s illegitimate sons?” I could not resist needling Chapuys. “A good Pope-Catholic, by necessity!”

“Why not? An illegitimate King’s daughter for an illegitimate prelate’s son?” He returned the parry. But our fencing was mellow, affectionate, as only long-standing adversaries can grow to be. Jesu, I would miss him!
“Yes. That would do. And as part of the marriage settlement, the Bishop of Rome would recognize my title as Supreme Head of the Church of England.”

“You dream,” said Chapuys.

“A man should dream, and a King must do so,” I insisted. “And such may yet come to pass. Odder things have done so. Nay, I have not given up hope that someday the Pope and I…” I left the sentence vague, unfinished. Unspecified wishes came true sooner than detailed ones.

“May I take a private leave of Mary?”

“Indeed,” I said. “She would be grieved if you did not.”

Chapuys, gone from England. Another bridge to the past down. Sooner or later, if one snoozed to Van der Delft.

“Let us continue our interview out of doors, in the Privy Orchard.” To Holbein I said, “You are free to do whatever you like.”

While the Imperial ambassador and I strolled beneath the blossoming cherry, apple, and pear trees, caressed by sticky-sweet breezes from the south, Holbein went to his apartments, lay down on his narrow bed, and died of plague.

Plague! The word itself was a call to fear, but in striking Holbein, it had announced its grinning presence within the heart of the palace itself. And Edward was at Whitehall! I had brought him here to spend the summer, so that he could observe court life and feel at home in a grand palace. Edward had been sketched by Holbein, had seated himself within a few feet of him, just seven days before his death!

I must get Edward safely away, and then flee myself. But where would be the safest place? Already, reports were coming in of the severity of the outbreak in London. Corpse-piles were starting to mount in the cross-streets. No one wanted to touch the bodies, let alone bury them. At Houndsditch, near the gun-foundry, someone doused the pile with hot oil and then set a torch to it. They shovelled dirt over the smoking, greasy ashes, making a gruesome little hill.

The plague was prevalent in the Southeast, all through the villages of Maidstone, Wrotham, West Malling, and Ashford, and at Dover. As yet there were no reports of any sickness to the west. I would send Mary west to Woodstock. I would also go west, with Edward, back to Wiltshire, to Wolf Hall.

The Seymour brothers would come; as Edward’s uncles, it was fitting. The rest of the court must scatter, and the Privy Council function as a unit only by means of messengers.

I called together the Council and explained briefly what we must do.

“The plague rages,” I said, “and we must flee. No bravery; I want no bravery. Wolsey showed ‘bravery’ and stayed working in London, until eighteen of his staff died. You are too precious to me for that. I therefore command you to leave London within forty-eight hours. Take as few with you as possible. The plague travels with people, we know not how. If anyone in your household is stricken, move immediately.”

They all looked back at me, seemingly healthy. As Holbein had been, when he perched Father’s wax death-mask on a stool, just scant days ago….

“Since we must now part, to reunite in autumn, God willing, I must open all my mind to you,” I told them. “We prepare for a war with France. The Emperor has already declared war on Francis, and it is our intention to join him, taking the field in person.”

At this bold pronouncement, the French-leaning members, such as Edward Seymour and John Dudley, looked unhappy. The non-fighters, like Wriothesley, Paget, and Gardiner, likewise had clouded countenances. But since Seymour and Dudley were essentially soldiers and wanted war, and Paget and Gardiner were Imperialists, there was something for them in the Continental venture regardless.

“At this moment the negotiations are tangled, but only over diplomatic style. England will war against France and solve the Scots problem once and for all. Their insubordination has grown intolerable. I wthert> Norfolk and Suffolk looked resigned, but tired. They were old. A Continental army meant that they must lead it. Of course, Norfolk had his flamboyant son to assist him. Suffolk had no one, his son having died betimes.

“I myself am bound for Wiltshire, with my son. I will stay at Wolf Hall.”

If Edward Seymour was annoyed by my commandeering of his ancestral seat, he did not show it. He merely sat
calmly and nodded, as if he had known it all along.

“I will have at my command a group of trusted messengers, with the best horses from the royal stables. I expect to conduct the business of the realm as well as humanly possible, and I will speed all things to you for your consideration. In the meantime, I pray God will keep us and spare our lives.”

One and all, we crossed ourselves.

*Let it not be me*, each of us prayed. *Spare me.*
Would I go alone to Wolf Hall? I would have preferred it; but as King it was necessary that I have a few reliable others to accompany me, preferably including a Seymour, as I was going to their home. Edward Seymour I could not ask after all, I had realized that. He was too important to the realm; better he should go into seclusion at some other place and preserve his life, if our party were stricken. Thomas—now there was company, there was amusement ... but at bottom he was a man so empty of matter that he had never held a position of importance, and hence would be no loss to England should he succumb to the plague along with myself.

Is there any worse verdict that can be passed on a human life? He is expendable. His death would make no difference. I shuddered in even thinking it, as it seemed to be a curse. I liked Tom Seymour, I had not meant it ill.... But the truth was, his presence was not essential to any activity or person.

There needed to be a woman, a woman’s influence during this exile. A soft woman, a kind woman, a woman concerned with Edward, who could further his studies, as I was not keen on bringing tutors along. The widow Latimer, Kate Parr—was she still at court? I had been remiss in disbanding all the remnants of Catherine’s household. As I had no intention of marrying again, I knew that once Catherine’s ladies had left, there would be no more women at court. Not that I cared. But my attendants, my Council, my musicians—they cared. A monastic court would not appeal, would not draw the finest minds. So I lingered and delayed, keeping a posthumous court for a dead Queen.

The Lady Latimer was still at court, although she had already submitted a request to be allowed to return to Snape Hall, her late husband’s estate in Yorkshire, to take care of her three stepchildren. I sent for her.

She appeared promptly, and when I made what I assumed would be a startling request, she made a startling answer.

“I prefer to go straightway to my own home,” she stated. “My lands, my servants, my Lord Latimer’s children—they will need me there, with all the confusion—”

God’s blood! Did she not understand? There was death about, not “confusion.” The plague was not something that needed a competent administrator to direct it. Furthermore, my request was not a “request.” A royal request is an order.

“Madam, ... for a little while. Flies were thick on the lower portion of the heap, making an obscene humming noise, writhing in iridescent waves over their feed. On top of all, like an offering, lay a naked maiden, pale and lovely, her golden hair serving as a funeral pall. Even as we passed, death-defying scavengers climbed on the human pile, searching for jewellery.

Outside the city gate, men were digging trenches. The dead would be thrown in, up to the top, and some little dirt shoveled over them. The men who dared to handle the corpses often followed them within a few hours. As I saw and smelled their sweat, I knew these were braver than any of King Arthur’s knights. What Galahad would have fled before, and Lancelot would have avoided altogether, these men faced unflinchingly.

Suddenly I realized that I knew not what had become of Holbein’s body. Had it been properly attended to? Surely so!

WILL:

No. Holbein was consigned to just such a trench-interment, where he decayed cheek-by-jowl with a tavernkeeper or a wet-nurse, and their dust is now mingled.

The plague brought about moral dislocations in every aspect of life. Neighbourliness evaporated, as everyone fled from the sick and refused to touch them, leaving only extortionists, whose greed exceeded their fear, to tend the dying.

The plague, and fear of it, reduced people to such terror that they forgot themselves and let their true natures reign. The Seven Deadly Sins stood revealed, glaring and gigantic, in every man, woman, and child.

Pride? There were groups who withdrew from the plague-ridden people around them and, shutting themselves off completely, thought themselves safe if they embraced “moderation” and “tranquillity.” They ate the most delicate viands and drank the finest wines, listened to sweet music, and admitted no one to their quarters, although neighbours were beating on their doors, begging for help. Not only did they refuse entrance to other people, they...
even refused any news of what was happening beyond their immediate quarters, in London or the realm itself.

Pride wears many hats: another is bravado, as when Charles, Duc D’Orleans, Francis’s favourite son (for the plague raged in France as well) rushed into a plague-stricken house and punctured the feather mattresses with his sword, shouting, “Never yet has a son of France died of plague,” and died of plague on schedule three days later. Then there was the pride of not fleeing, of standing at one’s post stalwartly, as Wolsey had done.

Avarice bared its face boldly, with all fear of reprisal and castigation gone. The scavengers, as Hal described, picking over the bloated victims; the extortionistic rates charged for the simplest services; the “pickmen” who appeared, like ghouls, to charge for carrying biers to a burial place, all “respectable” people having fled. Avarice propelled men forward to grasp at positions and possessions abandoned by their rightful owners.

Envy and anger joined hands in letting inferiors wear their masters’ clothes and exercise their masters’ offices, like evil children let loose to romp in cultivated fields. The anger of the underlings expressed itself in the glee they took in tossing their masters into unmarked graves or in leaving them to decay in public view: the ultimate shame and degradation. Squire Holmes, who had once worn los erstwhile servants.

Gluttony, even in this poisonous time, managed to find a niche for itself. Since one might be dead tomorrow, should not one die with a surfeit in one’s belly, one’s lips still sticky with spiced wine? There were those who declared that they would as lief die of overindulgence as plague and, in fact, thought they would cheat the plague thereby. So they caroused, eating and drinking continuously, feasting on dead men’s stores, going from house to house scavenging, not for gold, but for meat and drink. They passed their last days in an oblivion of wine and pastries.

Others, of course, embraced lust as their answer to plague, preferring to die by an onslaught of Venus. They made their impending release from the moral code their excuse for violating it. They abandoned themselves to licentiousness, setting up orgy-rooms in death-emptied houses, where they indulged in every Roman and French vice known to man. Even respectable women were pawns of lust-inflamed men who came to “minister” to them as they lay incoherent and weak with plague. They were “examined” and exposed and then sported with ... and left to die.

The law foundered. Lawyers and priests were dying along with those they served, and there were few to administer the law or the Sacraments. Whenever a lone remaining priest appeared to perform a funeral, he would find many other biers falling in behind the original one, as people watched eagerly for any sign of a legitimate funeral, and attached themselves to it. So few remained to enforce civil or sacred law that no one had a mind to observe it, and so there was, in effect, almost no authority at all.

Sloth—that slouching, lurking sin that underlies so many of the others—came into its own, as people declined to tend even to that which they could, such as clearing the streets, removing piles of offal, or gathering in the harvest. They were on a grotesque holiday.

The plague was enough to make a moralist out of me, if not a true Christian. For man’s true nature was so ugly, so heinous, that any system, no matter how odious, that modified its evil was to be sought and embraced. At least until the plague abated.

HENRY VIII:

I had neglected Holbein. I had not cared for his mortal remains, and in so doing, I had behaved as barbarously as any fear-crazed apprentice. The plague had made a Heathen of me—I, the Supreme Head of the Church in England. I prayed as I passed the corpse-pile, _Grant them eternal peace._

Then, _God forgive me for my failings, my lacks, my blindness._

The more I knew, the more I understood, so it seemed, but thereby my sins multiplied.

Once outside the city walls, the dwellings grew farther apart. But if I thought that the plague was incapable of leaping separated households, I was wrong. Workers had died right in the fields, and their families in their farmsteads had succumbed at the same time. Livestock of all sorts—cows, pigs, sheep, goats—wandered the roads, starving and dazed. Dogs ran loose, reverting to beasts of prey, crouching and growling as we passed. Everywhere the fields were untended, the crops growing as best they could, but with no one to gather them in. Country gluttony manifested itself in people snat beasts16; these hands are destined for orbs and sceptres, not distaffs and spindles.' ”
Perhaps what starts out as a retort, a dream, turns into a drive, takes on a reality of its own. Is that not another cousin to destiny?

“Everyone dreams of becoming royal, even the maids and chimney-sweeps. ’Tis a common fantasy,” was my answer.

“When is it to be?” Will indeed sounded tired, whereas I was filled with energy.

“When the plague abates and we return to London,” I said. “No, I shall not find a lone country priest and go secretly to him ... although it would be romantic,” I added. A small parish church ... nuptials in the early summer morning, a walk through the fields, picking wildflowers.... “But it is important that this be no hole-and-corner affair. Gardiner or Cranmer must officiate. Pray God they are safe. I have not had word in five days from those in Suffolk. Edward Seymour and Paget, they are well in Gloucestershire, as of two days ago.... Nay, I want them all present.”

But the cool secret chapel, the procession through the fields ... forbidden to me, no need to dwell on it.

“Well, I wish you joy,” Will said. “You have had little enough in your weddings.”
The table was laid in the courtyard, the long wooden one about which we gathered every noon, set up under the spreading hazel tree, as there was no shade from the long wings of the house at this time of day. Jugs of wine were set out on the table, and bunches of flowers, freshly gathered by Dr. Butts, Edward, and Kate.

We all seated ourselves and waited for the cooks to bring out today’s fare. I would make the announcement in a moment.

I looked at Kate, seated as always next to Edward. I tried to catch her gaze, but she did not look at me. Rather she looked only at Edward.

The cooks brought out the first course, spring lamb and larks, prepared with scallions and chervil.

After everyone’s plate was filled, I took the jug of red wine, thin and sour, but sweetened with honey, and filled my cup. “Fill yours, all,” I ordered. When that was done, I took a sip and then raised my cup, “I wish to share with you my great joy this day. England is to have a Queen, and I a wife.” I looked at Kate, inclined my head toward her.

“Look at me, woman!” I ordered her silently, as she continued to study her plate.

“It is our sweet, kind Lady Latimer who will become my wife, and your Queen.”

Still she kept her eyes down.

“A modest Queen!” I jested, reaching my cup over to her and touching her vessel with mine. The clink made her look up.

The company broke into smiles. Kate smiled too, shyly.

“The King has honoured me greatly,” she said softly. “I pray that I may ever be a good, kind, loyal, and true wife to His Majesty.”

“Nay, you make it sound like a funeral, Lady Latimer,” said Tom Seymour. He was sitting at the foot of the table, his accustomed place. He grinned, his elbows on the table, the great sleeves of his whing.” I said, “they leave us alone to do as lovers do.” It seemed humourous, as we did not do what lovers do. I patted my basket. “How we shall disappoint them when we return with our baskets overflowing!”

She turned and gave me a smile, but a sad one. As if to say, What a pity. All about us nature was rampantly growing, reproducing, making an abundance of new green stalks, weeds, creepers, and climbers. And here we were in their midst, sterile and restricted.

But it was my time of life. I was autumn now, late autumn. In autumn all these fields and forests would be like me, we would be at one in our cycle. Now November passing through June fields was an outrage, an insult; then we would blend together and I would belong, where today I was but a visitor, a foreigner.

We found the strawberries, mixed in with weeds and self-sown rye. Picking them out was a job, a job I disliked. Bending over was so difficult for me that I was forced to kneel down; but that was also difficult, because the pressure on my weak leg caused it to start throbbing. Disturbing it in any way meant possibly causing it to revert to its festering stage. At length I devised a sort of half-kneeling position to use.

We picked, silently. In truth I had no extra strength to carry on a conversation while bent down in an uncomfortable position. The sun on my hat was rapidly making me overheat, but—last vestige of vanity!—I could never remove it and reveal my baldness.

Sweat began popping out all over my face; then gathered in little streams, running down the troughs and wrinkles of my skin. The red strawberries gleamed and shimmered before my eyes, pulsating like stars. Then everything swirled, and I fell into the patch of meadow, face downward. I felt a strawberry crush against my cheek, and its sweet yielded juice was overwhelming in my nostrils.

I looked up at Kate’s face. I was lying on my back in her lap, and she was fanning me with my hat. My hat ... then she had seen my baldness! Oh, the shame of it!

“The sun made me grow dizzy,” I murmured. I was so humiliated, so mortified, that I hated her for seeing this. I would never marry her now. I could not have a wife who looked down upon my weakness, who considered herself superior to me. My legs were forked out. I lay like a helpless frog in her sight.

I sat up, retrieved the hat, clapped it on my head. I must leave this site, her presence, her shaming presence. I struggled to my feet, pushing away her “helping” hands. Her mocking hands, more like!

“Edward does the same,” she said, in a natural voice. “He overheats in direct sunlight. It must be the Tudor complexion, for I believe Elizabeth avoids the sun for that reason. Although her white skin is her pride, I know.”

I felt a rush of relief. My pride had been spared. But no, this would not do. “Kate,” I said, “you have seen, now, what I would have kept from you at all costs. I am not what I was. The truth is, the sun has never bothered me.
before. The truth is, I have many infirmities. My leg periodically goes on a rampage, crippling me. I have had
trouble, of late, with my bladder ... and with raging headaches that leave me spent and weak. And with sick fancies,
with shapes that come and talk to me, that stand in corners and run down corridors, shrieking. I am an old, sick
man.” There, I had said it. Now I would dismiss her, release her from the betrothal, on the
understandomwmunication from his master. It seemed that Charles had had a successful campaign already, and had
scored some notable triumphs in Luxembourg and Navarre. He looked to continue the war on the northern front, but
would pass the coming fortnight at Landrecies, directing the siege there. If I wished to enter the campaign after that
date ... ?
“No, no,” I said. “It is too late in the season, and we cannot ready an army now, with midsummer already past.”
Not to mention the plague. “Next season, next season, we shall join him. How long does he plan to campaign?”
“Not past September,” Van der Delft replied. “He has family business then—a wedding.”
“Ah.” I smiled. “I also. I have my own wedding.”
The ambassador grinned. “Your own, Your Majesty?”
“Aye. Ah, ah, do not mock me, sir”—I began laughing, as I could see his surprise and unasked questions
—“although I know ‘tis a temptation.”
“I wish you happiness,” he said simply.
“I do truly seek it,” I answered.
“Then you shall find it.” He looked straight into my eyes. I liked him; he seemed honest. We would not spar and
parry, as I had done with Chapuys, but that was well enough.
“I pray so. I shall wed the widow Latimer, as soon as all is set in order. Now, though, as to this war business—
Charles and I have settled satisfactorily the title confusion, as being addressed as ‘Defender of the Faith, etc.’ will
content me. I lack but the proper means—in winds and moneys—to come to France before spring. But I shall do so,
and in person. You may tell your master that I will lead my soldiers myself, as I did in the glorious campaign of
1513—the Golden War!”
My God, I grew excited just thinking of it! Oh, my blood stirred! To wear armour again, to camp again, to hold
war council meetings in the field-tent ... how sweetly it beckoned!

As soon as he returned to London, I spoke to Bishop Gardiner about my intention to wed Kate Parr.
“wish you to marry us,” I said.
“Not Cranmer?” His tone was distant, judging. Yes, Gardiner was jealous of Cranmer, jealous of his closeness to
me and his privilege in sharing so much of my life.
“No. It must be someone whose orthodoxy is beyond question, as Lady Latimer is suspected—unjustly, of course
—of leaning toward the Reformers. Your performing the ceremony will silence those tongues.”
“Will it, Your Grace?” Still he appeared aloof, cool, uncommitted.
“As best they can be,” I retorted. “Nothing ever silences tongues altogether.”
“Are you so very sure she is not a Reformer?” Each word was measured out and flung at me.
“Because her foolish friend Anne Askew goes about preaching? Each person is responsible for his or her own
soul. Wto me aave to nurse me—“and, forsaking all other, keep thee only unto him, so long as ye both shall live?”
“I will.” Her voice was faint. Had something given her pause? The “sickness”? The “forsaking all other”? For she
was young....
“Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?” He looked round at the company, smiled his thin February
smile, and said, “I do.”
Then, taking our right hands together, he directed me to say:
“I, Henry, take thee, Katherine, to be my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for
worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part, according to
God’s holy ordinance: and thereto I plight thee my troth.”
Marriage promises. They took in both sides of life: no sooner did they say “better” than they said “worse,” no
sooner “richer” than a quicker “poorer.” In the midst of our greatest happiness they were worded to remind us of
woe, and bound us to include wretchedness in with our rejoicings.
Kate then repeated the same vows.
Gardiner took from me the ring I had for her, plain gold, with no engraving at all. I put it on her finger, her cool
slender finger. “With this ring I thee wed,” I said, “with my body I thee worship, and with all my worldly goods I
thee endow. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, amen.” There. It was done. How differently I would fulfill these vows than I had with my previous wife.

“Kneel,” said Gardiner, and we did so, upon the blue velvet cushions laid before us. “O eternal God, Creator and Preserver of all mankind. Giver of all spiritual grace, the Author of everlasting life: send Thy blessing upon these Thy servants, this man and this woman, whom we bless in Thy name: that, as Isaac and Rebecca lived faithfully together, so these persons may surely perform and keep the vow and covenant betwixt them made, and may ever remain in perfect love and peace together, and live according to Thy laws: through Jesus Christ Our Lord, amen.”

“Amen,” murmured the people.

“Forasmuch as King Henry and Katherine Parr have consented together in holy wedlock,” said Gardiner, addressing the whole company, his voice rising, “and have witnessed the same before God and this company, and have declared the same by giving and receiving of a ring, and by joining of hands: I pronounce that they be man and wife together.”

He raised his hands over our heads. “God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Ghost, bless, preserve, and keep you: the Lord mercifully with His favour look upon you: and so fill you with all spiritual benediction and grace, that ye may so live together in this life, that in the world to come ye may have life everlasting. Amen.”

We rose, man and wife. The gathered company broke into movement, embracing, swaying together, laughing. We turned to them and accepted their good wishes, joined them in celebrating.

Mary, the bridesmaid, came to us and threw her arms around us both. She kept her eyes averted, but I spied tears spilling down her cheeks. She had known Kate for a long time, ever since Kate first came to London with...
council, began plotting for revenge. The form that revenge would take was a Franco-Scottish invasion. The plans were (my spies were able to ascertain this much) for France to send a force to Scotland via the northwest and another just to the Border in the east. Released from bothering with Charles, the rest of the French forces could attack England from the heast by sea. Francis could raise an immense fleet if he so desired, and since the prevailing winds were from the south across the Channel, he could effect a landing in almost any season.

I was half sick with worry about these things, when Gardiner insisted on a special audience with me to raise alarmist concerns about the growth of the Protestant faction in our midst.

“In your absence this summer they have grown like pestilent weeds,” he said. “But unlike weeds, the frost does not kill them. Nay, they hibernate in winter, meeting secretly in one another’s homes, spreading their sedition, infecting others with it.”

I was weary of this, weary of having to stamp out things, prune the kingdom, control sedition. Ungrateful, malicious dogs! There were always such, prowling and sniffing about the kingdom, lifting their legs and pissing on the rest.

“Let them but show their faces, I’ll cut them off,” I promised.

The Great Turk continued to correspond with me, for mysterious reasons of his own. He inquired after the crocodile—which was miraculously thriving, having been quartered near the hot springs in Bath, in the southwest part of the country—and offered to send me eunuchs for my court. He himself, he wrote, was luxuriating in winter retreat in Constantinople. How did we ever endure those northern winters, he asked? One January in Vienna had been enough for him. He sent me a Koran. A month later another long, chatty letter arrived. Suleiman was a friendly fellow.

I must confess I enjoyed his communications. They took me far away to a confusing but perfumed land, made me forget the chill-induced misery I grappled with daily in the palace.
That I was miserable that winter, I readily record. Only Kate served as a comforter, and I thanked God every day that I had had the grace to make her my wife. For she was a source of grace to me. She was a quiet spot to which I could always return, who was never sharp or cross or unable to give.

The children revered her as well, and she brought out the very best in them. They were gathered together in the palace under her tutelage, and I felt, at last, that we were a family. Kate, mother of none of them, and “wife” (in the carnal sense) of no one, yet made us a family. That was her special grace.

Spring, 1545. The French invasion was even now being equipped, and it would certainly come before Midsummer’s Day. To ready our coastal defence system, which stretched from Deal to Pendennis, guarding our entire southern flank, I had to extract more money, in the form of loans and taxes, from the people. I expected them to grumble and resist, but they did not.

WILL:

Hal’s enemies expected them to rebel, and were sorely disappointed. The theory went like this: the English people were brutalized by a bloodthirsty, rapacious monarch who denied them the religion they desired (Catholic or Protestant, depending on the speaker); made them sign oaths which they detested; repressed them and robbed them. They but awaited the opportunity to rise up and free themselves from his oppressive yoke. gner, and the Scots traitors. King Hal was right in fighting them, and they would join him in sacrificing to protect their country. Had not the King gone in person to fight? Had he not spent the winter inspecting and fortifying his southern coastal defences? Did he not intend to captain a warship against the Frenchies? Could his countrymen offer less? Gold, jewels, coin, even touching personal possessions like crosses from Jerusalem, ivory combs, and wedding rings arrived every day at Whitehall. Far from revolting against the “tyrant,” the people supported him in his hour of extremity.

HENRY VIII:

I stood prepared for war, to the best of my ability. In the south of England, I had almost a hundred thousand men in arms, divided under three commands: one in Kent under the Duke of Suffolk; one in Essex under the Duke of Norfolk; and one in the west under the Earl of Arundel. My fleet of over one hundred ships lay anchored near the Solent.

In the North, against Scotland, Edward Seymour commanded an army poised right beside the Borders. And standing offshore, the Lord Admiral John Dudley was at sea with twelve thousand men, waiting to grapple with the enemy.

At Boulogne, which the French had vowed to recapture, I had put Henry Howard in charge, to fill the position vacated by Brandon. I prayed that when the time came, his valour would not melt into hotheadedness and bravado.
July 18. It was just after the second anniversary of my marriage, and I had prepared a special celebration for Kate. We would dine aboard Great Harry, my flagship, which was waiting in the Solent, that channel between the Isle of Wight and Portsmouth, on our south coast.

Great Harry had gone through many refurbishings and refittings since her launching in 1514. At the time she was built, navies were but “armies at sea” ... floating platforms carrying soldiers to grapple with enemy soldiers at sea. But now ships were converted into fortresses, stocked with rows of cannon, and the job of sailors was not to engage in hand-to-hand combat with enemy sailors, but to man the killer guns and destroy entire ships. Great Harry, although a bit clumsy and old-fashioned in her overall design, had adapted herself well to the renovations, which pleased me. I did not wish to scrap her, as others had urged. Her sister ship, Mary Rose, had likewise made the transition and was ready to do battle, as soon as the French were sighted. Our information was that Francis had bade his fleet of two hundred thirty-five ships adieu near Rouen some days ago.

Two hundred thirty-five ships ... and we but one hundred. Truly, the hour of testing had come. Nonetheless I was proud of my forces, proud of my fleet, in a way one can be only when one has offered one’s best. We had poured every sacrifice into our defence and readiness for war; we had stinted nothing. Now God would have to make up the rest.

Lamps were being lighted in the July twilight when Kate and I arrived at the pier to board Great Harry. Kate had dressed in what she laughingly described as her most nautical costume, and I was touched by her efforts to join in the spirit of the occasion.

Stepping on board, I felt a great surge of near-carnal love for my flagship. The smell of the linseed oil which had been used to rub down the seasoned wood; the almost voluptuous creaking of rigging and hemp ropes; the stirrings and rustlings of the bleached linen sails, gathered tidily in their bindings: what a ship was she! She and I had grown and changed together, and in her I felt a summary of myself....

“Your Grace.” The captain, Viscount Lisle, Lord Dudley, bowed to us. I acknowledged him. But for this moment I did not wish to speak of common things. The sky was half on fire with the reflection of the setting sun. I went to the rail and looked out to sea, where the waters were flat and untroubled, and there was no wind. At this moment England seemed inviolate, protected by all the elements.

Kate stood beside me. The calm I felt in my person, a sort of afterglow like the departed sun, was crowned in her presence.

“Your Majesties!” A raucous voice sounded behind us. I turned to see Tom Seymour, bending one knee, his plumed hat held at an angle. His uncovered hair glowed, reflecting the red sky.

“Thomas.” I held out my hand, indicating that he should rise. “We are pleased that you could join us.” I used the royal we. The truth was that I never consulted Kate about these things. She was usually amenable to guests; therefore I was acutely aware, by her quick stiffening, that she did not wish Thomas Seymour to be present at this private occasion.

“And I am deeply grateful that you should invite me.” He sauntered over to us and took his place at the rail, letting his muscular arms hang over the side. “Are you trying to sight the French?” he said. “They are coming from the south, if they come at all. Such poor sailors!” He shook his head, and all that mane of hair swayed.

“We talk not of the French,” said Kate. “We are here to celebrate a private matter, and to inspect the King’s flagship.”

“Peace be unto you,” said an old, familiar voice. Brandon was aboard. I turned to see him, standing bearlike on the oiled deck.

“And unto you.” I held out my hands. “We sound like bishops.” I laughed.

“Not quite,” he said. “We are not discussing property.”

We embraced on the deck. “How is your army?” I whispered, for Kate would have no politics to spoil this evening.

“Well,” he said. “We are at the ready in Kent to defend England against whatever comes our way. I think they will most likely land there.”

“If they do, you know when to light the signal fires?” I had ordered a system of beacon fires to be laid all across the entire southern coast of England, the first torch to be touched as soon as a Frenchman was spotted.

“Aye. There’s a great heap near my encampment, and willing torch-bearers to spread the flame.”

I was loth to release him. “Think you all of this shall come to pass? Will we truly be invaded, for the first time in four hundred years?”

“I fear so,” he said. “The invasion fleet is on its way.”

“Invasions fail,” I said. I could not hold myself apart from the others much I them, and are filled with malice and rancour. You need not be; you have your own gifts, which they have not.”
“And what are they?” He shrugged. “They win me no glory.”

The gift of attracting women, I thought. Not men, but women. Even Elizabeth had shown herself susceptible to his charm, which puzzled me. “Your immense energy,” I said. “You are like a thousand suns.”

Like all shallow men thrown a sop of flattery, he smiled, took the bait to his den, and subsided.

A slight breeze stirred, and we felt it on our cheeks. It was not a soft caress, but a warning. _I fill the French sails, it whispered._ I shivered and looked out at the horizon.

The master-cook brought out the fanciful dessert: a great pastry, in layers, replicating _Great Harry_. Tiny pennants flew from her four masts, and exact miniatures of cannon were mounted on her main deck and gun deck. As the ship was placed before me, two of the cannon “fired,” making a snap and a puff of smoke.

“A salute for each of our years of marriage,” I said to Kate.

She burst into rare laughter. “O Henry!”

That address between us was forbidden in public. I frowned; Seymour frowned, Brandon frowned. Seymour, indeed, looked angry.

“Nay, gentle wife,” I reproved her smirkingly. “That is our private talk.” Then I changed the subject. “Yet I know we shall look back upon this date as marking a great anniversary for our realm. We stand on the brink of a great battle,” I said. “May we prevail, with honour!” I raised my fresh-filled glass.

They solemnly drank. Each of us prayed. For it was a fearful hour for England.

Faces were lit only by the candles set on the table. All around it was now dark, except for the lanterns set up on deck; I permitted no open flames on board ship.

“I must to my post,” said Brandon. “I have a far ride to Kent.”

“It will be a long night,” I said. “My thoughts go with you.”

He grasped my hand. “To be alive is to fight the French,” he laughed. “Remember, Your Grace, how we planned it all, at Sheen?”


“I must take my post as well.” Tom commanded _Peter Pomegranate_, a fine,新-built ship. He was much more a seaman than a soldier.

“You are anchored one of the farthest out,” I said. “You will see the French first. Set double watches.”

“They won’t approach in darkness,” he said cockily.

“There will be instruments that enable men to come right alongside in darkness, someday,” I said. “Perhaps that day is now.”

“Not for a thousand years. The stars can tell a captain where he’s located on a map, but not what lurks beneath his hull. No, there’s no way night. That is a royal command.”

“Aye.” He bowed, took Kate’s hand. “I will obey all His Majesty’s commands. Bless you in your marriage; I pray daily for you.”

His distinctive step, higher and more prancing than Brandon’s, sounded on the gangplank.

“I think he has become light-witted,” murmured Kate.

“I think he has become dangerous,” I said. “Ambitious, cankered, eaten up with envy—dangerous.”

“Nay, Your Grace!” Her voice rose. “He does not—does not deserve such weight. He is too insubstantial ever to amount to anything dangerous.”

“Perhaps,” I said. “But I will watch him. I like him not. I regret that I invited him to join us.”

“I do not. It was a kind thing to do, and you are ever kind.” She put her arm about my waist, boldly. She had never done this before. “So kind, I think that I have never shown you how my heart warms to your great love.” She was pressed up against me, resting her face on my chest. I bent to kiss her, and she did not pull away; indeed, she returned the kiss, deeply.

There was a royal chamber below decks, where I had quartered on my passing to Calais. It was large, well appointed, and completely private. It was held in readiness for me at all times, and afforded a blissful retreat. “Kate—” I murmured, as I made my way toward the steps leading below, with her clinging to me. “Kate, wife—”

In that wooden chamber, well belowdecks, with its stout door and no window at all save a round porthole, Kate became my wife at last. I was gentle with her and she with me, and as it was a prize I had thought never to win, I received it with awe and gratitude and wonderment. I can say no more; to do so is to desecrate it. I will not insult her body by describing it, nor our actions by narrating them.
It was dawn now, and I stood alone at the rail of the ship. I had come out here on deck, in that darkest time of night, to wait for sunrise.

There was a holiness about “watching in the night.” The early monks had known this when they set their first worship hour at midnight. And indeed it did possess its own benediction. I prayed as I stood there, prayed for England, and it seemed my prayers might be better heard for the sky being hushed and empty.

I prayed that we would withstand this assault, the largest ever launched against England. It was my fault that this had come to pass; it was my mishandling of our affairs with France. I had done the worst thing one can do in hunting: I had injured the beast without killing him, thereby maddening him, driving him to fight for revenge.

I had done the same with Scotland, I saw that now. “It was not the marriage so much as the wooing,” a Scots noble had protested. I had behaved stupidly and rashly in Scotland; so anxious was I to achieve the union almost within my grasp that I had let my impatience gain the upper hand, had insulted and bullied them until they had no choice but to turn—But I knew in my heart that I was the realm, and the brunt of my shortsightedness and whatever ineptitude still remained in me after all these years must be paid by common Kentish soldiers, by the sailors on these hundred-odd vessels assembled here in the bay.

My hours with Kate were forgotten as I stood there in agony. With her I had been a man, but in this battle and invasion I was a king; and as a king I bore the guilt of having brought my country to this pass. Deliver us, O Lord, from the hands of our enemies.

Now the sky was growing light, and I could see the horizon, a faint flat line with nothing on it. The French were not yet in sight. The wind always dropped at sunrise and sunset, and soon would pick up. I knew today was the day we could expect them. I knew it would be today.

The sailors changed watch, traditionally, at four o’clock. Now the morning watchman came out on deck, and I heard him speaking to his fellow, who had stood from midnight until four. They both sounded sleepy.

The sun came up over the eastern rim of the horizon, over land, and struck the tallest gathered sails, touching their puckers and pouches. Men were stirring. I smelt coals being lighted in the galley. My private hour was gone, and I was given back into the hands of the world.

A breakfast was served to Kate and me, and our captain and first mate, on the selfsame table as the night before. This time the table was spread with brownish homespun cloth and pewter plates, and we were surrounded by shouting men. We ate “sailors’ fare”—hardtack and salted meat and heated ale—so we could see what provisions our men subsisted on. They were dismal. The hardtack almost broke my front teeth.

’Tis said if one rolls off a table, it will kill anyone who might be sitting beneath,” the server said, a skinny lad of about sixteen. He laughed in a neighing way.

“The salted meat will make us thirsty in two hours,” said Kate. “What do you do upon the high seas to combat that, since you cannot drink sea water? If you must drink on account of your food, does that not add problems in your provisioning? Should you not carry something else?”

“Meat untreated with salt cannot keep,” said the first mate. “Carrying live meat in the form of chickens and cattle is even more of a problem than carrying extra barrels of water.”

“Why carry meat at all?”

“The sailors cannot work without it. They subsist on bread well enough for a while, but when it comes to doing any strenuous tasks”—he shrugged—“they have no strength on just bread.”

“Man does not live by bread alone,” bellowed the captain, thinking himself witty.

“Evidently,” replied Kate, in her most queenly manner. Those who quoted Scripture to make jokes irritated her.

“So the sailors live on just this?” I asked. It was quite remarkable.

“On long voyages, yes. Pity the Spaniards on those ships to New Spain. It takes weeks to get there, and when they do, half the crews are dead,” said the captain. “We are all thankful that Your Majesty, in his wisdom, has shown no interest in this so-called New World.”

The New World, with its painted savages and stone cities, had niv wrtune upon a fighting vessel for its relatives to look upon it whilst under sail. Perhaps you should—”

“Aaaaah!” She gave a choking noise and began clutching at her throat with one hand, whilst pointing hysterically with the other. She was tedious; no wonder women were not permitted on board ships. Annoyed, I turned away from her and looked for Mary Rose myself.
She was not there. She was gone, sinking. Even as I watched, she turned on her starboard side and slid out of sight beneath the grey waters of the Solent, whilst the most pitiable, hideous cries rose from below decks. Rose—and were drowned. The high-pitched shrieking, which carried across the water like the death-squeaks of rats, turned into a grotesque gurgle, as the entire ship slid as neatly under the water as my portcullis had into its housing. Only two masts remained above water, and frantic men clung to them, gesturing and crying.

*Mary Rose* was lost; lost in a moment.

“What happened?” I cried. I had had my head turned toward Mary Carew, had been conversing with her. Yet that had been scarcely two minutes.

“The ship—listed,” said Kate. “It seemed to be pushed over. The balance was bad; it tipped on the instant—”

“But by what?” The wind had been very light.

“It seems—by itself,” she said, confused. “I could see nothing that would have pushed it thus. It was almost like a drunken man, losing his balance. A drunken man falls, not for that he is pushed, but because he is drunk. Thus seemed it with the ship.”

“A ship does not founder upon nothing!”

“This ship did,” she insisted.

“God! God! God!” screamed Mary Carew, seeming to hear her husband’s cries from the lost ship.

“He is safe,” I assured her. “Only those belowdecks will have—will have”—I could not finish. “Those who could jump clear are swimming. I see them now. Rescue boats will pick them up.”

“George cannot swim!” she cried. “He hated water, hated being in it—”

I reached out to hold her, as now I could say nothing to comfort her. Unless the Vice-Admiral were one of the men clinging to the masts, he was lost, if he truly could not swim. Already there were dots surrounding the site of the wreck. Dead men? Or swimmers?

Hysterical, she tried to fling herself over the wall. I pulled her back, and she began to beat on me, pulling at my clothes and clawing at my face.

“Why should you live?” she shrieked. “Why should he”—she pointed at the militia-captain—“and she”—she gestured at Kate—“and even he”—she threw a pebble at a lazy circling gull—“and my George not?”

I gestured to the guards. “Take her away. She is a danger to herself. Confine her.”

Two huge Hampshiremen encircled her and led her away, making a cage of their arms.

I, too, wished to shriek and cry. *Mary Rose*, with six hundred men, lost. And for no reason, no apparent reason, save—Divine will. God’s finger had reached out and touched my beautiful ship, and sunk her. As punishment? As warning?

The way Kate laid her fingers on my arm, I knew she was thinking the same thing. The masts of the ship pointed at me like the handwriting on Belshazzar’s wall. But what did it say? I could not read it clear. O, I was weary of these hateful, muffled messages from Him....

*Great Harry* swung about, executing her turn perfectly. The fault lay not in the lack of wind, then, or in the captain’s skill, but in the very design of *Mary Rose*. But what? She had proved seaworthy for thirty years. What had happened to her now? Truly it was the handwriting....

The nettlesome French galleys provoked *Great Harry*, emboldened by the shocking sinking of the man-of-war *Mary Rose*. Now our English row-barges, a counterpart to their galleys, streamed out to engage them. I had thought row-barges, combining both sail and oars, to be transitional vessels that we soon would not need. But here they carried the day, and did what the great warships could not: chased the French away. Now the French fleet lay outside our Solent waters, waiting to pounce.

Night fell, and the action ceased. Our vessels were anchored in the Solent, and the French were around the spit, invisible. The rescue boats had saved thirty-five men from *Mary Rose*, and they had all been on the open top deck, and swept directly into the sea. They were for the most part seamen, unschooled, superstitious, and hard—unable to describe what had happened to them or their ship. They were of no help at all in reconstructing the tragedy. Sir Gawen Carew, George’s uncle, aboard *Matthew Gonnson*, had passed near *Mary Rose* just as she had begun to tack; he claimed that George had cried out, “I have the sort of knaves I cannot rule!” Had they mutinied?

Thirty-five out of six hundred. I sat in my quarters in the granite bowels of Southsea Castle and pondered that fact. Kate was with me, sitting glumly at my side, tracing meaningless patterns with my walking stave on the floor.

“They will attempt a landing during the early hours of dawn,” I said. “On the Isle of Wight. Their plans are to establish a camp there, and then take Portsmouth—in reprisal for Boulogne.”

“How do you know this?” she asked.

It was obvious. “As an old soldier, I know.”

“And you must lead the militia here of twenty-five thousand men, when they land?”

“Yes.”
“They have landed no other place?”
“No.” The signal fires had not been lighted. The French were, thus far, confined to our area.
“So they concentrate their fury upon you?”
“Yes.” Good that it should be so. I worried about Boulogne. Had they left it alone? Or were they harrying it as well? If they did, could Henry Howard and his garrison hold it?
“The ship—” she began, hesitantly.
“Was a great loss,” I finished. I did not wish to discuss it, even with her.

Dawn, at five o’clock. I had barely slept. The French were ashore.

Outside Basingstoke I found Sandys’s house—“The Vynes,” a sign announced at its entrance. I looked down its long entranceway, bordered on each side by young lime trees. Someday they would grow giant and sheltering, but for now they were as yet tender and easily felled. They bespoke newness, yet they had already outlived their planter.

Our little party came down the mile-long avenue of struggling trees, and faced the great mansion. It was all of red brick, clean-edged and new. It was beautiful; beautiful as most of my palaces never were, for they were so large, or else built by other men....

Kate pulled up beside me. “Sandys has built a magnificent home.” She paused. “Pity he could not live to see this moment.” I must have made a depreciating gesture, for she continued, “The moment his sovereign came to visit. Think you not the ‘H’ was intended for this? Think you not that whatever chamber you lodge in tonight will be designated the King’s Chamber, and kept as a shrine forevermore?”

She looked so fierce! “Ah, Kate—”

“Can you not understand?” She sounded angry. “You bring the people joy. They will build an entire house on the hope that someday you might see it, visit it!”

She spoke true. Yet I had seldom allowed myself to consider it enough, to luxuriate in my subjects who revered me so. Instead; I had addressed myself to foreign potentates and powers: Francis, Charles, the Pope. They would never honour or keep a single thing that I had done.

We halted at the end of the brave tree-bordered drive. I sent a groom to the door to announce our presence. It opened; then the groom was left to wait for a quarter-hour whilst confusion erupted within.

At length a man appeared, squinting his eyes as if he beheld an eclipse. “Your Majesty,” he stammered. “I am but a merchant, a poor unworthy servant—forgive me, but I cannot—”

“Cannot offer your King a night’s shelter?” I kept my voice low and gentle. “That is all I ask. My Queen and I are weary, and would break our desperate journey en route to London. We ask only for a bed, and two small meals. Our party is small”—I indicated our few companions—“and if they cannot comfortably lodge here, they can find a place in the village.”

“Nay, nay—” He jumped about and waved his arms. “There is space aplenty here.”

“Poor man,” whispered Kate. “Your royal presence has quite unstrung him.”

“My Lord Chamberlain Sandys built this house,” I said. “Oft he begged me to come and lodge with him, but I was never able. Consider this a debt, then, that I pay to my loyal servant; one that I neglected and left too late. ’Tis a personal matter between us; it concerns you not.”

He bowed nervously. I knew what he was trying to say. Unexpected events try us most. I put my fingers to my lips. “We do what we can. And if we do that, then that is acceptable to Almighty God.” And to anyone else, I added silently. For my part, the greatest favour he could do me was to provide me with silence and a bed.


The; and he had known William Sandys since babyhood. The entire village had been proud when Sandys went to make his fortune at Court; although Hornbuckle had actually made more of a fortune by staying in Basingstoke. No matter, though, to the common mind: fortunes made at court were always magical, and better than those made at home. Sandys’s house was the envy of the village. And then, suddenly, the house was for sale, and Sandys entombed in the local church. Hornbuckle had bought the property, feeling both obligation and guilt. His friend was dead; how could he assume his property, walk in his shoes? Yet letting another do so seemed more of a betrayal. At last, reluctantly, he had let himself take possession of the property, although even now he itted. “Not quite yet. Now I feel nothing. As though a block of winter were in my heart, imprisoning it.”

“You will,” she assured me. “You will feel all of it, but only later. I do not understand it, but that is how it happens.” She was out of bed now, fastening on her garments. “Feeling returns only after the person is buried.”

“But I should feel something besides this ice-locked nothingness!”

“You feel what God allows you to feel. If nothing, now, it is for a purpose. God wishes you to feel other things.”

God, God, God. I was weary of Him and His capricious ways.
“Am I supposed, then, to care only for the French war at this time? Because England is in danger?”
“Evidently,” she said, and smiled. “One task at a time. God decides which.”
Her faith was so simple and sweet. But “simple” so easily slides over into “simplistic.”
At Whitehall, where all messengers had gathered, awaiting me, it seemed that nothing was happening elsewhere in the realm.

Except that Brandon lay dead.

The English fleet yet lay anchored in the Solent and waiting for orders, with the French poised just out of sight. There had been no landings at any place along the southern coast. Nor had there been in Scotland. Francis had failed his promise there, as he failed all his promises. Now perhaps the Scots would understand the nature of their ally.

Across the Channel, Boulogne was quiet. The French interest lay elsewhere, for the moment. Yet Henry Howard was having problems maintaining discipline and morale amongst his men. They broke out in quarrels and rancour continuously. His fault or theirs?

I issued orders: the fleet was to pursue the French, corner them, and do battle with them. In spite of the loss of Mary Rose, I believed we could cripple the French fleet and send it limping back to Francis, like a sick child. The Earl of Surrey was to return to England, to attend the state funeral of the Duke of Suffolk. The armies at all points were to continue to maintain their posts.

As I must maintain mine. My health, seemingly so improved by the earlier campaign on the Continent, had deteriorated. (I can safely write it here.) Fluid had accumulated in my leg, so that sometimes I had no sensation in it, and it was swollen and ugly. There was no resurgence of the open ulcer, Jesu be thanked. But I feared that any hour it might be reactivated.

Also (I hesitate to write it even here) ... there were nights when I thought I heard the monks again. The ones who had been in my chamber when ... during that time after Catherine’s execution. They stood in the corners and mouthed the selfsame words. But now I knew them to be false, so I heeded them not. Why did they continue to haunt me? I had done nothing to encourage them. Was it that they scented a weakened man?

Weakness. It drew forth all the jackals, to snap and snarl and quarrel over their victim. But I was more clever than they, the jackals roaming about my kingdom and Privy Council. They had only their noses, to scent a sick man; I still had brains and pomoutheont>

All would be well.

Except that Brandon lay dead.

A state funeral is a formidable thing. I had never attended one, not as an adult. I hated them. All the protocol, all the rank and privileges which must be observed, with the focus of it all an insensate body.

The body, the earthly remains of Charles Brandon, had been disembowelled and soaked in spices for ten days. Then it had been put in a cerecloth, and that wrapped in lead, and that laid in a coffin, and that simple coffin enclosed in another. Around that were arranged garlands and ribbons. I never saw Brandon himself, only the formal outer festoonings of what had once been a man.

Would I have wished to see him, to see his flesh white, his lips set, his great chest sunken? He had been, after Thomas Howard, Duke of Norfolk, the highest-ranking noble in the realm. I had made him so; taken the mud-spattered orphan and raised him up. I had done well to do so, as he was worthy of his rank.

My sister Mary had loved him.

Now he had another wife who would mourn him. But would she, truly? The truth is, I had loved him more. Brandon lay dead.

The insistent chorus was coming more often to me now. Feeling had crept back, and was only waiting behind a barricade to burst out.

The Order of the Garter customarily held ceremonies in the Chapel of St. George in Windsor. Brandon was to be buried in the choir of the chapel, only a few yards from Queen Jane. All twenty-five Knights of the Garter were
called upon to be present, even though they represented the foremost defence of the realm. For this one day we must be undefended, and pray that God would stand watch whilst we did honour to Brandon.

I had moved to Windsor—even though I disliked the quarters there, as too closely associated with my grief after Jane’s death—to oversee this funeral. I wished to make some sort of personal memorial there, to say something. I attempted to write an elegy, but my verse did not come. I tried to compose a prayer, but it sounded pompous. There were words I wished to say. I knew I had almost heard them before, but they slipped from me. The fruitful ground, the quiet mind ...

Yes, I had read them. They were Henry Howard’s, part of a poem. I sent for him.

It was the night before the funeral, and all Windsor was in mourning. My apartments were hung in black, and there was no music. In the Chapel of St. George, Brandon’s coffin lay on a catafalque, tapers flickering all around it. I would go down later, would keep vigil as a Knight of the Garter should do. But now there was still the poem to be attended to.

Howard came upon the stroke of nine. He was dressed all in black: I had ordered the court into full mourning.

“Did you bring your poems?” I asked him.

He held out a portfolio of papers. “All I had,” he said. “As you requested. And exhaustion have, I fear, routed my Muse. Yet I found a phrase echoing through my mind, and I think it to be yours. It is ‘The fruitful ground, the quiet mind....’ ”

“Aye. ‘Tis mine,” he said quickly. He must have been pleased, but like all artists he disdained to show it. “Here is the entire poem.” He plucked out a sheet and laid it down next to my candle.

Yes! It was exactly what I wished to say. It expressed my own inner feelings.

“It is—my own words,” I said, amazed.

Now he blushed. “The highest award one can give a poet. We sit in our little rooms, composing for ourselves, but believing that all men must feel the same. We are alone, but united with every human being—if we are good. If we are bad, we are united with nothing, and no one. The frightening thing is that, sitting in the little room, one does not know to which category one belongs. One must sit there in faith.”

“Yes, yes.” I did not wish to flatter him overmuch. “I dislike to use borrowed trappings, but I have no choice. My own words will not come, and yours are already there.”

“They are to be used by others. I hope that in years to come, when I am no longer here to give permission, they may continue to serve man’s inner needs.”

I looked at him. I believed his words to be true and heartfelt. As an artist he was noble. But as a man he was petty, unstable, and rancorous. How did the two intertwine?

“I have reports of your difficulties in Boulogne,” I said at length, hating to break the spell—the spell that bound us as journeymen in the arts. Now we must revert to ruler and subject. “What seems to be the cause of this trouble?”

“The city is a bastard child of England,” he said. “We retain it, but for how long? In Tournai, we were committed to incorporating it into England. Vast sums were assigned for its upkeep. Frenchmen, citizens of Tournai, were to take seats in Parliament. But everyone knows that Boulogne is but a war-pawn, to be returned to France for a ransom. So who shall bother with it? The men are restive, and order hard to keep.”

I sighed. His words were true. Keeping Boulogne victualled and defended were enormous expenditures, and I no longer had the cash reserves I had had in 1513. The truth was that I could not afford Boulogne, as I had afforded Tournai.

“Well, do your best,” I answered. I knew he was waiting for me to reveal my ultimate plan for Boulogne. And oh, yes, I had one: to unite it with Calais, to double the English holdings. But all that took funds, funds which I did not have. I owed the money-lenders of Antwerp huge sums, plus interest, for the taking of Boulogne.

I was tired. “Thank you, my lad,” I told him. “You may go now.”

He bowed, stiffly. He was displeased.

“I call you ‘my lad’ because you were my son’s friend,” I said.

He smiled somewhat. “There is a poem about our years at Windsor, oh I was alone in the room. The candles jumped and flickered, and I remembered yet another reason why I hated Windsor: my son had flowered here in his brief season. He had brought colour to the dead drab stones, a momentary life. But Windsor was death. Nothing survived here.

I began rifling through the poems, looking for the one celebrating his life. Surrey’s portfolio was so fragile. Too
fragile to entrust a reputation or memory to.

*So cruel a prison how could betide, alas?*

Surrey had written the poem in prison, then. His imprisonment had served to bring my son back to life for me, if only for an instant.

I knew what I must do. Go to Brandon’s coffin, where it stood before the high altar. There I would say farewell to him, privately.

The church was empty. The great catafalque stood, like a building itself, black and square, blocking the altar. All about it flickered tapers, lit hours ago and now burnt half down and guttering. They illuminated the coffin in a ghastly, pagan way, jumping like sacrificial maidens.

I knelt on the stone steps. I closed my eyes and tried to see Charles, tried to conceive of his really being there. In my mind I knew his corpse rested somewhere within the great black-draped box, but in my heart I had no contact with him. Charles ... what had been my last words with him?

That night he had come on board *Great Harry* ... what had we said as he took his leave? What was it, what was it?

“*It will be a long night,*” I had said. “*My thoughts go with you.*”

“To be alive is to fight the French. Remember, Your Grace, how we planned it all, at Sheen?”

“Old men fight boys’ battles. Well, good night, Charles.”

“Good night, Charles,” I repeated, and touched the mourning-cloth. “You spoke true. ‘Remember how we planned it all, at Sheen?’ And we lived it. To live a dream is life’s highest reward. Sleep well, my friend. I join you soon.”

I started to rise, but now it all came rushing back upon me. His hand-grasp at Sheen, when he had caught me scrambling over the wall. His bedding of me after I had just wed Katherine of Aragon, and I such a frightened virgin. His acting as my champion throughout my madness with Nan, even enduring censure from his wife. His faithful support of me after Jane died. Suddenly I saw his face in all its ages, heard his laughter, felt his love; that love which had always been present, supporting me. The love which I had sought elsewhere, never realizing that I had had it all along.

Now I was alone. The one person who had truly loved me, and known me throughout all my life, was gone. Brandon had loved me when I was yet the second son; had taken my side when Arthur still held favour and sway.

I put my hand up along the great coffin. “*I love you,*” I said, as I had never said to any woman.

As if sealing a pledge, I pressed my hand down upon the black velvet; kept it pressed there as long moments passed and I heard the discreet coughs in the rear of the cavernous chapel. The official watchers waited to God of His great mercy to take unto Himself the soul of our dear brother here departed, we therefore commit his body to the ground: earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust: in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life, through Our Lord Jesus Christ: who shall change our vile body, that it may be like unto His glorious body, according to the mighty working, whereby He is able to subdue all things to Himself.’ ”

The Duke’s household chamberlains came forward and broke their staves and threw them into the pit, signifying that their master was departed forever.

Now the grave was ready to be filled in.

“Let us now pray as Christ hath taught us,” Cranmer said, and led us in the Lord’s Prayer.

Out in the dazzling, hot sunshine, we blinked. We were still alive; that was the shock, not the brightness or the incongruity. Inside, all was stopped and cold. But outside, all the while, life was burgeoning. Insects attacked us and bit us. Flowers drooped from the heat of the sun; the attendant had forgotten to water them the evening before. The sheer busyness of life seemed a sacrilege. We were immediately sucked back into its demands.

Outside, people gathered in little knots and began talking—the more frivolous the subject, the better. There is a great need for that after a funeral, and I had no doubt that many would engage in the marital duty as soon as they reasonably could. It almost seemed to be a part of the obligation—or perhaps the rebellion against death.
You see how alive we are? As long as we do this, you cannot touch us. This certifies how alive we are. Nothing of your domain, death.

In the Great Hall of Windsor Castle, the funeral feast awaited. I had ordered the finest cakes and meats to be provided, and the best ale from Kent. The traditional little funeral cakes from Suffolk were provided by the household baker from Brandon’s estate of Westhorpe. He had made each one exquisitely, with the ducal arms in miniature on the lid of the pie.

“To honour my master,” he had said, when presenting them. They must have taken him days.

“He is honoured,” I assured him, “in servants like you.”

I eyed them now, neatly arranged upon the royal gold platters. Why are exquisite foodstuffs part of death? The living expect to be fed, even though they have done no labour.

The hall was filling up now, as the mourners came in out of the sharp noon sun. The two factions of the Privy Council grouped about their rallying points—Edward Seymour, Earl of Hertford, and Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey—like eddies of a whirlpool, black cloaks turning slowly about their centres.

About the Seymour centre there were William Petre and William Paget, the principal secretaries; Tom Seymour himself, of course; and important, but missing, was John Dudley, serving now in Boulogne as captain.

Swirling and circling around the hub of their wheel, Henry Howard, were Bishop Gardiner; the Duke of Norfolk; and Thomas Wriothesley—the conservative spokes.

When had these factions arisen? There had not been factions when I had had Wolsey the other. Now both parties snapped and snarled at one another like rabid dogs in August. What was the purpose of factions? To steer the sovereign in one direction or another. But this sovereign would not be steered—surely they knew that.

Then it must be another sovereign they sought to control.

Edward.

They foresaw my death, and looked ahead to the control of Edward.

It was my funeral they celebrated now; mine after which they congregated and ate their meat pies and laid their plans. This was how it would be. This was its true rehearsal. It was one thing for me to realize this; it was another for my enemies to do so.

Damn them! I would stay alive as long as possible, thwart their plans!

In truth, there was no one fit to rule in my stead. There must needs be a balance between old and new, the selfsame balance as existed inside my head. Therefore, therefore—I must appoint both factions to act as Protectorate Council for Edward. They would cancel out the bad aspects of each other. But, oh! so cumbersome ...

I looked at them. They were such small men. The meek shall inherit the earth. But what is the translation, the exact translation, of meek? Surely it is not “colourless,” “shortsighted,” “timid.” Such were the men who strove to guide England.

I walked about the guests, smiling and pleasant. My person was now so large that dragging it about was an effort for me and meant that I could address only the person standing directly before me. I spoke to Brandon’s widow, Katherine, who, although tear-streaked, seemed reconciled to “the hand of the Almighty.” I talked with my nieces, Frances and Eleanor: pretty lasses, and seemingly healthy and intelligent. They had married and had children already—unlike my own childless, bastard daughters....

The sun streamed through the high-placed windows of the Great Hall. I took a seat—a great mourner’s bower, all decked in black—and watched. I felt dead myself, and my whole being ached. There was but a little way to go, and it must needs be alone.

Kate was talking with Tom Seymour. I saw them, far down on the floor below. (Is this how hawks see?) I wondered what they were saying. I watched her face, and it was a face I had never seen. She loved Tom Seymour.

I knew it, and even could say the words to myself. She loves Tom Seymour.

Now I indeed felt buried in the crypt with Brandon. All he had experienced, as a true knight ... and yet never, never had a woman he loved, loved another man first and thoroughly. He had died without that wound.

Well, our wounds are our selves.

I swung myself down from my seat, addressed the company, and went to my private apartments.

But not before I began to see strange horns sprouting from the hired mourners’ cloaks, shimmering and glowing.
All this took place over a year ago. And what has happened since then?

In regard to France, prudence dictated a settlement, although God knows I have no love either of prudence or a peace treaty. That was after New Year’s, and there were festivities honouring them, although they were faint and lacklustre compared to similar events in the past. Oh, how we used to celebrate treaties! I remember the Treaty of London in 1518, when Mary was betrothed to the French Dauphine, and Wolsey so happy, and Katherine of Aragon so glum. And then ... but I ramble. Yes, there once were bright festivities. But brightness has dimmed—or perhaps my eyes can see beyond the lustre to the hollowness now, and so I spare myself the expense and participation altogether. Thus I allowed the French to buy back Boulogne for two million crowns over an eight-year period. It is worth more than that to England, but only if we could truly defend and victual her on a permanent basis. I tried to do that, and failed. Now I had to give her up, like a wife I could not keep.

Wife. Kate ... ah, Kate. A wife I could not keep. Well, no more of that.

My health continues to improve. I have grown a bit more unwieldy, but the corner has been turned, and as my leg is now completely well—no more attacks!—I hope to begin exercising shortly, and regain my youthful shape. It is still there, hidden, and I will bring it forth, now that my illnesses are past.

Even though I am completely well, daily I work on my will, setting forth the secret governing council for Edward, selecting and culling names, then discarding them. It is a great labour. No one is to know of my plan. I keep them all in the dark. There are surprises in my choices! I outsmart my councillors. They think they know me, but they do not. I have hidden my papers well, inside ... no, I will not write it here. But I mean for the “changers” to be checked and balanced by the “stayers.”

That is why I had to chop off the head of the serpent, the Howard serpent, Henry. He meant to coil round my Edward, imprisoning him. Venomous, ugly thing. I stopped him.

But all is well in the kingdom now. I have kept my naughty factions balanced and soothed, and they have caused no further problems.

Only the voices in my head, the annoying visions, have proved a problem. Occasionally I have done things I could not remember, but always I have rectified them as soon as possible, and no harm has been done.

Oh, yes—there was that fool who just recently (yesterday, or was it longer ago?) asked me what my earliest memory was. I was cross with him. I must send for him and make it up. Those sorts of things, those tidying-up things, occupy me much of late. Yet majesty must always be gracious.

It is time-consuming, making up for the voices in the head. But they are growing less, and then I will have more time to attend to the things dear to my heart. I have waited all my life to do so. At last it is almost at hand. O, to be just a man!
WILL:

And there it ends, just as the King himself did, some few days later. King Henry VIII died when he was fifty-six years old, in the thirty-eighth year of his reign, expecting to live and reign much longer.

He was never the same after Brandon’s death. Despite the brave words in his journal, he was melancholy and ill—either in body or in spirit—ibid most of the time remaining to him.

The things to of succession, yet remained illegitimate—a neat bit of legal juggling by their father to increase their rights and desirability as wives without compromising his belief that he had never been legally wed to their mothers. He loved those daughters, and wanted them to have as full and happy lives as possible. (A love sparsely returned on their parts. If the unnatural act reputed to Queen Mary is true, then indeed King Lear was well served by Goneril and Regan in comparison. To curse and desecrate her father’s skeleton ... !)

As to the French, the Scots, the Emperor, the Pope—well, as you know, Francis died directly after Henry, although he rallied long enough to send a teasing, insulting note to his fond old rival before both expired. The Emperor resigned his crowns, the Netherlands one in 1555, the Spanish one in 1556, and retired to a Spanish monastery. The Pope finally led his General Council at Trent, which hardened, rather than softened, the position of the Catholic Church against the Reformers. A battle line was drawn, and the Church seemed ready to fight rather than compromise. Why, it was almost as if she had principles!

The Scots actually show signs of succumbing to the Reformed faith, which would change the entire character of their realm, in relation to both England and the Continent (requiring them to find some Scriptural excuse for their money-grubbing). It is true that Mary Queen of Scots adheres to the Old Faith; but increasingly she is at odds with her Council and countrymen and isolated in this matter of religion, so that she has to import foreigners, Italians and French and such, to buoy her up in her faith. A surprising turn of events, would you not agree—although you hold that the Lord directs the Protestant victory?

As for the King’s will: what a troublesome document that turned out to be! He used it to control his councillors, waving it over their heads like a schoolmaster with a whip. Do this, and (perhaps) I shall instate you: do not, and you shall (probably) be omitted from my will. He kept it in a secret place, amending it constantly (oh! he was old: only old men act so!), tut-tutting over it. The price he paid for this old man’s—and tyrant’s—luxury was that upon his death it was unsigned, almost undiscovered, and questionably legal.

Those constant games that he played with his courtiers led them to play games with him. Hide the document—hide the news. Dangle me—and I dangle you. Divide and rule—unite and outsmart. The last few months were so Byzantine I felt that Suleiman would have been perfectly at home amongst us. Intrigues, flatterers, panderers, betrayers all stalked the corridors and Long Gallery at Whitehall, where the King lay fighting the Angel of Death. Factions in the Privy Council waited to seize power, sure that they could trounce their adversaries. When the old King was dead, when the breath was out of him at last ... then they would move, sweep into power.

But the Almighty had other ideas, did He not? Little Edward, Henry’s pride: his reign was like a shadow, insubstantial and quickly over....

And all their machinations and arrangements went down like dust, and they had to flee before Mary, Queen Mary, the Catholic angel of vengeance.

Now need I set it down, what Henry’s death and interment were.

The King died on January twenty-eighth, 1547, at two o’clock in the morning. He had been quite ill since autumn, and by mid-January ’ They began ransacking the chests, the boxes, the coffers.

I remembered the journal. It was of no use to them but to desecrate. But where had he put it? The last I had seen it, it was at his desk....
Feathers were flying. They were ripping open the mattress underneath him, searching for the will. Cranmer begged them to stop.

“If he’d left the will in a proper place, we’d have no need of this,” they replied. “But no! Like the madman he was, he hid it even from his own Council—”

I slid open the hidden desktop, and there the journal lay, right in plain view. I took it out.

“What is that, fool?” Tom Seymour wrenched it from my hands. Upon seeing the tiny handwriting, he lost interest. He could scarcely read.

“My poetry,” I said. “Ideas for poems I hope to write, upon retirement.” A journal would interest them, threaten them. Poetry would bore them, and be safe. Henry Howard knew that, as he had attacked King Henry under the guise of writing about the Assyrian king Sardanapalus (“... with foul desire/And filthy lusts that stained his regal heart ... Who scarce the name of manhood did retain ... I saw a royal throne ... Where wrong was set/That bloody beast, that drank the guiltless blood”).

“Fah!” He tossed it back. “Begone. No one wants you now. It’s our day, the day of the Seymours, the day I’ve waited for since my stupid sister married that rotten, evil hulk of a King.” He grinned and repeated the last sentence in the dead King’s face—the face to which he had always been unctuous and simpering in life. Now I, too, began to see the red in Thomas’s eyes, which the King had recognized in his “madness.”

I walked out of the death-chamber, the journal tucked beneath my arm. Outside in the adjoining Privy Chamber the remainder of the councillors and courtiers waited to hear the word, to know where the King’s soul lingered. No, in truth, they cared not where his soul was, but only where his will and his gold and his heir were.

Nonetheless it was a good reign, and beyond the courtiers, the realm grieved his going. He had done well by everyone but himself.
I fled down the corridors, seeking only to escape the clutching hands and covetous faces of the self-seekers now gathered around the dead King’s apartments. I found my own quarters and made my way to a pallet without lighting a candle, lest anyone see the light and come to question me.

When dawn came, I awoke and found that the great palace of Whitehall was still, hushed—pausing for death. The suppliants and mourners had departed, the watchers had gone to bed; the sun was not yet up. Death held sway; Death ruled the realm.

Where had the scramblers for the will gone? Had they found it? What did it say? Had they scampered off to proclaim the news? Or did they hold it fast, like a cardplayer with a losing hand—hoping for deliverance, for some “rearrangement”? Were they themselves working to bring about that rearrangement?

I came up to the royal apartments. I had to knock now; there was no friendly King to let me in. The head of the Yeomen of the Guard grabbed me and searched me.

“What madman would I asked, more in wonder than in anger.

“There are those who seek to desecrate the royal corpse,” he said. “In the past hour I found burning-oils and even silver stakes amongst those who have sought to enter; knives and heart-removing devices. Some of these are witches —how else could they have known the King lay dead? For it has not yet been announced, lest the French make war against us in our confusion and disarray. The Council meets tonight.”

“To decide what?”

“The details of the funeral. The publication of the will.”

“They found it, then?”

He looked confused. “Why, was it lost?”

That is what they would give out. It was lost. Or the King had not made one. To give them time to alter it. O Jesu, chaos reigned!

“I know naught of wills and councils,” I said, adopting my most wheedling manner. “I seek only to do honour to my lost King. Tell me, where is he?”

“In the Privy Chamber. The chapel is not prepared to receive him. While it is being readied, he must lie in state in his own Privy Chamber.” He waved me in.

They had done something to him in the night: spirited him away, disembowelled him, steeped him in spices and preservatives. Now his corpse lay lapped in Eastern tars and inside a flimsy coffin. It was draped with heavy black velvet palls. The supports underneath it were sagging. No one had been prepared for this eventuality. To “imagine the King’s death” was treason, therefore one could not ready even the most elementary props for it. The coffin supports were inadequate, but no one could replace them beforehand without running afoul of Cromwell’s leftover secret police.

Sun streamed into the chamber. I felt foolish approaching the death-bier. It was all so makeshift, so un-kingly. I had nothing to say here, nothing to do. I had joined the throng of people who only wished to “check up.” I disgusted myself. I left.

Later I was told that “officials” (what officials?) made it more palatable and seemly. The coffin was surrounded by eighty tapers, and there were Masses, obsequies, and continual watches kept by the chaplains and gentlemen of the Privy Chamber.

Outside this well-ordered respect, the realm trembled and soldiers diced for the seamless garment. No, that is really being too cynical. The truth was that offices must be filled and a nine-year-old King “protected” ... especially from his older sisters, who represented substantial claims to the throne in their own right.

Here I must digress to comment on the two contradictory deathbed scenes reported by “witnesses,” neither of whom was present at the time. The Protestant version is that King Henry had envisioned a great enlightened state in which the Reformed religion would prevail. In this version, Henry deliberately had Edward brought up by Protestant tutors and entrusted the Protestant cause to Mary’s conscience by calling her to his deathbed and saying, “Be a mother to Edward, for look, he is little yet.” Dying in sanctity, he had commissioned Mary to protect her brother,
had cut down the Howards as Catholic weeds that might block Edward’s Gospel sunlight, and had created the Governing Council as a safety device to shelter; was surrounded by wax tapers, each two feet long, and weighing, in total, a ton. The entire floor and walls of the chapel were covered in black cloth. It was a chapel of exquisite death.

While Henry was engaged—albeit unwillingly—in this tableau, the realm was seething like an anthill. Chancellor Wriothesley went to Parliament to announce the death formally before both houses of the assembled Lords and Commons. Then Sir William Paget read Henry’s will (discovered at last) so it could be proclaimed throughout the land.

The surprise provision in it was that Henry had not ruled out the possibility of children by Katherine Parr; for he placed them directly after Prince Edward in the line of succession, and before Mary and Elizabeth. These were his exact words:

And for the great love, obedience, chastity of life, and wisdom being in our wife and queen Katherine, we bequeath unto her three thousand pounds in plate, jewels, and such apparel as it shall please her to take of such as we have already....

And per default of lawful issue of our son Prince Edward, we will that the said imperial crown after our two deceases, shall fully remain and come to the heirs of our entirely beloved wife, Katherine, that now is.

And all this time we had assumed their marriage was of the spirit only! Now the Dowager would have to be carefully watched, and guarded, for the next three months, much as the Princess of Aragon had been after Arthur’s death. Truly they were sisters in fate.

The news of King Henry’s demise was received with great exultation in Rome. Only Cardinal Pole refused to join in, prompting the Pope to ask, “Why do you not rejoice with the rest at the death of this great enemy of the Church?” Pole stated that the new King, Edward, was steeped in Lutheran and Zwinglian principles, and that his Regency Council was made up of Protestants, so the Church had gained nothing by King Henry’s death; indeed it had probably lost something.

But to return to the lying-in-state at Whitehall. At dawn of each day, the Lord Chamberlain stood in the choir-door and chanted in a sad, clear voice, “Of your charity pray for the soul of the high and mighty Prince, our late Sovereign Lord and King, Henry VIII.” The mourners—some of whom had been keeping watch throughout the night—then would begin to murmur their prayers before sung Mass would begin, to be later followed by dirges. The Pope would certainly have approved of the Catholicism of the rites.

Then came the day of the removal, so that Henry might be interred in his vault near the altar of St. George’s Chapel. Workmen had been busy prying up the great marble paving stones and digging down into the soil beneath. They uncovered Jane’s coffin, its royal pall faded and worm-eaten, but still recognizable. Knowing Henry wanted to be as close to her as possible, they excavated a space for his great sarcophagus directly adjoining it.

By mid-February, all was ready. So it was that on the thirteenth day of that cursed month, the coffin was conveyed from the Chapel Royal and loaded upon the funeral carriage to make the slow, two days’ journey to Windsor. The great, creaking hearse, nine storeys high and draped in black, swaying from its bulk and awkward shape, was escorted by a four-mile procession of mourners;

“He’s here because of the King,” said one of his fellows, boldly. “And because of the King’s executed Queen. Remember how she wept and grieved?”

“No, it’s to fulful the Scriptural prophecy, the one about King Ahab. A friar said our King would meet the same fate. He preached it to his face. When he wished to marry the Boleyn woman. The Scripture was:

“And thou shalt speak unto him, saying, Thus saith the Lord, Hast thou killed, and also taken possession? And thou shalt speak unto him, saying, Thus saith the Lord, In the place where dogs licked the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick thy blood, even thine.

“And the battle increased that day; and the King was stayed up in his chariot against the Syrians, and died at even: and the blood ran out of the wound into the midst of the chariot.

“And one washed the chariot in the pool of Samaria; and the dogs licked up his blood.’’
Protestants always knew Scripture by heart, and quoted it smugly.

“But this was Queen Catherine Howard,” one realist pointed out. “Perhaps she cursed him.”

Now you have it, my lad. Now you have it. So evil and hatred can survive the dissolution of the body ... unlike love and devotion. Love is stronger than death. No, hatred is.

“We must wait until light.”

In the full light of morning, workmen entered the chapel to re-solder the split coffin. The dog was still there, crouching under the hearse. The plumbers and solderers had trouble driving him off, but by thrusting hot pokers at him, they were able to get him to quit the den he had made under the hangings of the hearse. Once out from under it, he bounded away and seemed to disappear. He did not use any of the church doors to make good his escape.

Peering under the hearse, the workmen saw that it, and the coffin inside it, were cracked. A fluid, thick and repulsive, was oozing down and dripping slowly on the floor. They thought that it was not blood, but corpse-fluids, mixed with embalming fluids and spices. The jouncing and jostling of the funeral hearse over the rough roads had loosened the fastenings and allowed this hideous episode to occur. They worked quickly to patch it up, and then, in the light of day, transport the coffin to its final resting place.

By ten in the forenoon, the funeral cortège was on the road, leaving the fouled stones of Syon Chapel to be cleansed.

The people were thicker now; more lined the road as we approached Windsor. But I could not leave the ugly taste of Syon behind, and the malevolence of Catherine, and the eternity of our past deeds. Nothing is ever gone, it seems, and the past does not wash clean like paving stones. Only the good disappears. I have smelt the potpourris made of last summer’s roses, and they are stale and faint. Good evaporates; evil remains and incubates.

The interment at Windsor was a lengthy but simple ceremony. It was almost exactly like Charles Brandon’s, eighteen months previous. Bishop Gardiner, that most Catholic of Henry’s prelates, led the burial service. There was no eulogy. All of Henry’s friends were dead, save myself, and no one invited me to speak.

I felt so sad over this that I perplexed myself, so bereft that I even shouted at Hal one evening.

“You left me nothing of you! I need something to touch, like an old fond woman! And there is nothing. The vultures have taken everything away, to make an ‘inventory.’ Even your handkerchiefs have been taken!”

And yet, and yet—was not memory always, and exclusively, within one’s head? What good did an object do?

Wearily I bent down to see it, whatever afterthought had been propped up there. Forever, the “afterthoughts” would come trickling in. Now I would have to find room for this, this—

King Henry’s little harp. The one he used when composing.

It had not been here earlier. Had someone brought it? But no one had entry to my chamber. And certainly not within the past half hour, which was the last time I had walked around the bundles, checking the knots.

But there it sat, leaning against my belongings, pressing itself to them.

So love can survive, too. Or something close to it. Consideration and kindness.

*In my Father’s house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you.*

It must be a very big mansion, to encompass all it does.
Author’s Afterword

My object in writing *The Autobiography of Henry VIII* was, in the process, to meet Henry VIII in person. In order to do so, I had to become a master spy in some ways. When the object of one’s spying is a historical character, one is privileged to call the spying “research.” My research took the form of doing a great deal of reading—of contemporary accounts of Henry VIII, of which there are luckily a large number, and also of the works of scholars analyzing this material. I also tried to visit the extant sites connected with Henry VIII and to see as many objects owned or handled by him as possible, and to recreate some of his experiences, such as taking the pilgrims’ walk at the shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham—although not barefooted in winter, as he reportedly did. The Autobiography has helped dispel some of these untruths.

If you would like to do further reading and research of your own, I include here some of my sources for the various areas of his life.
HENRY THE KING

The Young Henry VIII

The young Henry left behind some physical evidence of his athletic thinness (height, 6’2”; chest, 42”; waist, 35”) in the armor on display at the Tower of London. See his armor for foot-combat, as well as his jousting armor, covered with Katherine of Aragon’s initials in true knightly fashion.

You can also see the young, golden-haired Henry VIII in a large painting in Chichester Cathedral by Lambert Barnard, painted in 1519; in the Great Tournament Roll of Westminster; and in the initial letters of the Plea Roll of Trinity 1517 (K.B.27/1024), reproduced in “Royal Portraits from the Plea Rolls,” Public Record Office Museum Pamphlets No. 5, HMSO 1974. There is one portrait of the young Henry VIII by an unknown artist in the National Portrait Gallery. You can recognize him by his characteristic lips and nose.

The young Henry was a warrior, and you can follow his footsteps in France, to Calais, and in Belgium, at Tournai, which he captured in the war of 1513. There he built, with characteristic over-excitement, a huge fortress, sparing no expense. He had thought to hold Tournai permanently. The Henry VIII Tower is now a museum.

Go to Portsmouth and see the reclaimed “great ship,” the Mary Rose, which was built and originally launched by Henry VIII in 1510, wearing a jewel-encrusted gold whistle. Reading: Ernle Bradford, The Story of the Mary Rose (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1982).

In London, Eltham Palace, where he spent much of his childhood, is still extant, and retains a feeling of the original countryside setting around Greenwich.

In Rouen, there is a carving at the Palais de Justice commemorating that great chivalric event, the Field of Cloth of Gold, showing the young Henry VIII and Francis I meeting in glory.


The Middle-Aged Henry VIII


—Dissolution of the Monasteries: visit ruined abbeys, such as Bury St. Edmunds in Suffolk; take the pilgrims’ walk to the shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham, in Walsingham, Norfolk; visit Canterbury Cathedral and the former site of Becket’s tomb.

—Height of power and glory: visit Hampton Court, which Henry VIII acquired from Cardinal Wolsey as the balance of power tipped toward the King. R.J. Minney, *Hampton Court* (Coward, McCann and Georghegan, 1972).

—Holbein’s paintings and sketches are reproduced in *Holbein and the Court of Henry VIII*, a catalogue printed by The Queen’s Gallery, Buckingham Palace, 1978, H.M. the Queen. Read about the sitters in David Mathew’s *The Courtiers of Henry VIII* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1970).
**The Old Henry VIII**


—Visit Deal and Walmer Castles in Kent, his coastal defenses built during the war scare of 1539; they were the latest in design for the new cannon warfare.
THE WIVES
Katherine of Aragon:

Anne Boleyn:

Jane Seymour:

No biography is available; the nearest is William Seymour’s *Ordeal*
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