

Rose of Honor

By [H. A. Covington](#)

The Casting of the Die

Spring, 1457

I.

We arrived at Raby Castle, in the northern English county of Durham, on a rainy afternoon in early April. Our horses clattered across the drawbridge after the queen's heralds had formally demanded entry and the castle gates were opened. The royal entourage had been strung out along the road since before dawn, slogging onward after a miserable night spent huddled around hissing campfires in a sodden meadow beside a roadside inn wherein the queen had slept. In the pre-dawn darkness and drizzle we had struck the pavilions, folded the soggy things and heaved them onto carts, and then we trudged through the mud towards Raby.

We were a small army, over five hundred of us in the entourage: noblemen, knights of the guard such as myself, noble ladies and their tirewomen, soldiers, priests, minstrels, clerks, courtiers, scullions, valets, pages, squires, archers, doxies, leeches, porters, clowns, laundresses, pastry cooks, astrologers, heralds, huntsmen, and hornblowers. At the centre of it all was the queen herself, Margaret of Anjou: a proud, strong and beautiful woman whom some believed to be possessed by the devil. So she was. The devil that possessed our queen was hate, endlessly athirst and unslakeable, and she was perforce dragging us all with her as she toured the kingdom from end to end in search of support for her most cherished goal in life, the destruction of the Plantagenet Duke of York and all his kinsmen. For in Anno Domine 1457, the year of which I speak, the two great Plantagenet houses of York and Lancaster were mortal enemies, and ill fared England.

I am Sir John Redmond, born outside Tavistock in Devonshire. In that time of which I write, I was then a landless knight in the queen's service. As I had not been among the fortunate ones chosen to remain behind in London with the Tower garrison, thus it was that on that misty afternoon so long ago in the days of my youth, I found myself leaning on my saddle pommel in the fine drizzle in Raby's outer courtyard. The castellan, a rotund little man in ill-fitting armour, stood bareheaded as Margaret stepped regally from her litter. Then he knelt upon the muddy flagstones of the courtyard and kissed her hand, formally surrendering the keys of the castle to her. The amenities now over, the castellan escorted the queen and her ladies into the great hall and thence to their chambers. We knights of the household dismounted and handed over the reins of our horses to squires or servants, save for a few such as myself who were too poor to afford either and who

perforce led their destriers to the stables ourselves. As the last of the entourage crowded into the wide outer ward, the gates gave a lugubrious squeak and crashed behind us, a precaution against surprise attack.

At the stables I snagged a skinny young groom, slapped a penny into his hand, and gave him specific instructions on the care and feeding of my war-horse, Thunder. I had to look out for the animal, since he was all I possessed in the way of worldly goods save for my sword and my wits, the customary legacies of a younger son. After having seen Thunder off-saddled and his manger filled with oats, I inquired of the groom the location of the bachelors' dormitory and set off in search of my bed for the night. I had feared that by delaying at the stables I would be late in grabbing a bed, but most of the knights had stopped off in the hall for a drink to take off the chill, and there were few besides myself in the long, low chamber with groined stone vaulted ceiling. The room was clean, the mattresses newly stuffed with straw and purged of vermin, and fresh new rushes crackled underfoot. Throughout the castle, signs of preparation for this rare royal visit were manifest. Tapestries had been cleaned and patched, burnished harness adorned the men-at-arms, the stables boasted new-cut bracing timbers, and the sleeping chamber smelled of perfume and fresh linen which I savoured. Castles generally stink, and so would this one in a few days, but by then no one would notice

After testing several of the beds along one wall of the room I found a soft mattress and threw my helmet and my saddle bags down onto it. This reserved for me only one side of the coarse linen pallet, for another knight would share the other half. This was a rather comfortable arrangement. In some castles we had visited it was three or four to a bed, while in others, cramped Norman keeps built just after the Conquest, we knights had to sleep on the rushes in the great hall along with the soldiers, the servants, and the dogs. I eyed my gear and shrugged. If one of these Lancastrian pugs tossed it aside and took my bed I'd remove the intruder with a fist in the face. It was ironic that so far the only fighting I had seen in the queen of England's service had been with the arrogant young men of her retinue, over just such paltry things.

In the great hall, the servants were busily setting the board for the evening meal, their task rendered more difficult by the throng of courtiers who milled around the trestle tables, congregated in the aisles conversing, and crowded around the ale kegs for a draught. There was a good deal of laughter, pummeling, and loud ostentatious horseplay, albeit a bit more nervous than usual, for we were deep into Yorkist territory. Richard of York was raised from childhood right here in Raby Castle, and the Neville family which had then held the fief were now his most powerful allies. Cecily, Duchess of York was a Neville herself. We Lancaster men called her "Proud Cis" and several cruder epithets, but to her husband's adherents she was still "the Rose of Raby". A babble of voices drifted across the cavernous hall "God split me, this stuff is sour!" someone swore.

"Mayhap you are drinking from a chamber pot!" Laughter

"My mail is rusting from the rain."

"I wish in the devil's name Her Grace would stay put for a while, like York at Ludlow!"

"Ah, who's that fair bit hoisting the trencher of livers?" In nine month's time they'll have to replace every maidservant in the castle, I reflected. I strode over to the keg, grabbed a pewter mug, and bulled my way through the milling knights and squires to draw myself a drink. When I had first come to court seven months before I would have hesitated before shoving any of these young blades aside. Then I had been alone and friendless, confused and overwhelmed by the bustle and the ceremony and the immediacy of politics and statecraft. Being new and last in the pecking order I had been bullied and badgered by the court bravos for a while, but many of them found out that I could only be pushed so far, so that now I was generally left alone.

Filling my mug with the sour beer, I drank deeply and brushed my long reddish-brown hair out of the forth and out of my eyes, making a mental note that I needed to trim it. A hand clapped me heartily on the shoulder, making me choke. It was Tommy Caxton, a blond, wiry young Staffordshire knight who was my only friend in the entourage. "Well, how's the terror of Dartmoor?" he cried.

"Drunk already, are you?" I asked

"Nay, just glad to be in out of that bleeding drizzle and behind stout walls, instead of lying out in the heather like we did last night waiting for some Yorkist rogue to sneak up on me and cut my throat. John, my lad, even though you are an ignorant West Country savage and devoid of every grace and virtue, I mean to do you a good turn. Being a previous visitor to this dingy little keep, I'm going to introduce you to one of the chambermaids I know, as accomplished and accommodating a wench as ever I have known, who but for a slight token of your affection..."

"Since when...?" I began, cocking my eye at the grinning knight, but he cut me off.

"Oh, don't be such a damned prig," he insisted, tugging at my sleeve. "Come on, let's take a walk, and maybe drop a few stones on the swans in the moat for merriment." I allowed myself to be led outside into the chilly, darkening courtyard, still thronging with menials and men-at-arms and those unloading the carts. The castle servants were lighting the cressets, iron baskets filled with pitch-soaked straw, and they sputtered and hissed in the damp twilight. Tommy jerked his head and we mounted the stone stairs to the parapet, where he leaned on a merlon.

"Right, what's all this about?" I demanded. "You know I don't go in for whores."

"You didn't mind lovely Janet at Christmas in London, at the Twelfth Night revel," returned Caxton.

"So I suffer occasional lapses. Why are we out here getting wet and chilly all over again?"

"I have something to tell you and I want you to know about it before the whole bleeding court finds out, which God knows will be soon enough," he said.

"Well?" I asked, frowning at Caxton's unusually serious tone of voice.

"I overheard Wiltshire and Hungerford talking. There's been a rider in from the West Country, awaiting Her Grace's arrival here. Do you know a Devonman named John Brinton, a landed knight of Tavistock?"

"I know him well indeed. He's my brother-in-law. Married my oldest sister, Melissa. Taught me swordplay and the longbow. What about him?" I asked.

"Get this: Brinton, his two sons, and your brother William Redmond rode into Ludlow about a week ago!"

"Damnation!" I cursed angrily. "It's bad enough that my father refuses to attend the court! Now I'm in for it! Has the queen heard yet?"

"If not, she will very soon."

"What about my father? Has he gone to Ludlow as well?" I asked.

"No, Lord Redmond seems neutral thus far. From the snippet of conversation I overheard I gather that he's sitting tight, nor does it look like he'll make a move any time soon." I nodded. Now that William had gone with York and I was here at the court of Lancaster, I could imagine my sire's feelings. He must be the most puzzled by my behaviour, for while brother William had never made any secret of his Yorkist propensities, I had simply left home abruptly and taken service with Margaret, telling no one of my secret personal reason for so doing."

"Old Brinton is a fine man," I said. "Now that he's gone to Ludlow, a good many in Devon will swing towards Duke Richard's party."

"I don't know Brinton," said Tommy, "But I have heard that he is a man of sufficient influence so that Margaret's grip on Devonshire is now shot to hell in a handgun. I don't know what her reaction will be where you're concerned, but I wouldn't gamble on it being pleasant. And I do know how the majority of the court will react."

"I can handle those bog knights and clods in the entourage," I growled. "I've broken enough heads around here to make them back off. But I'm worried about the queen. The only reason she took me on was to keep my district in Devon sewn up by showing favour to the son of a local landowner. I don't think she quite trusts me, under the best of conditions."

"Should she?" asked Caxton flatly.

"What?"

"See here, it's none of my affair, but why in God's name do you stay here? You'll never convince me that you have been taking this guff all winter because you love poor old King Henry, sixth of that name!"

I stared out over the rampart at the grey countryside and the darkening sky. Out there to the west, across England, my brother and my cousins and an iron-hard, great-hearted old man whom I loved well were gathered at Ludlow behind the Duke of York, and I could not deny that I envied them their allegiance and would fain be with them. The name of our sovereign lord evoked only a bitter chuckle from me. "Henry is a feeble-minded imbecile," I said moodily. "Though God forgive me for speaking so about one of His anointed. It is not meet, but it is true. Margaret is a vicious slut who will wreck the kingdom in order to bequeath Henry's throne to her bastard son."

"Agreed. Then why do you lend your sword to support that lewd Frenchwoman and the product of her adulterous dalliance with the Duke of Somerset?" I stood silent. Tommy went on, "I know some who support Lancaster out of greed, and some because they hate Richard of York. But I don't think any of the usual reasons apply to you. There is something here that you want. What is it?" The sound of his voice snapped my mind from its musings, back to the rain-swept parapet and reality.

"You were right at the beginning," I growled. "It's none of your affair."

II.

At the court of Margaret of Anjou, the old feudal custom of the salt still held. The queen found it a convenient device for dispensing minor patronage and also on occasion for disciplining those courtiers who had displeased her. After months of maneuvering and near groveling, I had finally managed to win a seat at mealtimes at the high board above the great ceramic salt cellars, the traditional place for those of gentle birth, and since then I had striven to avoid any misstep which might result in the loss of this distinction. Many knights and gentlemen felt that it was a degradation of the old ways to place any of gentle blood below the salt, and with this traditionalist view I heartily concurred.

Entering the great vaulted hall for the evening meal, I was struck by the fear that Queen Margaret had already shown her displeasure with my relatives by shoving me back down to the lower board with the commoners and the men-at-arms. Nervously, I took my accustomed place at the trestle table above the salt. I did not sit, as the queen had not yet arrived in the hall, but stood by my stool and fidgeted, eyeing the gathering crowd for the steward who would come to reassign me had I been demoted.

I spotted the dinner herald for the evening, marked by his staff of office, a middle-aged man of the professional service class born and raised to court service, wearing the livery

of the House of Lancaster on his back, old John of Gaunt's red-rose emblem. My heart sank as the man espied me and began pushing his way towards my place at the high board. Evidently some of the courtiers had already heard of the Devon defections, for several stopped to watch the little drama unfold. Standing stiff and straight, I fought to control myself. *By God*, I thought, *That churl had damned well better be polite about it, or I'll smash his teeth down his throat!* I stared straight ahead as the liveried servitor tapped me on the shoulder. Gripping my self-possession like a starving dog grips a bone, I turned to face the man. "Your sword, please, sir knight," said the steward courteously.

"Ah, yes, of course," I stammered, fighting to conceal my relief. "I forgot to check it with the squire." No one was allowed to carry swords or other weapons in the hall at mealtimes, other than the marshals appointed by the steward. It was a wise rule, for as the evening wore on and the drink flowed freely, soldiers and knights often became quarrelsome. Since I had arrived at courts there had been a number of fist fights and several outright brawls at dinner which the doorwards had broken up with cudgels and sword flats, although as yet no one had drawn a dagger, these being perforce allowed for the cutting of meat. I unbuckled my sword and sheath and handed them to the steward, who carried them off to the squire-armourer who had charge of the weaponry this evening

There was a bustle as the queen entered, and behind her the ladies of the entourage. Margaret stopped to converse with Lord Hungerford, and also with her current lover and favourite James Butler, Earl of Wiltshire. This gave the women and girls time to find their seats. My eyes searched the female throng, looking for the brilliant yellow hair of one whom I knew would be there. Another old custom followed at the court of Lancaster was the practice of seating the courtiers alternately by sex, with the gentleman serving the lady on his right throughout the meal, cutting her meat for her, keeping the dogs from jumping up on her and stealing her food, and so forth. Within the limits of propriety and discretion, the unmarried ladies were allowed a degree of choice as to whom they sat beside, this hailing back to the old custom of courtly love. I was resigned to having the Dowager Countess of Kent on my left as always, but I fervently hoped that tonight the Lady Melisande would fill the place of favour on my right as she sometimes did.

I saw her across the hall, dressed demurely and simply in dark velvet. I caught her eye, and she smiled and began to move in my direction when another girl came up behind me and firmly stationed herself by my right elbow. I regarded her with annoyance. "Hello, Jeanetta," I said coolly. "I take it you're honouring me with your attendance this night?" Jeanetta Talbot had been flirting and coquetting with me ever since I had arrived at court. What she saw in me I could not possibly imagine. I was the landless younger son of a back-country baron and she was the daughter of one of the most prominent noble houses in the realm, a niece of the Earls of Shrewsbury and Kent, and related by blood or by marriage to virtually every powerful magnate in England. This evening she wore a tall conical headdress with flamboyant yellow streamers, beneath which she let her honey-gold hair hang free, beautiful enough to be sure, but in my mind surpassed by Melisande's shimmering sunlight tresses. "You didn't think I'd leave you to that little hoyden Sandy Grey, did you?" demanded Jeanetta, sticking her tongue out at her rival.

"That's uncalled-for!" I muttered. Across the room the other girl hesitated, then turned away to sit beside a pug named Sir Roger Kenelm. This was not the first time that Jeanetta had deliberately disrupted things between Melisande and me.

"All my family are great fighters," said Jeanetta complacently.

"I call you quarrelsome and boorish."

"But valiant withal. My great uncle was Old Talbot himself, the one they called the Terror of the French."

"So you've told me, numerous times, in fact," I responded wearily. "I seem to recall the four years ago your ferocious uncle got himself blown to pieces in Guienne by King Charles' artillery. Offhand I'd say the French are no longer terrified of you Talbots."

"Fffft!" she hissed

"Don't make that noise. You're a bitch, not a cat," I said rudely.

"Melisande Grey will feel my claws someday."

"Be quiet. It's the opening health." Queen Margaret had taken her place at the head of the high board, Wiltshire on her left. The Earl raised his goblet to open the meal. "My lords and ladies," he intoned formally, "Long live the queen!"

"The queen!" responded everyone.

"And long live King Henry the Sixth!" added Wiltshire almost as an afterthought. Those who weren't already drinking muttered "The king," before draining their cups.

Poor old King Henry was lucky to achieve even this brief deference at his wife's table. The son of the mighty Henry the Fifth of Agincourt fame, he had been born under an unlucky star, out of his father's sword-point marriage to Katherine of France which had brought the insanity-tainted blood of the house of Valois into England's royal line. When his warrior sire descended into the grave thirty-five years before, he had left behind a nine-month-old infant to wear the dual crown of England and France. The trouble spawned thereby tore England in half and lost us all our French possessions. While young Henry grew up pious, sheltered, and naive, his two uncles Duke Humphrey and Gloucester and Henry Cardinal Beaufort fought like tigers over the regency, and their adherents despoiled the kingdom at will. King Harry's French conquests were first held, then whittled away bit by bit, until finally his son's marriage to a princess of Anjou was bought with a huge chunk of English-held France.

Margaret of Anjou had been fifteen years old when she came to England. She was beautiful, sensuous, politically astute, and as lethal as a viper. To everyone's surprise she turned on both factions and destroyed both their leaders. Humphrey of Gloucester died of

poison while attending a special Parliament at Bury St. Edmunds; his wife the Duchess was condemned for witchcraft on highly questionable evidence and buried alive in a castle dungeon so remote no one even knew if she still lived, or where. Cardinal Beaufort she subtly stripped of all his power and reduced to impotence, hurrying him into his grave through rage and sheer mortification. Then, to make her power absolute, Margaret struck at the most powerful of the kingdom's lords, Richard Plantagenet, Duke of York. Here she met her match, and for almost a decade the two of them, queen and duke, intrigued and conspired and snarled and snapped at one another like fighting dogs. Margaret used her weak-willed, religious husband and his throne as a pawn in her game of power, while Duke Richard rallied around him the bulk of the realm's nobility who were jealous of their rights and fearful for their prerogatives, as well as a growing number of merchants and commons who were tired of the years of misrule and chaos. Time and again York rigged Parliaments against the queen, exiling and sometimes executing her lovers. One of York's mercenary captains named Jack Cade had stirred a peasant's revolt in Kent and almost captured London, but Margaret bribed and charmed the aldermen and guilds of the city into defending her, and Cade's rabble were defeated in a pitched battle on London Bridge and routed back into the countryside. York was exiled to Dublin as King's Lieutenant of Ireland, a post meant to be his political grave as Ireland so often was, but in short order he brought such peace and prosperity to the Pale and so gained the respect of the wild Irish clans that he had to be recalled for fear he would establish his own kingdom in the Emerald Isle.

Finally, two years before, open civil war had broken out. Margaret had entrusted command of the Lancastrian army to her lover of the moment, the Duke of Somerset, who was brave enough but devoid of any capacity for generalship or strategy. There was a battle at the village of St. Albans a few miles outside London, the Lancastrians were crushed, and Somerset was hacked down in the streets in his smashed armour. London was open and was captured quickly. Margaret and Henry were trapped in the Tower and were forced to make terms. It was clear what had to be done. The young Earl of Warwick and the Duke's father-in-law, the Earl of Salisbury, were all in favour of imprisoning the queen, waiting a few months, and then having her quietly strangled in her cell one night. King Henry would abdicate and retire to a monastery, and England would have a new monarch. But ironically, Richard of York was no traitor. He was still reluctant to take the final necessary step. So a gimcrack "council" arrangement was cobbled together which in theory gave the Yorkists effective power, and the Duke's army disbanded. Queen Margaret promptly violated the agreement, seized the person of King Henry, and raised troops to defend her position.

So taxes fell into arrears and the Crown fell into debt. Commerce was collapsing, the barons engaged in private warfare, the roads were unsafe, public offices were bought and sold like meat pies at a fair, and justice disappeared as the law courts became the playtoy of whichever action had the most blades. Four decades before England had been the paramount power of Europe; now we were descending into chaos and anarchy, all because of this lovely woman who now presided over the board at Raby with wit, charm, grace, and gaiety.

After dinner I escaped Jeanetta's company with some difficulty. When I returned to my sleeping chamber I found that my helmet and saddlebags had not been disturbed. Evidently the troublemakers were learning their lesson. I was further relieved to see that Tommy Caxton was to be my bedfellow. The court didn't turn into until after compline, the last service of the day, and I had nearly two turns of the glass until then. I was undecided what to do. I wanted to see Melisande if I could, but I didn't know her plans for the evening. Sometimes she would return to the great hall after the tables were stacked for a game of chess, or the new pastime of gaming with painted pasteboard cards. If she were there tonight I could talk to her, although as per usual we would be under the watchful eye of the dowager Countess of Kent or some other venerable crone, assisted by a squad of duennas. The young, unmarried noblewomen of the court were always well attended, and it was seldom that Melisande and I could converse alone.

When I re-entered the great hall, the trestle tables had been taken down and stacked against the walls, and the stools and benches were moved back against the table tops until the next meal. By the light of flambeaux and spluttering cressets I could see several chess and card games in progress, while men-at-arms dined in the corners. A few young men and girls were twanging on lutes or stroking spinets, while a page was playing softly on a recorder, an old Welsh air that I remembered from my childhood in Devon. My sister's husband and family would visit us, or we them, and John Brinton's Welsh squire Toby would play for us. I shook off the momentary twinge of homesickness and searched the hall with my eyes, but Melisande was not present. Sighing, I strode over to a group of hardened tosspots gathered around the ale keg, the third or fourth broached this evening. Tommy Caxton cheerily raised his mug in salute. "Come and imbibe!" he shouted.

"I never cease to marvel at your capacity for drink," I told him, smiling as I filled a mug of my own to the brim with dark brown ale.

"And I ever wonder at your asceticism," he responded. "The world looks so much better over the lip of horn or goblet."

"It doesn't look so good with ringing ears, a splitting head, and a spewing belly the next morning," I said, sitting down next to him. I leaned back, sipping, and spoke softly to him. "Is there any news? I haven't gotten any ordure about William and the Brintons yet. I had at least thought that swine Roger Kenelm would venture one of his wonted stupid sallies."

"I imagine that like always, the luminaries of the court are awaiting a sign from above," Caxton muttered. "You probably have a day or two of grace while the powers that be decide what they want to do about it. Margaret has a lot on her plate right now, and she may let you slide for a bit." He continued aloud, "John, I fear that you have yet to discover the pleasures of a life of sin!"

"Enjoy it here, reprobate, for on death your soul will doubtless drop like a stone into the nethermost pit!" I admonished him solemnly.

"One more thing," whispered Tommy. "Melisande Grey asked me to pass on a message. She wants to see you privately. Now what might that be about, I wonder?" I suppressed a wince. Tommy was just bantering, but he was hitting a bit close to home.

"I'd have been able to speak with her at supper tonight if that Talbot wench hadn't butted in!" I complained.

"Ah, no mystery there," chuckled Tommy. "The whole court has been watching that fine little baggage chasing after you for months. Damn you, man, why don't you partake of such a magnificent repast?"

"I thank you, no. Life is sufficiently complex in this pit of vipers already. I don't need to get illicitly involved with a girl of her lineage. One doesn't trifle with the Talbots. They have a tendency to kill people who displease them. Did Melisande say where to meet her?"

"She asked that you not go blundering into ladies' country tonight in search of her. After matins tomorrow she's going outside to feed the swans in the moat. I trust that's enough said."

After Mass the next morning I sought out Melisande. Morning routine was always rather desultory at court, so no one would miss me or note my absence from the hall of the tilt yard, the long course where the knights practised their jousting. At any rate, few would be running any courses this morning, for the mists were moist and pervasive and rusted weapons and harness. Some young men lounged in the hall and chambers drinking and bantering, while others rode down into the village or into the countryside, hunting or looking for whatever sport offered, be it a horse race or a tavern brawl or a buxom peasant wench.

I seldom wasted my mornings tilting at all, but generally practised with sword or guisarme or shot longbow at the butts with the archers. These were the true weapons of modern warfare, not the mock war of the tournament. There was more than enough of the real thing to go around, or so I thought, for I was as yet unblooded myself and had the usual idiotic young man's desire to see war.

After the morning service I walked along the parapet until I espied Melisande below the east wall. She was throwing bread to the evil-tempered swans, trying to make friends with the great snowy birds. Quietly I descended to the nearest postern and let myself out. The castle watch would be able to see us below the walls, but at least our conversation would be unheard. It was about as private as anyone could get in a castle

I strode to her and knelt by her side. She did not look at me but continued to toss bread to the swans. "Hello, John," she said. "How have you been?"

"Still breathing," I replied cheerfully. "And you?"

"I am quite well, thank you. Did Sir Thomas tell you of my desire to speak with you?"

"Yes. What service may I render you, fair Melisande?" She looked up and smiled softly at the compliment, although I'd made it sound like the typical turn of phrase which protocol demanded of a knight addressing a girl of noble birth. Her eyes were not the blue that her golden hair might have led one to expect, but a soft golden brown.

"I wanted to ask you about your brother," she said. "He's gone over to York." She stopped and watched for my reaction. I shrugged and tugged at a blade of grass.

"I know," I said. "That is his affair."

"Does it not trouble you?" she asked, her tone not quite reproachful.

"I'm not his keeper. Perhaps now William will be attainted and I shall become heir to my father's title and estate." The harshness of my own reply surprised me; I had not intended to sound so brutal, but I desperately wanted to avoid talking politics with Melisande. Damnation! I cursed silently to myself. Why do I always say the wrong thing to her?

"No, John," said Melisande, shaking her head. "I know you're not like that. Sometimes I believe you are the only man I know who isn't." She sat silently for a moment, her hand extended to a huge old swan holding a piece of bread. The bird cocked a beady eye and regarded the proffered hunk suspiciously. Then his long neck shot out like a striking serpent and snatched it. She jerked back her hand with a little cry, and I saw a bright crimson splash of blood hit the murky water and diffuse down into the darkness. I cursed and kicked at the swan, who squawked away in a huff. "He bit you," I said.

"He didn't mean to," she replied sadly. She wiped the blood off her injured finger onto the grass, then dried it on the hem of her gown. I seated myself on the sward next to her, and we watched the swans in awkward silence for a while. "What's he like?" she said after a little while.

"William?"

"Yes. What sort of man is he?"

"Well, he is a man of courage," I said slowly. "A good fighter. He was with Old Talbot at Castillon and was taken prisoner. We had to mortgage our manor to ransom him back from the French." There was silence for while, then I felt compelled to add, "He does what he believes to be right."

"You like him, don't you?" she asked.

"Yes," I admitted. "He is my friend as well as my brother. I like old Brinton too, and respect his judgment. He fought as an archer at Agincourt when he was but fifteen years old, and he was a household knight to Harry Fift afterwards. I've often heard him speak of King Hal, for Brinton loved him well, as did all England. I know he would never betray his old sovereign's son unless his conscience told him there was no other way." Blast! I raged inwardly. Another slip. I knew what the next question would be, one I desperately wanted to avoid.

"Do you think he's right, John?" she asked.

"If I did, do you think I'd be here?" I hedged, scowling.

"I don't know," she replied quietly. "Somehow, I just can't see you as an ardent partisan of Lancaster. I know you don't like the court." I chuckled bitterly at this understatement, for I loathed all things Lancastrian, but I kept my voice steady.

"Not all the queen's adherents are like these," I told her. "There are good and decent men who wear the red rose because they feel King Henry owns their loyalty and true allegiance."

"You still haven't answered my question," she reminded me.

"What would you have, madam?" I demanded irritably. "Should I speak treason? Am I condemned for what my brother does?"

"Oh, John, I didn't mean to make you angry," she said with a little laugh. "It's just that I can't believe you follow Margaret because you love her poor half-witted husband."

"He is still king," I asserted.

"Yes, and withal a good and holy man. I meant no ill. But John, why came you hence? You hate the court, you cleave not to Margaret's cause---no, gainsay me not, it's true. Why do you stay here?"

"Why do you stay?" I asked, which was a stupid question.

"I'm a royal ward, remember? I have no choice," she reminded me. "When my father died Queen Margaret paid my Uncle Reginald twenty pounds for my mainpast, although I haven't a clue why. Reginald's branch of the family is the wealthy one. I've no dowry, only an illustrious name."

"You underrate yourself!" I protested.

"Not really, although it's sweet of you to say so." She cocked her head at me. "Why is it that you never answer any of my questions? You still haven't told me why you follow Lancaster."

This is perfect, I thought. I wouldn't have another such opportunity for months. At last I could tell her. But I could not. The sight of her beauty tied my tongue, and I could not think of the words to tell her of the love my heart held for her, the longing and the loneliness and the anguish of it. I worshipped her, but I bowed my head and said nothing. "You'll not tell me?" she asked, hurt in her voice. "I shall speak of't to no one. I promise."

"I cannot." I could barely speak, my throat was so tight and painful. I stared out across the moat and the fields towards the dark line on the horizon, the royal forest of Durham, trying to gather all my strength to blurt out three short words to her. But within the castle the chapel bell began ringing terce, and Melisande rose gracefully.

"I must go to offices. I've missed them for several days now," she said.

"You're not angry with me?" I asked.

"No, John," she said, touching my cheek fleetingly. "Your counsels are your own to keep. I just wish I knew you better. I think you are the most honourable and admirable man here, and yet sometimes..." She trailed off, and left my side as if suddenly she felt she had said too much, while I had said far too little. I sighed and picked up a stone. Toying with it, I considered casting it at the swans, but because she might be looking back I laid it aside and threw them the last of the bread instead.

III.

Just before the evening meal, Tommy Caxton approached me in the stables as I was giving Thunder a rubdown after his feed. "Dame Rumour hath it that Queen Margaret intends to haul you up for some kind of audience tomorrow or the next day," said he.

"How's her mood?" I inquired.

"Right at the moment she's rather on edge," he said. "There's a big haunch on the fire. Have you met that Morriss fellow yet?"

"Who?"

"Sir Robert Morriss, from Cumberland," returned Tommy. "He rode in just after midday with a large party of gentry from that goodly shire. Margaret's been courting his favour for months now. Although he's just gone twenty he wings a lot of weight in his home county, and he's got connections amongst the Percies and Nevilles and even the bloody Scots themselves. Margaret's been trying to get the North Country behind her ever since the battle at St. Albans two years ago, and evidently Morriss is a man with enough pull largely to accomplish that for her."

"And now that William and the Brintons have gone to Ludlow she needs Cumberland all the more," I said grimly. "Ever since Cade's rising back in '50 she's had the West Country sewn up, counterbalancing the York men in Kent and London. Now my relations have upset that balance and sent all her counters rolling. I can imagine how she regards me now."

"I've heard this Morris fellow has offered Margaret his support. He's here to dicker over the price and he's brought all his Cumberland cronies along to impress the queen with his following and impress them with his importance at court."

"What, specifically, is he asking for?" I asked curiously

"I'm not sure, but the rumours are flying. I've heard he wants wardenship of all the royal forests and fisheries north of the Tyne, administration of all royal manors in Cumberland, a cut of the Bouchier lands if Margaret can ever manage to confiscate them, and get this--command of the castle of Carlisle!"

I let out a low whistle. "Immense wealth and a fortress from which he would virtually rule the North. He has a high opinion of himself for a youth!"

"I gather Margaret shares it. I saw him at the formal presentation this afternoon, and youth or not he's a hard one. These Border reivers have to be, else the Scots or their enterprising neighbours will carry off everything that's not nailed down. Captain Marguerite wants him with us badly, and so she may let you slide for a few days while she strokes Morriss. She may end up giving him Carlisle. Oh, I forgot," Caxton added, "Morriss is also looking for an advantageous marriage. Be interesting to see which of our court lovelies Margaret dangles in front of him as bait."

Sudden dismay struck me. For all her poverty, Lady Melisande Grey was still one of the most high-born noblewomen at court, a close relation to the Greys of Ruthin who, after precipitating Owain Glendower's revolt fifty years before, had managed to land on their feet and come out of the rebellion with seisin of half the land along the Welsh Marches and immense estates throughout the rest of England. It did not take a wizard as Glendower was reputed to have been to prophesy that we were coming into a time when the mortality rate among England's magnates would be high, and distant relations would find themselves inheriting large legacies from men who lay dead on the battlefield of bloody civil war. Melisande was beautiful, vulnerable, and a legal chattel for Margaret to toss like a bone to any swaggering bog-knight who would give her twenty swords to fight her battles against the Duke of York. I grew more disturbed that night at dinner, when Robert Morriss usurped the place of honour by the queen's side, temporarily displacing the morose Earl of Wiltshire. He was a tall and handsome knight with a massive mane of tawny hair, surprisingly elegant and debonair for an erstwhile Border bandit who held his lands with steel. In his following were over a score of more typical Border reivers, scarred and truculent men who thrived on the dangers of the war-torn Scottish frontier. They crowded the hall and conversed among themselves in the half-Scots tongue of their country which was only barely understandable as a dialect of English to those of us from

the South. I knew Margaret would give much to have these hotspurs with us when the showdown came with York.

I momentarily awaited the queen's summons the next day, but it did not come. Her Grace spent most of the day going over the tax records of the City of Durham with several aldermen and the royal revenue commissioners, in an effort to squeeze a few pennies more from those in the town with Yorkist leanings while easing the tax burden on those whose politics were Lancastrian. The afternoon she spent with Wiltshire and Morriss and several of the Cumberland notables. It was an edgy day for me, and I very nearly struck Sir Roger Kenelm over a veiled remark about traitors' brothers. Fortunately both he and I thought better of it before coming to blows; he was missing a few teeth from a previous similar episode and on my part I had no wish to make matters worse by getting into a brawl.

My mood was not improved that evening when I entered the great hall after checking my sword with the armourer, to find Melisande sitting on the right hand of none other than Sir Robert Morriss. That the Northerner should relinquish the seat of honour beside the queen for Melisande Grey was a sinister portent. I did not relish the thought of spending the entire evening watching the two of them exchange banal pleasantries, even though the society of the banquet board was the most sedate and formal of all courtoisie between lady and gentleman. So piqued was I that I considered pleading sickness as an excuse to withdraw, but decided it was best to stay and keep an eye on things. The prospect before me was rendered even more galling when Jeanetta Talbot again appropriated the stool on my right. "You honour me, madam," I muttered wearily.

"So I do," she returned pertly. "I see Lady Grey has found another gallant to sit with tonight."

"Why is it that every time I speak to you, you open the conversation with some derogatory remark about Melisande?"

"Did I say anything derogatory? All I said was..."

"Oh, be still, my lady! I know what you said!"

"My, aren't we surly tonight?" she purred. The opening toast interrupted us. When it was concluded I seated her, then sat down on my own stool. As each course came around she chose what meat and drink she wished, and out of customary courtesy I not only cut her meat and broke her bread for her but emulated her choice of foods

"Protocol can be a damned nuisance at times," I growled. "You know that I loathe lampreys!"

"I picked them to spite you," she said

"I'm sure you did," I returned wearily. "You know that lampreys were what killed King John?"

"You're not King John. Here's a nice fat segment for you. Eat up."

"Why don't you like Melisande?" I mumbled a little while later

"Don't talk with your mouth full," she scolded. "It's very vulgar."

"Since when does vulgarity bother you? It's what you get for making me eat these detestable eels. I said, why don't you like Melisande Grey?"

"Perhaps it's because we're hereditary enemies," Jeanetta replied primly. "In days gone by our families on the Marches spent almost as much time fighting one another as they did battling the Welsh."

"If you go into that declamation about the Talbot grandeur again, bigod I'll stuff this whole bowl of lampreys down your throat! Now answer the question!"

"What question?"

I counted to ten, slowly. "For the last time, madam, why don't you and Melisande Grey get along?"

"Oh, no reason," she replied airily. "She's a mewling little lap kitten of no parts with sawdust for brains, whose only purpose in life is the highly dubious one of ornament, but I've nothing at all against the child."

"God's chillblains, that's no answer!" I exploded. "Although I might add that if Melisande is a kitten you are a spiteful little monkey who does nothing save get into people's things and throw them about!"

"That is no way to speak to someone who is about to do you a favour, sir."

"Your favours put ordinary calamities to shame!"

"I could be offended at that, but I consider the source," she drawled. "I've got something for you."

"And what might that be?"

"I won't tell you here. No, John, I'm not just teasing. I don't think anyone is listening to us prattling, but I don't want to take the chance of being overheard. I've a strong suspicion that this is not something you would want proclaimed to the assembled court."

"Egad, Jeanetta, if this is some silly little..."

"It isn't," she assured me. "I'll take the white wine, please. It goes well with seafood. Will you play chess with me after dinner?"

"Very well," I assented gloomily. "If I don't die from these damnable lampreys!"

At the conclusion of the meal I was relieved to see Morriss retire to the queen's chambers with Her Grace, Wiltshire, and several other courtiers, while Melisande left the hall with the other girls. Jeanetta obtained a chessboard and pieces, and we sat on a bench beneath a flickering cresset and began our game, but before I could speak the Dowager Countess of Kent and another elderly lady appropriated the other end of the bench for a sedate game of dominoes. I suspected that this was deliberate; the Dowager no doubt considered it a major part of her duties as senior lady of the court to keep an eye on so flighty a maiden as Jeanetta, although I personally doubted anyone's ability to keep the Talbot girl on the straight and narrow. I knew Jeanetta well enough to believe that if she wished to conduct an amour, steal the queen's jewels, or practice witchcraft she was quite capable of doing so undetected

At long last the Dowager and her gossip concluded their game and rose. I eyed the chessboard suspiciously. "Stop throwing the game," I demanded. "I know you're not that stupid. Check. Now what is this you've got for me?"

"No, I'm not that stupid. Check yourself, and you lose as bishop."

"Jeanetta..." I intoned dangerously. "Have you eve wondered why the troubadours so often sing of maidens murdered by young men?"

"Fffft!" she hissed. "All right, pushy. This afternoon an old family servant of ours arrived here from the March country with routine reports and a letter from my father."

"He's in Hereford now, isn't he?" I asked abstractly, studying the board

"Mm-hmmm. He's supposed to be keeping an eye on York and Salisbury and Warwick and that lot at Ludlow. But he's got little use for Captain Marguerite, and he openly tolerates Yorkists in his household. The man who came today is one such, and before he came here he stopped off at Ludlow Castle."

"Did he, now?" I exclaimed, my eyebrows shooting up. "See here, I know this whole court is riddled with Duke Richard's agents, but don't tell me that you...?"

"No, no, although this fellow does a lucrative trade in that sort of thing. But in addition to the letter from my father to me, he brought a letter for you."

"Oh," I said. I didn't need to ask who would be writing to me from the Duke of York's stronghold. I sat for a moment, staring at the chessboard without concentration. Suddenly a thought struck me, and I moved my remaining bishop. "Check. Why did this man give the letter to you and not to me?"

"I told him anything related to you should pass through me," said Jeanetta, smiling

"And why did you do that?" I demanded with some heat.

"Why, to protect you, of course. Too many people know that this man is the bearer of all kinds of goodies from Duke Richard. If you were seen in his company they might get ideas. Check."

"They get ideas anyway," I said morosely. I made a movement on the board, and she laughed.

"You just lost your rook," she said, suiting the action to the word

"You just lost the game," I said conclusively. "Checkmate." For a moment Jeanetta studied the board, but there was no doubt that I had her king boxed and nailed.

"I ought to cut your throat!" she said succinctly.

"This is the place for it. All right, do you have this letter with you?"

"Yes. I couldn't risk leaving it about where nosy chambermaids or court spies or those hoydens society has made my equals might find it. But I won't give it to you here in public."

"For once, Jeanetta, you show rare good sense," I sighed. "Very well, my lady, would you care for a stroll along the parapet to some private place where I can read the letter and you can tell all your friends I tried to rip your bodice?"

"No."

"I beg pardon?"

"Oh, any other time I'd jump at the chance, with or without bodice-ripping, but your walking me along the ramparts tonight would attract attention after the way you've been shoving me off for the past six months. The chess game is enough of a break in character for one evening. I imagine you'll be hearing about it when you get back to the bachelor's dormitory. I know I will. The little trollop Margery Chadwicke especially. Now there's a bodice you'd not have to rip."

"Eh?"

"Oh, didn't you guess? We girls have been wondering about you. No one seems to have observed you feeling up the serving wenches, nor have you come around ladies' country plunking a lute or reading wretched poetry to any of us. Other than that escapade with that greensleeves on Twelfth Night we had about decided you were a monk or something."

"Really?" I responded airily. "In these times a monastery is the last place one would expect to find spiritual purity such as mine."

"That was *not* what I meant," she replied archly. "Meet me out behind the stables half a glass before compline. I'll take you to a place where you can read the letter."

At the appointed time she guided me to a small shed behind the castle tannery, deserted at this time of night. The place reeked of raw hides and fuller's earth. She had a lit candle in a tin dark lantern, and she opened it a crack while she took the precaution of stuffing rags beneath the crack at the bottom of the door to prevent any light from showing. Then she opened the lantern full and drew a leather pouch from her long sleeve pocket. "I've often wondered what those floppy sleeves were good for," I grunted as I untied the pouch.

"You'd be surprised how many items of feminine apparel are designed to hide things," she simpered. I held the parchment which the pouch contained up to the candlelight, nor did I object when Jeanetta read over my shoulder. I needed no reminder that she was jeopardizing her position at court and probably a royal flogging by giving me the letter. Like all female rulers, Margaret was more swift to punish and cruelly humiliate women who offended her than men. In my time at court I had seen more than one strung up to a whipping post or writhing in the pillory, and not always servant girls, either. If Jeanetta was willing to take that kind of risk for me, she deserved to know why.

It was from my brother William, as I surmised, written in the strong flowing hand of a monk or a professional scrivener, for William could neither read nor write. The only reason I could was my early preparation for a career in the church.

To my honour'd Brother John, (it ran)

By the time you read these lines you will have heard that I and our kinsmen the Brintons have cast our lots with York. Our most noble and gentle sire hath bade me do all in my power not to tar you with our brush, but the love I bear you allows nought but that I importune you to come hither where I know your heart lies. Father has not a clue as to the cause wherefore you attend upon the queen, nor does Sir John. For myself, methinks I can hazard a guess as to why you have taken a course so false unto your nature, for I watched you closely when we came to the court at Exeter.

How like you are to gain your desire you will of course know better than I, but I fear you shall meet with disappointment. If and when you become convinced of the hopelessness of your endeavours you shall wish either to come unto us or return to Devonshire. In either case you shall pass through long stretches of white-rose territory, and the roads are not safe. I have therefore procured the Duke his seal upon this letter which shall serve as identification and safe-conduct for you. I understand that in your position this could be a deadly thing to possess, therefore think well ere you retain it and do not hesitate to cast it into the fire if you feel at risk.

Come and join us soon, my brother! Our numbers and our puissance grow daily as more and more of this realm's gentlefolk and commons alike grow weary of Margaret's misrule. God grant that I shall see you next in Ludlow's hall and not across some bloody field.

- William

And below William's mark was affixed the seal which might mean my death, along with a few words scrawled in a bold hand. "Custodet cacher et passez J. Redmonde, Eques. - Ricardus Princeps Anglorum et Dux Yorke."

"A thousand devils!" I raved. "Has William taken leave of his senses to send me something like this, now of all times? Does he want to get me shortened by a head? What in God's name was he thinking of?"

"I take it then that you are going to destroy this deadly thing as all good sense dictates?" inquired Jeanetta.

Would I? I thought furiously. My brother was not a stupid man and not generally given to rash acts. Surely he realized he could well be sending me my death warrant? Slowly I calmed down and looked at the matter with as much objectivity as I could muster. Yes, the letter and the pass were dangerous, but occasions might arise where they could also save my life. I suddenly recalled something John Brinton had said to me, the last night at home in Devon before I had ridden to join the court at Exeter. We were sitting by a roaring hearth supping our last tankard of mulled ale. "Lad," he said, "Your reasons for going are your own and I won't pry, but I will tell you this: you're riding into a snake pit. I've lived at court for many years, not just here in England but in France, in Rome, in Constantinople and all up and down Europe. They're fascinating worlds all their own, but bloody dangerous even to those who know the ropes. Power corrupts, without exception, and Margaret is more corrupt than most. Her court is accordingly more dangerous than most and you can be very seriously hurt in every sense of the word if you make a misstep. Keep your own counsel, form your friendships and alliances but stand ready to break them at need, and above all keep as many irons in the fire as you can. Always keep every wager covered, lad, for you never know which is the one that will pay off." Suddenly I understood that although the pass had come from William the agile mind of an old veteran who was my friend was actually behind it. I knew that John Brinton was giving me another iron to stick in the fire, and I was surprised and honoured to perceive that he trusted my judgment sufficiently not to burn myself with it. It was up to me to vindicate that trust.

"No," I told Jeanetta. "I'm not going to burn it just yet. But then who would expect good sense from a Devonshire savage?"

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?" she asked quietly. "You're under suspicion already. If they find that on you you're as good as shortened. I don't fancy seeing your head on a pike."

"Indeed? I should think the sight would amuse you."

"Oh, didn't I tell you?" she laughed. "We're going to be married, you and I."

"What?" I exclaimed. "First I've heard of it!"

"Oh, yes, it's all decided."

"And why me, pray tell?" I inquired courteously.

"I want you to teach me to play chess," she returned prettily. "No, I've marked you as a lad to gamble a life on. You're the quiet type who rises slowly but steadily. Twenty years from now you'll be a lord in this land, John."

"Or get myself killed in the process."

"Possibly," she agreed soberly. "That's the chance one takes nowadays, and there's no surety against bad luck or a stray arrow and a fever. You might die in battle or get thrown from a horse. But then the same applies to any other man, or woman. I might not rise from my first childbed, or I might die of a pestilence that passes you by, or in the course of this coming civil war I might fall into the hands of men who rape me and then cut my throat as a casual afterthought. Death follows behind us all, John, and we can't choose when he will reach for us. But I decided long ago that I could and would choose who will be at my side on the journey. I've chosen you."

"I'm honoured and flattered, madam," I laughed, "But what if I don't choose you?"

"And what's wrong with me?" she demanded, performing a short pirouette and then leaning back against the wall insolently. "I'm no Helen of Troy but I'm not that uneasy on the eye, and I'm a Talbot with a Talbot-sized dowry, a big manor in Hereford and another in Gloucestershire and a chest full of money and jewels. You'd gain more from wedding me than if you were your father's heir."

"Oh, don't think I'm unaware of my penury," I said dryly. "Certain gentlemen around here are disinclined to let me forget it. But I'd be afraid of a wife like you, Jen. You might take a fancy to some stable boy and poison me."

"Ffffft!" she hissed in her catlike way, running her finger across my cheek. "I'll have you in bed with me yet, John Redmond!"

I mistook her meaning. "Well, if that's all you want we've no need of a priest." I stepped forward and hooked my hand under her bodice, quite prepared to swive her on the

tanner's bench or up against the wall, but she promptly sank her teeth into my wrist, and I cursed.

"Try it again and you'll lose a finger!" she informed me in no uncertain terms.

"But you said...?"

"Good gracious, I didn't mean now! I'm not a kitchen wench, sir, I'm a Talbot. You have to marry us first! Don't worry, you'll have your fill on our wedding night."

"If that's a sample of your loving, I'll have to wear full plate armour to bed," I muttered, sucking on the hunk she had taken out of my hand. "Never mind, my immediate problem is what do I do with this pesky letter?"

"I could keep it for you," she suggested.

"You?" I said suspiciously

"You can't keep it anywhere about you. On the other hand, you've made it painfully clear to the court that you've little use for me. No one will suspect me of hiding anything for you. Besides, our female minds are more devious than yours. I can think of a dozen places to hide it, and I can always carry it up my sleeve."

"You omit to mention that I would also be placing myself effectively in your power, which I am loath to do," I reminded her.

"Don't be stupid. You think I'd inform on my future husband? A headless corpse makes a remarkably poor bridegroom."

"Well, I guess I have no choice," I said with a sigh, "Although I must forewarn you that you are mistaken about the future husband idea."

"We'll see," she said, smiling wickedly. I gave her the pouch, and it vanished up her voluminous silk sleeve. "Now I'll go back to ladies' country through the great hall. You wait here for a while and return to the men's dormitory on your own. No one should see us together. I hope you see toads and loathsome hags tonight."

"Sweet dreams to you too, Jeanetta," I replied. She departed with the lantern, leaving me alone in the dark.

IV.

I was kept no longer in doubt as to the queen's pleasure. After mass the next day the Earl of Wiltshire approached me outside the chapel. There was little trace of the polish and

urbanity for which James Butler was famed in his demeanour towards me now. "Her Grace would speak with you privily this morning, in her study," he told me in a low, brusque tone. He did not state the purpose of the audience, nor was I naive enough to ask. "Terce. Be on time." Wiltshire turned and stalked off. Tommy Caxton glided up in the surly nobleman's wake.

"That, I presume, was Margaret's summons?" he asked.

"It was," I replied

"Would it be impertinent of me to ask how you intend to explain away your kinsmen's conduct? Whatever it is you're after here at court, you'll now be lucky to get away with a whole skin unless you can somehow wriggle off this jolly wee hook that your brother and these Brinton gents have stuck you on." I was acutely aware of the truth of his words and I had been pondering my alternatives worriedly ever since I had heard the news, but I had no intention of showing any unease.

"I will simply convince the queen that I do not hold with my brother's actions and that I repudiate them as treason and folly."

"Coz, if you've the kind of silver tongue which can accomplish that, although it has yet to manifest itself to me, then you do indeed have a future here," said Tom with a grim chuckle.

"Gadzoons, it's not as if I'm the only individual around here with any relations at Ludlow!" I protested

"True, but most of the other parties to whom you refer perform some useful service or other for the Lancastrian cause which makes it worth the queen's while to overlook their family skeletons. You offer Captain Marguerite one unblooded sword, and she can get those three for a shilling. But the best of luck to you. Oh, by the by, when Wiltshire's bullies are stretching you on the rack and asking for names, I'd be obliged if you'd forget mine."

"Already forgotten, Tom," I sighed bitterly, although it was a perfectly reasonable request under the circumstances. He clapped me on the shoulder and strode off towards the stables. I had nearly two hours before my interview with the queen, and I wandered deep in thought through the outer bailey of the castle, then across the open drawbridge and beyond the walls. My footsteps took me in the direction of a small orchard perhaps ten rods from the keep. There I sat beneath an apple tree, toying with fallen white blossoms and staring up into the sunny blue sky. Spring was in the air at last; majestic white cloud-mountains floated across the firmament like airy ships under full sail. The beauty of the morning depressed me. I wanted to take Thunder for a run across the dales, or play at bowls, or shoot a few clothyard shafts in good company, not sit and cudgel my brain over a senseless danger which threatened me for no reason having anything to do with rationality.

But I was threatened, gravely. What would be my fate? If I was lucky Margaret wouldn't be in an overly bloodthirsty mood this morning, in which case the best I could really hope for would be dismissal from the court as a security risk, no matter how much I protested my fealty to Lancaster. I would never see Melisande again, never mind ever be able to pay proper court to her. I briefly considered returning to London and waiting on the court's return that I might see her secretly, if somehow I could get her to agree, but that would be madness. I would risk arrest as a spy.

Worse possibilities? I scowled. This was England, not Spain or some petty little German dukedom where a ruler could strong up his subjects without trial, but if Her Grace suspected anything of the true opinions I had formed of the court and of her person, in these times due process would be whatever she said it was, and that was unlikely to be overly punctilious. I harbored to illusions that I could long resist the kind of questioning the queen's officers would inflict upon me; never a man was born who could resist the rack or the thumbscrews for any length of time, and I would confess to whatever Wiltshire or Hungerford might care to fabricate. The last sight of me Melisande ever saw as she rode out beneath the portcullis with the departing court might be my broken body dangling from the parapet. I shuddered at the thought.

The queen was no idealist, and if ever she knew what love was it had been burned out of her in the years of treachery and intrigue. She understood only the cynical pragmatism of politics, the grasping considerations of personal gain. Unless I could defend myself to her on those grounds, I was lost. If I were to tell her I had come here because I loved a young girl enough to give up everything just to be near her I just might save my life, if she believed me, but she would surely cast me from the court as a chuckleheaded fool. She was canny enough so that she didn't want fools around her; fools might lose her the coming battle with York. She locked men to her side by appealing to everything that was base and ignoble, but effectively nonetheless, until of course York came along and made a better offer.

I had come to this court of my own accord and by doing so I had tacitly agreed to play by Margaret's rules. My one hope was to convince the vicious bitch that I could be of some assistance to her in destroying her enemies. I had nothing to offer now. Very well, I would try to show her that I might be a useful tool later. I rose, my decision made, and I brushed the fallen blossoms from my garments and strode back to the castle to bury my honour and my self esteem in the mud.

I stopped off at the bathhouse to neaten my appearance. I put on my only other doublet, a wine-coloured garment of velvet I kept for formal occasions, added a few ribbons and gold buckles to my attire, slid off my boots and put on my good pointed shoes of green and white. There was a burnished steel mirror over one of the basins, and I vigorously scrubbed my face with pumice to remove several days of youthful beard, for I was unable to afford the expensive luxury of a razor. I trimmed my red-gold hair up off my ears and shaved the back of my neck with my dagger, washed my hands carefully, and splashed perfume on my face and rubbed it into my clothing to somewhat sweeten my smell. I

polished my sword pommel, although I knew I would be required to hand it over to an equerry of the royal guard, as well as my poignard, before entering the queen's presence

The queen's chambers were in a wing of the castle which had been reserved for the highest nobles and officers of state, and at this time of day the corridors were notably empty, in contrast to the congested bustle in other areas around the keep. Several small tapestry-covered alcoves were set into the stone passageways, and just around the corner from the royal chambers I caught a motion in one of these out of the corner of my eye and stopped. I recognized the soft slippers with curled toes which were visible beneath the billowing arras. "I see you, Jeanetta," I said. "Come out." She stepped forth. She wore green today, with a blue coif and ribbon in her hair, all trimmed with fox fur. "Egad, now who's a greensleeves?" I laughed. "It suits you. Now why are you spying up here where you've no business?"

"I wasn't spying. I was waiting for you."

"And why is that?" I inquired.

"I heard about your audience with Margaret," she told me. "If it goes ill for you might need a certain document in a hurry. I want to set a meeting place for this afternoon." I was taken aback, but it made good sense, and I told her so.

"I salute your percipience," I said. "Is that tanner's room open during the day?"

"Yes, but we can't use it. It's full of people scraping hides and doing revolting things with earth from the castle jakes. It had better be somewhere in the castle. You might be watched. In fact, not to be a sibyl of doom, but what if they throw you in the dungeon?"

"Then I'm as dead as if I were already swinging. See here, if you hear that I am downstairs in the lockup, you burn that bloody letter and forget I ever existed. For all your transgressions against God and man I don't want you to get hurt because you tried to do me a good turn. Don't try to see me or do something foolish because you think you're in love with me or anything of the kind. This is serious. If Margaret thinks you're involved with me in some kind of Yorkist conspiracy she won't hesitate to toss two ropes over the beam instead of one."

"Don't worry, dear, I mean to ensure that our first dance together is on our wedding day. Have you seen that old wall-up postern in the south wall? There's a guard chamber there full of rubbish. Meet me there half a glass after the midday meal."

"I hope you see me at the midday meal!"

In the outermost chamber which served as the queen's waiting room, I handed my sword and dagger to the knight on guard without being asked and plumped down on an overstuffed upholstered bench. These were normally the personal apartments of the fat little castellan of Raby, whose name I could never recall, but now they served as the royal study and council chamber. There was a private room beyond, the queen's bedchamber, closed to all but her tirewomen, and, in the nocturnal hours, the Earl of Wiltshire and a few other selected gentlemen who assisted Her Grace in delicate matters of state similar in nature to those which rumour declared had produced the kingdom's heir. The Prince of Wales had been born during one of King Henry's periodic spells of insanity, the Valois madness which darkened the sovereign's mind on occasion, and when he came to his senses and was presented with the infant Henry was said piously to have thrown up his hands and declared that the boy must be the child of the Holy Spirit.

Muffled voices could be heard through the oaken door. I glanced idly out of the narrow casement into the courtyard below, watching the bustle of activity, the people and animals going to and fro, trying not to fidget under the gaze of the expressionless equerry. After a while the door opened and from the room beyond emerged Sir Robert Morriss and one of the Cumberland knights, a thick-set bowlegged old sinner with a white face and one eye smashed in by a blow in some long-past fight, and over which the hoary reiver scorned even to wear a patch. A North Country speech whistled through his three missing front teeth. "Wi' the Fenby men and aal my lances we can..." They saw me as I rose and the old man cut himself off. Morriss acknowledged my presence with a curt bow and they left. I was interested to notice that neither Morris nor the older man had been deprived of their swords, no doubt a concession to their fierce Border pride.

The equerry entered the chamber and announced my name, then stepped back out and nodded for me to enter. Through the open door I could see Margaret sitting at a massive, ornate cedar table which served as her escritoire, while Wiltshire and her personal attendant, a gigantic knight of Anjou named Hubert D'Agenais, stood by her side. Wiltshire stood in order more conveniently to read over the queen's shoulder rather than through protocol, for he was wont to flaunt his close personal relationship with Her Grace by sitting in her presence and otherwise flouting courtoisie and precedence.

I knelt down on one knee in the doorway, my head lowered and my feathered cap sweeping the floor. I heard her say, "Rise, sir knight," in a clipped voice, and I did so. "Come here." I entered the room. "Close the door, Hubert. You may look at me while we speak, Sir John." I raised my gaze. I had never seen her so close before. She was twenty-seven, almost middle-aged, yet slim and icily beautiful in salmon-coloured silk embroidered along hem and sleeve with cloth of gold. Her ash-blond hair was coifed in a business-like roll, her slender fingers ink-stained from holding the quill on the table before her. Her face was clean carven ivory, her eyes blue and cold. "I always look in a man's eyes when I talk to him, so I'll know whether or not he's lying. I always know, with a man. Women are a different story. A woman can fool another woman, sometimes. With women I look at their hands. With men I watch their eyes. No man has ever deceived me, Sir John, except once. Only once. The Duke of York. That's one of the reasons I'm going to kill him one day." I knew then that today had to be the second time, or she'd kill me.

"Your family has betrayed me, Sir John. They have betrayed their king as well. What have you to say?"

"Not all my family has betrayed you, Your Grace," I replied respectfully but firmly. "My father has not. I have not."

"Your father sends one son here to court and another to Ludlow to cover both side of our national wager. A transparent ploy, and a common one," she said.

"My father did not send me here, Your Grace. He is apolitical, at least insofar as it is possible for a baron of the realm to be so. William is covering his own wager at Ludlow. I'm covering mine here. One of us will win, one will lose. I think he's backed the wrong horse."

"I see," she said. "You will understand that these treasons have cost me substantial support in Devonshire. Your brother and even more so your brother in law are popular men. This necessarily creates doubt in my mind as to your own utility, not to mention your reliability."

"I owe my allegiance to King Henry the Sixth," I said neutrally.

"Very well and diplomatically put," said Margaret with an unpleasant chuckle. "Sir John, when I enrolled you as a retainer of Lancaster it was in large measure to prevent precisely such an occurrence as this. Now that your relations have ignored your presence here and gone Yorkist, your value to me is nil save perhaps as an example to others of what to expect from opposing me. You voluntarily came to my lord of Hungerford and asked to be engrossed onto my household roll. I was unsure of you then and I am more unsure of you now. I want a quick and straightforward answer to the question I will ask you now. Why do you follow this court?"

"I guessed that William would go Yorkist," I told her, unblinking. "By the law of primogeniture he gains the title and land in Devon when Father dies, while I get a pittance. I want more, much more, and I mean to have it. I am a gambling man, and I'm gambling now that in spite of that little mishap at St. Albans two years ago Your Grace will triumph over York. When that happens William will either be killed or he'll flee the country and be attainted. I will become the next Lord Redmond on my father's death." I was unused to telling such monstrous lies, but the queen merely nodded.

"A commendably practical attitude. You are ambitious, then, and since you desire to advance in the world I presume you have some immediate reward in mind for your service, such as it is?"

I nodded. "I wish to marry the Lady Melisande Grey," I told her evenly, my heart pounding. "She is a royal ward and Your Grace may grant her hand to me."

Margaret stared out the narrow casement abstractedly for a few moments, toying with a paperweight. It was an ivory statuette, carved in the shape of one of Mandeville's mythological bestiary, a beast with flat feet and a nose like a serpent called an oliphaunt. "I can understand why you desire a good marriage," she said. "Your family is rather newly ennobled, is it not? As I recall, your grandfather was a lawyer."

"A rather shady lawyer at that," I confirmed. "He had the good fortune to save Henry the Fourth's life on one of that illustrious monarch's campaigns against the Welsh rebel Glendower, for which he was knighted. His eldest son, my uncle Richard, received the accolade on the battlefield at Agincourt, as did John Brinton and others. My own father served as Richard's squire and was in turn knighted at Patay, where the English fought against La Pucelle..."

"You mean the Holy Maid of Orleans!" snapped Queen Margaret.

"Quite, Your Grace," I immediately reassured her, cursing myself for the slip. "I forgot, we are at peace with your motherland now. Old habits die hard. Forgive me. At any rate, some twenty years ago just before I was born, my father loaned old Humphrey of Gloucester a sum of money, and in lieu of repayment he accepted a baronetcy. But we're just jumped-up country knights, with but a single manor in the entire family. Having that Grey name in the household would be an enormous step up."

"Uniting you and Lady Melisande would amount almost to disparagement," remarked the queen.

"That matters little nowadays, Your Grace, so long as the gap between husband and wife is not too great. Let us be frank: chivalry is dead, if indeed it ever existed at all outside the pages of romance and the songs of the troubadours. Besides, although we are indeed a more, ah, modern lineage, we are a prominent and well respected family, as you yourself have admitted. Nor have we lacked for honours. My soldier uncle was Duke John of Bedford's standard-bearer, and my father was high sheriff of Devonshire for about three years before Cardinal Beaufort conspired to have him removed." Another slip! I bit my tongue, but it was too late to correct it.

"Cardinal Beaufort arranged my marriage with Henry," said the Queen dryly. "Most of his former adherents are now in my entourage, while those still living who opposed him are at Ludlow. And your father was in well enough with that old swine Gloucester to buy himself a barony. Your family has a history of enmity with my faction. In short, your credentials are rather poor right now. What have you to offer me in exchange for an important royal wardship?"

"I know that William and the Brintons have undermined a good deal of your support in Devon," I told her smoothly. "They are indeed popular. But the damage isn't irreparable. I'm a Redmond, too, and I am fairly well hooked into the grapevine down there. I can tell you who's irretrievably lost to Richard of York and who's wavering. I can give several of Father's enemies the needed excuse to step in against William and the Brintons, and I can

tell you how to seize upon every local issue to your advantage. I can build an organization which will hold the West Country fast for you."

"I do need help in that area," she admitted. "Unfortunately, there are difficulties. Sir Robert Morriss, for one, since he also wishes to wed the lady in question." My heart sank, but I maintained my poise. "Tell me," Margaret went on, "Why do you desire to wed her, a poor girl with no substance to speak of? There are other girls with more material rewards to offer you. For example, I am given to understand that Gerald Talbot's daughter would not be averse to wedding you."

"I'll grant that Lady Jeanetta is handsomely endowed in every sense of the word, and I realize that the Talbot name is naught to sneeze at. But as I said, I'm a gambling man. Jeanetta is far down the line for both family earldoms, with two uncles and a plethora of assorted cousins ahead of her, and in any case the honours of Shrewsbury and Kent put together do not command as much as the Ruthin appanage. Lady Melisande is the sole niece of Reginald Grey and if memory serves, the only marriageable female in the house. Lord Grey has two sons, one of whom is sickly and not expected to survive childhood. If both die without issue, Lady Melisande's husband will enjoy the whole Ruthin estate. I want a crack at it."

"I can understand that," replied Margaret with a nod. "It is neither the most distinguished nor the largest of the realm's holdings, but in terms of real wealth it is one of the richest in England."

"Precisely, Your Grace."

"As such it is of concern to the crown, and the potential line of succession is of concern as well. But Reginald Grey's eldest son is hale and hearty and betrothed as well. He may produce an heir, and then all you'd have is a useless pretty pauper."

"Your Grace, of course, knows more about the national situation than I," I returned deferentially. "However, it is plain to any thinking man that the present disturbed state of affairs cannot endure. Something must give. Am I correct in assuming that before two years are out, there shall be open warfare once more between Lancaster and York?" The queen nodded wordlessly. "Well, then," I continued, "Sir Thomas Grey is not due to be wed until a year from now, when his bride shall turn thirteen and the marriage can be consummated. That young, it might be a while before she conceives. I know Sir Thomas by reputation as a wild and impetuous youth, violently inclined and courageous to the point of stupidity. Likes to fight cornered stags with only a dagger, that kind of thing. If he doesn't get himself gored or spiked in a tavern brawl or some similar idiotic end, I believe that he will fall gallantly in your service when war comes. My brother once described to me Thomas Grey's conduct during the assault at Castillon, and clearly nothing but divine providence preserved him from death. Such good fortune cannot last." Margaret sat silent, deep in thought. I urgently wondered what was going on behind those eyes of coldest azure, but I was beginning to feel faintly optimistic. I had at least succeeded in putting myself on a credible footing with the queen, for she was obviously

appraising my scheme, assessing its implications, her razor-edged mind hard at work calculating, hypothesizing, extrapolating, second-guessing.

"The fact remains," she said finally, "That Morriss also wants to marry the lady for much the same reasons, although I believe he's also very taken with her personally as well. He's shown himself to be an enthusiastic supporter of mine at a crucial time. Why should I prefer you to him?"

"For one thing, Your Grace, Sir Robert Morriss is a leader in his own right. Should he ever become dissatisfied with your party there would be nothing to prevent him from turning his coat. In my case, however, my title and fortune would depend in the first instance on my brother's attainder, which means it would depend on the victory of Lancaster."

"Ah, yes, but if your designs on the Grey holdings ever bore fruit you might consider yourself powerful enough to turn against me," said the queen

"The same consideration holds true, Your Grace, for Sir Robert Morris. More so, because he will not have gone so far or done so much to earn your favour as I shall have done."

The queen leaned back in her chair, slightly more relaxed. "So it comes down to the political consideration of where I need the support most, Devon or Cumberland? Both far-flung shires away from the centre of the realm where the action is likely to be. Cumberland is a border county, though, and I may need the Border to hold back the Scots."

"Or you may need the Scots to help you catch York between two fires, Your Grace," I suggested. "In which case their hereditary enemies in Cumberland will not be so pleased to assist, no matter what benefits they have gained from the crown. The politics and feuds and inter-family relationships of the Border are complex to the point of incomprehensibility, madam, virtually impossible for an outsider to unravel, but you must always remember that a Border lord is a Border lord first and an Englishman or a Scot second. Most families up there have married into Scots clans on the other side. It is not unknown for Englishmen and Scots to join forces to raid or punish or seek revenge on enemies of either nationality. National identities tend to blur between Hadrian's Wall and Galloway."

"Your point?"

"Morriss comes from a world of complicated and wide-ranging loyalties and associations, Your Grace. He will always have somewhere else to go if you displease him, other irons in the fire. I will be burning all my bridges when I go against William and the Brintons. I will be your creature. If Lancaster falls, my hopes fall. Besides, I submit to you that a recovery of what appears to many to be a reverse in the West would do better for your cause than a tenuous commitment from a largely uncommitted shire even more remote from the center of things than Devonshire."

"Whom can you deliver?" she asked. "Who, specifically, can you pull in on my side? How about Peter Marmion?"

"Yes, I'm told Your Grace has had your eye on him for some time. Understandably, of course, since he's the richest merchant in Exeter and is prominent in all the important guilds. There's a simple way to Master Peter's heart. Through his purse."

"I had hoped that the flow of gold would be from his coffers to mine, and not vice versa," said Margaret flatly.

"There is a bribe which would cost Your Grace naught but parchment and ink. Some years ago my father received a royal license to vend our manor-made ale in the city of Exeter, to the detriment of Peter Marmion's breweries, which are the largest in the town. It would be worth much to him to have that license revoked." In silence the Earl of Wiltshire leaned over and scribbled a notation with a quill in a quire of paper on the escritoire, and bitterly I realized that I had just impoverished my father by a quarter of his yearly income.

"Any chance you might be able to bring Lord Redmond himself over to us?" asked the queen. "He'd be an even better counterweight to your brother and the Brintons."

"I would tend to doubt it. For one thing, his political views genuinely diverge from Lancaster. For example, he has always favoured this country's traditional alliance with Burgundy over the French ties which Your Grace and the late Cardinal Beaufort have cultivated. Then again, the counsels of his eldest son and his old friends like John Brinton will certainly weigh more with him than mine. However, I believe I can keep him neutral, in the early stages at least. He and I have always got on fairly well, although that may change as I perforce kick over more of his apple carts in the service of Your Grace."

"What about Sir Henry Cabot?" asked the queen.

"An old feud with the Brintons. He shouldn't take too much persuading," I assured her with a shrug.

"Sir James Byerly?"

"The same," I replied

"Sir Walter Haddon?" asked the queen.

"Your Grace's assistance in the matter of a divorce would work wonders there," I told her. "His wife is barren, and he is frantic for an heir."

"Make a note of that, James," commanded Margaret. "Find out which prelates require their palms crossed with silver. Probably the Bishop of Exeter to start with. Sir John, I want that blasted Exeter mayor Shillingford removed. He is insolent and too

presumptuous in insisting on the city's charter rights. Which guilds should my agents there stir up against him?"

"Shillingford was a butcher, and there is a bad cleavage in his own guild, if Your Grace will pardon the unintentional pun. The poulterers want independence and their own seat on the corporation. The chandlers and bakers and smiths are firmly behind Shillingford, but Peter Marmion can swing the goldsmiths and the brewers, and if you can procure the election of a man named Jennis Henson as councilman for the masons he can be counted upon to oppose Shillingford in all things."

"Another matter, Sir John," said the queen, imperceptibly allowing me the status of an advisor now. "Lord Thomas Courtenay, the brother of Devon's earl, has asked me to rescind a decree of exile against his son Cedric. The man has been rotting in Ireland for several years on foot of some criminal case. No one knows his political bent. Do you?"

"I know nothing of his politics, Your Grace, and I rather doubt he has any," I told her earnestly. "The man is a lunatic. He was exiled for the nasty murder of a young girl out on Dartmoor. Violated her in every conceivable way, naturally and unnaturally, and then strung her up to a tree limb and flogged her to death. I hear that in Ireland he has gathered about him a band of outlaws, Irish and the scum of the English garrisons, and he spends his time raiding the Gael to plunder them and capture women, whom he carries back to some stronghold in the bogs he's built, where he rapes and tortures the wretched girls until they die or go mad."

"This is going to be a very nasty war, and we'll need experienced outriders," decided Margaret. "He will be sufficiently grateful to us for ending his exile to place his sword at our service. Draw up a pardon, James, and inform Sir Cedric by letter that he may bring with him on his return to England all his present retainers and men-at-arms. I must admit, Sir John, that you seem to provide proof of your pudding. You have a mind refreshingly free from idle scruple. I like that." Indeed I have proven myself worthy to serve her, I thought. I had robbed my father, condemned poor Lucy Haddon to a bitter end in a convent or some relations' begrudged corner, stirred up strife in Exeter which would probably end in bloodshed, and loosed a homicidal madman and his hand-picked band of marauders upon England, all in the course of a single conversation.

"I'm sure Your Grace begins to understand my potential value to your service," I said suavely. "Sir Robert Morriss brings you swords, but swords can always be had. I bring you my refreshingly unscrupulous mind, as you put it, a commodity not completely unknown in these times, to be sure, but of sufficient rarity to merit a royal ward, I should think."

"Ensure that your head remains at my service, Sir John, else it shall not long remain on your shoulders," she said flatly. "If you begin to win men over to Lancaster for me, you may begin to entertain the delusion that you can convert them to York at your pleasure. Disabuse yourself of any such notion. Traitors are common these days, true, but when the blades are unsheathed then you will find my memory long for slights and betrayals. You

state your case very well. I must confess I never took you for so cold blooded a realist, and that as you say is a quality sufficiently rare to warrant reward. Well, I think I can persuade Robert Morriss to take another bride. He shall have other compensations, after all. Very well, you are hereby betrothed to Melisande Grey. You may have the nuptials celebrated in June. As your wedding gift I'll present you with a house of mine in Southwark. I'll be touring Kent and Sussex in July, but I'll excuse you from attendance on that trip. If you're going to be married to the lady, you should at least have some time to get to know her before you are called into the royal service; you won't have too much time together for some years after that, I fear. Once we defeat York I'll give you a post in the West Country commensurate with the service you've rendered, if you live up to your promise. You will rejoin the court in September; I want to be off to Devon by Michaelmas and start repairing some of the damage your relations have inflicted on our cause out there. I have to have the Western counties shored up before the crunch comes with York. I can't have a strong Yorkist presence on my flank when we move on Ludlow."

"You are magnanimous, Your Grace," I assured her.

"I can be, to those who serve me well. You are dismissed for the nonce."

"My queen, may I inform the Lady Melisande of these happy tidings?"

"Not yet. The Dowager of Kent is in charge of the unmarried women and it's her prerogative. Protocol and all that." I began backing out of the royal presence. "Sir John," she called after me. "A final word. Try to be kind to the girl. Political marriages are a necessary evil, but they can be...hard on a woman. Believe me, I know."

I bowed low. "Your Grace, I shall do even as you say."

V.

At the midday meal I noticed that Melisande again sat by the side of Sir Robert Morriss, which at first chagrined me, but then I reflected that she had not yet been told of our betrothal, and so the delay became in a way almost pleasant. The seat on my right was taken by a plump, giggling Lincolnshire girl whose name I could never recall, but halfway through the meal I managed to catch Jeanetta Talbot's eye about a dozen places down the board and give her a nod that all was well. She looked away, but I knew she had seen me. I would meet her that afternoon and destroy the embarrassing Yorkist document she held.

She was at the disused guardroom before me, and I found her seated cross-legged on a pile of woolsacks. She rose quickly as I entered the chamber. "What happened?" she demanded.

"We can speak up," I told her. "There's no one about. They've organized an impromptu tournament this afternoon. Morriss and his Cumberland lads are going to run a few courses against our best lances."

"I heard," she said in a normal voice. "What happened? Will you need your pass?"

"Yes, but not to use it. I want that thing destroyed."

"Why?" asked Jeanetta.

"Because I won. I cleared myself of suspicion and I got what I came here for. Melisande Grey and I are to be married in June." I saw her face and realized that I had dealt her a blow. "Egad, Jen," I exclaimed in surprise, "You weren't telling the truth about all that blather about wanting to wed me?"

"In sooth I was," she said quietly, looking away from me. "I didn't know it was so...serious with you and Melisande. It would appear that I have been making a fool of myself. How were you able to court her without my hearing of it?"

"I wasn't, not really. She doesn't know how I feel about her. I'm going to speak to her this afternoon. Damnation, Jen, I'm a block! I should have told you I loved another from the very start. It's just that, well, it's rather difficult to take you seriously sometimes."

"Apparently," she said briskly, wiping away a tear. "Well, there's nought for it. Don't worry, John, I won't trouble you with any female foolishness, nor shall I impose my unwanted presence on you any longer. We're all chattels, from me and Melisande down to the peasant girls who carry the trenchers. We grow up knowing that full well, yet we still wail like a Greek chorus when we are reminded of the fact in our own lives. But pray, how did you happen to win the hand of the fair Melisande from so tight-fisted a custodian as Her Grace?"

"I promised to be her boot-licker, hod carrier, errand boy and eventually no doubt her hangman in Devonshire. When the war comes I'll fight my family and my friends and kill whoever she tells me to kill. At some point it's got to end, though, and then I will take Melisande out of this pigsty and we will make a life together."

"And what if York wins?" asked Jeanetta.

"Then I'll die knowing that in my heart I wanted nothing but her happiness and mine, but it was not God's will that I attain it at the price I have paid. That's the chance I have taken."

"I see. You have rolled the dice of fate with the queen of England and with God himself for her, when you could have had me for the asking? *Damn you! Damn you!*" Tears coursed down her cheeks now. I tentatively reached for her hand, but she jerked it away. "Oh, God, you've made me cry, you *bastard!* No one has ever done that! I didn't even cry

when my mother died!" I stood by in embarrassed silence; she trembled for a bit and then pulled herself together. "John, forgive me. This is my fault. You are not responsible for my foolish flights of fancy."

"As God is my witness, I never meant to hurt you," I told her gently.

"I wonder how many times have those words been spoken between a man and a woman?" she whispered.

"Times beyond counting, I suspect," I sighed. "I also suspect they are usually true."

"Here," she said, handing me the leather pouch from beneath her sleeve. "You can tear a strip from one of these sacks and burn it on the floor." I followed her advice and made a little pile of rags and twigs and dry dirty leaves upon the earthen floor. I then took out the letter and scanned its deadly contents. "Have you a flint and steel?" asked Jeanetta. I took them from my wallet and handed them to her, and she struck sparks until the tinder caught, blowing on the flame gently. "Ach! John, your flint came out of the lock! Can you fix it?" I laid the parchment on a woolsack and worried the pyrite flint back into the lock. "*Merde!* Someone's coming!" hissed Jeanetta. "They must have smelled the smoke!" I moved to the plank door and listened, but heard nothing. When I turned again a parchment was burning high and hot. "No one's there. Best stamp that out quick, though," I said, suiting the action to the word. "Jeanetta, you have my gratitude for your help. Would you think it cruel if I asked you to my wedding in June?"

"I shan't miss it," she replied lightly, now apparently restored. "Are you going out to the tournament? Morriss and his Cumberland clods should be hard pressed at the tilt by some of our court hotspurs like Aymer Chandos and your old gossip Kenelm."

"I may watch for a while, but mostly I want to speak with my betrothed this afternoon, although belike our discourse won't be as pointed as yours and mind is wont to be." I bowed to her and strode from the chamber, intent on my own thoughts, convinced that a potentially unpleasant loose end had been tied up.

In the years since, I have often thought on the scene I left behind me in that dusty small chamber that day. Did she weep aloud? Curse my name? Curse Melisande? Curse God? That might have been the way of it to the eye, had anyone been there to see, but what has troubled my mind and sometimes woken me in the night is the thought of what was done to a human heart, a human soul. Can I really say that she did it to herself? Reason and justice tell me that I am not responsible for what came after, but conscience always niggles. "You should have foreseen...you should have known...you could have done something if only you'd had the wit to understand." It has taken many years, but I know now that everything which made my life what it became was decided on that afternoon,

with a few heedless words between two confused young people who were yet hardly more than children. The die of my lifelong suffering was cast.

A ladies' country chambermaid informed me that Melisande and a group of girls had gone out to watch the tournament. The tiltyard was about a bowshot from the drawbridge. New sawdust had been laid, and the lane chutes newly whitewashed. The queen and the Earl of Wiltshire were absent, but Lord Hungerford was presiding as marshal of the tourney, and at either end of the lists the Cumberland knights and our own court champions had raised their shields, pennons, and guidons. I joined Tommy Caxton on a grassy hillock where he lounged with a number of the more indolent knights. He saluted me with the inevitable foaming ale jack. "Well, you look like the cat that got the cream," he said. "I gather all went well with the queen? Not off to be a doorward in Dublin, are we?"

"Exceeding well," I laughed, seating myself beside him. "Rather dry afternoon."

"The hint is taken." Tommy gestured to his squire. "Samkin, a mug for Sir John. No, just bring us a keg and a save yourself a few trips." The squire trotted down the hill with a page in tow, and returned from the sutler's wagon lugging a cask between them. The loafing knights knocked in the bung and filled their mugs. "Ah, the perks of the royal service!" exclaimed Caxton. "This would have cost several shillings in a tavern."

"King Henry is well served in you," I said. "Most of his retainers he must pay in pence, but you he pays in pints!" The heralds were riding the bounds of the lists, crying out for last minute competitors. "To arms, messires!" came the ritual calls. "Here is glory to be won! To the lists, show your prowess! Fair eyes gaze upon your deeds of valour this day!"

"Fuck the fair eyes," said Tommy.

"Is that how you do it? Certes, so that's why all the maidens flee at your approach!"

"Fly away, little bird," said Tommy. "Now tell me the tale. Are you completely clear of all taint, your soul immaculate in Lancastrian virtue now? And if so how did you do it?"

"Clear as a babbling brook, Tom," I returned. "As to how I did it, I spoke to the queen in her own language."

"In French?" asked Tommy, puzzled.

"No, Tom, that's not the language I meant. I'll tell you later. When are they going to start the jousting?"

"They're waiting on Morriss. He was summoned before the queen just after midday meat today, and he just rode down from the castle ere you arrived. He's probably still arming."

I downed my ale quickly. "Something I must attend to," I said, climbing to my feet. I pushed off into the crowd looking for Melisande. I wanted at least to be present when she was told of our betrothal. The throng was thick, and I had difficulty in making my way through the milling spectators, pie vendors, beer carts, and armoured knights. Finally I shouldered my way to the chest-high palisade demarking the tiltyard, searching the faces across the lists, looking for Melisande. The trumpets sounded for the first course, and in spite of myself I stopped to watch it run. Jousting is increasingly irrelevant on the modern battlefield, but it is still a breathtaking spectacle. The thundering hooves of horses in heavy brocade jupons and men clad in iron and steel shook the earth, churning the sawdust freshly laid over the spring mud, and at the crash of the impact and the splintering of the wooden lances a roar arose from the spectators and the trumpets blared simultaneously, making a sound unlike any other on earth. I knew these men to be nothing more than carrion crows in human form, but at such moments the old ideal of chivalry seemed to live and breathe again, and rise above the hatred and greed which surrounded us all.

Then I saw Melisande, standing a bit apart from the crowd, in the company of a dumpy female whom I recognized as the Dowager Countess of Kent and a knight fully accoutered in gleaming plate armour, tawny of mane, immediately recognizable as Sir Robert Morriss. It took me a few moments to stride up to them, the Dowager Countess moving away even as I approached. Morriss spied me, frowned, and bowed truculently. Melisande was startled to see me, and she dipped low in a formal curtsy. "Hello, John," she said, eyes modestly downcast. "I am informed that you are to have my hand in two months' time. I was unaware of so personal an interest on your part."

"It seems you've had the better of me, sir knight!" barked Morriss

"I trust you conveyed these tidings to my Lady Grey with proper speech and courteous demeanour," I replied coolly. Meddling ass! I cursed silently. My hand was on my sword hilt. If you would quarrel then I am for you.

"Certainly, messire, although we Cumberland men are ever forthright of speech and scorn going about our elbow to get to our thumb. I accompanied her ladyship of Kent that I might return to Lady Melisande her kerchief, which I meant to wear in today's tourney and which she was gracious enough to bestow upon me a few hours gone. Under the circumstances I must now decline her favour as inappropriate." He lowered his helmet over his head, snapped his visor shut, and stalked off to the lines where his squire held his mount.

"A surly fellow," I remarked

"He but speaks in the manner of his country," replied Melisande, her eyes still downcast.

"You know he also desired to wed you?" I asked her.

"Yes. He told me. He even did me the courtesy of asking me before he asked the queen."

I sighed inwardly. "May I ask what you replied?"

"I told him it wasn't up to me, that I was in the queen's mainpast. I also told him I was deeply honoured. As I am honoured by your suit as well, of course," she concluded diplomatically. A roar went up from the crowd. Morriss was running his first course, against my old enemy Sir Roger Kenelm. It was an even toss of the coin which I hated worse. There was a resounding crash, and both lances splintered, giving equal honour to both, but Kenelm was reeling in his saddle and as he turned his squire ran up and jerked at a girth which seemed to have been knocked loose by the force of Morriss' blow. The Border lord whirled on his destrier light as a butterfly, snatched up a second lance from the row by the lists, and snapped it down into *encouché* with a flourish. Interested despite myself, I watched him run the second course, flashily changing hands with his lance and standing in his stirrups for the impact, a real crowd-pleaser. This time Kenelm went flying head over heels, bounced off a chute two rows over, and rolled in the mud. For a moment I was tempted to run and scrounge up some armour---Tommy Caxton was about my size and obviously wasn't going to be using his today---saddle Thunder and challenge the new champion, but I discarded the idea quickly. There was no need. I had Melisande, not he. I had nothing to prove.

"Will you walk with me in the orchard, my lady?" I asked her. Gravely she assented and offered me her arm. We strolled to the secluded dell here I had spent the morning and conceived my successful plan to make her mine. We sat beneath the same apple tree, now glowing in the rays of golden afternoon. Melisande sat silent for a time, staring off into the distance at some object I could not discern, while I watched her in worshipful silence, drinking in her pristine loveliness and reveling in her possession. Aye, she was well worth any betrayal. "Why do you want me, John?" she asked suddenly.

This time there was no hesitation. I took both her hands and knelt upon the grass beside her. "Because I love you. I have loved you since I first laid eyes on you, kneeling all alone in the chancel at Exeter Cathedral, the beauty of your spirit blazing like a torch that blinded me. You didn't see me then. I hid behind a pillar, for I was afraid to approach you. I thought you were the queen herself, or perhaps some saint or angel descended to earth for a brief moment. Then when I saw you again that night at the banquet and learned that you were not only mortal but unwed, I knew what my purpose in life was to be. I had to follow you then, and now I know that somehow I must preserve you from the evil that abounds in this place, in all of England in these times."

"You speak well. I am told you spoke as fair and glib to the queen. Did you have to betray your brother and your friends in order to gain my hand?"

"How do you know that?" I asked, startled.

"Sir Robert told me. Oh, I know everything is ruled by politics. I've seen that long ago. But was there no other way, John?"

"No, my love, there was no other way," I told her simply. "A ruler like Margaret needs one thing above all else, the total complicity of men completely without scruple. I cannot acquire lands, I cannot draw down gold from the air or make a thousand soldiers rise from the earth full-armed. The only thing I had to offer her was myself, and you're right, I did speak fair and glib to her. I had to phrase that offer in the terms she would accept. If I'd told her I want you because I worship the ground you walk on she would have laughed her head off and then had me scourged from the court as a madman."

"But it's wrong, John!" she protested

"Yes, my love. It is. I must do wrong for the queen so that I may do right for you. Otherwise I can do nothing for you at all, and you will be given to some brutal baronial bully like Robert Morriss who will enjoy your beauty and your body for a brief time and then use you for breeding stock, while he neglects you if you're lucky or beats you bloody if you're not. Can you not see how much I love you from the fact that I am willing to incur such sin for your sake?"

Damnation, this isn't the kind of thing I should be saying to her! I cursed inwardly. "What have I done, really?" I demanded of her. "I am a knight and a knight's business is war, the defense of his lord and his sovereign's interest. I have simply committed myself to serve England's lawful king and queen in fact as I already do in name!"

"You know that's not true, John," she said quietly, not looking at me. "You know quite well what's coming isn't going to be that kind of war. You know that sooner or later, if you become the kind of man you have promised Her Grace you shall become, then you're going to have to put the fire to someone's roof and lay the whip on someone's back. Then the day will come when she orders you to murder someone. When you do it, how do you think I will feel knowing that I am involved, however indirectly? If you love me as much as you say, how will you feel?"

"And if I were to go to Ludlow and join William and the Brintons?" I asked. "Do you seriously think when the crunch comes Duke Richard won't be just as quick to burn and hang and cut down his enemies? With Richard I'd have my brother and my old friends, true. With Margaret I have you, and I love you more than life itself. I think Bill and the Brintons would understand."

"Then I'm sorry you did it, John," she said. "There's enough evil in the world. I had hoped to stay clear of it."

"I have often wondered why you haven't entered holy orders," I asked her. "I would have thought your relatives would have encouraged it in order to make sure no bog-knight like me married you and produced a rival collateral line of Greys."

"I am not worthy to be a bride of Christ," she said simply. "Why did you never become a priest?"

I started. "Who on earth told you I studied for the priesthood?" I demanded, dumbfounded.

"You are but a second son, yet you can read and you can write a clerk's hand, as I saw when you were so kind as to send to me that poem you wrote for me. When I have stood near you at Mass I have heard you make all the responses in correct and grammatical Latin. You shave your face every day, a clerkly habit noticeable among knights who usually shave every week or ten days. You also use a fork instead of your fingers at meat. I deduced a clerical education cut short. Am I wrong?"

"You are very observant, although I use a pumice stone, not a razor," I chuckled. "Yes. The Cistercine house in Exeter. It was the usual second son arrangement. We've only one manor and it barely could support William and his family. It was the only way my father could ensure a decent living for me. Then Bill was captured a Castillon, only for months we didn't know for sure whether he was dead or a prisoner or whether we could afford a ransom if he was alive. My father had to bring me home in case I turned out to be heir by default, so to speak. When the situation with William was resolved and he was on his way home, I went to my father and pleaded a release from my ecclesiastical career. He thought I was making a very serious mistake and told me so, but he's not the kind to force something like that on his children."

"Why didn't you want to be a priest?"

"Because the sheer rottenness of the church appalled and disgusted me," I said. "The oblate's house in Exeter was a kind of combination grog shop, brothel and bedlam. Oh, don't take me wrongly, the brothers did teach every skill necessary to run a parish, work in a chancery court or a magnate's household administration, even become a royal official. I can tot up a column of figures and write not only in that fine clerkly hand you noticed, my love, but also transcribe a court session in shorthand, write a legal pleading in Latin, draw up a deed of transfer in the correct form, keep balanced ledgers for any major household or abbey, and function as a notary. But the one thing they didn't teach there was the love of God, Melisande."

"You have to be taught that?" she asked.

"Apparently, because I couldn't find it within me in the face of all the corruption and cynicism."

"You must seek for it within you, John. You shall find it."

"I have sought it. And I found love of you instead." She was silent. "Melisande, I know you don't love me. That means that in our early days together I'm going to have to love enough for both of us."

"Love me while you hover like a harpy waiting for my family to die off so you can inherit the Grey estate?" she asked bitterly.

"Morriss!" I grated. "By God, I'll settle with him!"

"If you love me then don't seek a quarrel with Robert Morriss," said Melisande urgently. "My lord, please don't misunderstand. I am the queen's ward and her subject as well, and I accept her decision in this matter. You will never find in me other than a dutiful wife, John. As to love, I hope as much as you do that it will come in time, for a marriage can indeed be long and bleak without it." The wind ruffled her golden hair, dancing like sunbeams around her shoulders. "I'll try to love you, John. I swear to you that I'll really try."

"Then you must promise me, and promise yourself not to dwell on what I must do in order to earn this chance I have been given to make you happy," I urged her. "It's a wicked world, Sandy, and everyone has to do things they're not proud of sometimes. I know how cynical that sounds, but unfortunately it's true. And always remember that I love you."

"Why did you say nothing to me before?" she asked, beginning to relax a bit for the first time.

"Did you never guess?" I asked gently.

"I suppose I must have. I just never imagined that anyone could be in love with me." I leaned over and kissed her, and felt the soft touch of her face beneath my hand and her hair on my cheek. She returned the caress shyly. "That's the first time anyone has ever done that," she whispered. "Except for my aunts, I mean."

"It won't be the last," I said, suiting the action to the word. So we sat for a while under the apple tree, not saying anything, and after a while we arose and walked back to the crowd hand in hand, where the tiltyard rang with the blare of battle horns and the clash of knightly arms.

VI.

I returned to the bachelor's solar that night in merry fettle, whistling. Melisande had sat beside me at meat, we'd played draughts and got on cheerily during the evening. "My, aren't we jolly tonight?" chuckled Tommy. "But then you've reason to be, I hear. How fares your newly betrothed?"

"Oddsbodikins, is nothing secret around here?" I swore.

"Very little. We are all players, perpetually on stage, and you seem to have found some good lines indeed today. At long last methinks I perceive the reason for your attendance upon Lancaster."

"Tell me then, why do you follow the red rose?" I responded with irritation. "You don't strike me as the high-minded type."

"Nor am I, saints be praised!" said Tommy fervently, crossing himself. "Sooth, my father is not at all convinced that Her Grace is going to win the upcoming scuffle with York, but just in case he's sent me here to put his loyalty to Lancaster on record, while he plays footsie with those gentry to the west of us. If Duke Richard triumphs and ascends the throne, my sire can cadge a pardon for me on grounds of my youthful ardour and impetuous chivalry which led me into a course against the best interests of the realm, all that rot. That and a gold piece or two should see me clear."

"But what about the fighting which will be involved?" I asked. "There would seem to be a risk to your precious hide."

"I am under strict orders from the old man when that time comes to drag my feet and take the least prominent role I can manage, a command I shall obey with alacrity. I'm no Roland or Lancelot, and I suspect Roland and Lancelot weren't either, if you get my drift. I intend to fight only when I can't avoid it without irreparable damage to my estate or to my reputation, or else when I see something substantial to gain by it. Otherwise it's useless effort and needless danger. Why waste one's time whacking away at some steel-plated clown with as word when you can do something constructive with your life, like drinking yourself into a stupor every night?"

That night I lay awake on my pallet, listening to Tommy's stentorian snores beside me. Staring up into the blackness, I thought long on the future. Even should I succeed in breaking away after a very minimal period in the queen's service, the tense political situation remained along with the virtual certainty of civil war. How could I keep out of such a conflict? All my bridges in Devon would be burned, so I couldn't go back there. I would be dependent on the Queen's largesse to support Melisande and the new family I was already seeing in my mind's eye, and when her summons came I would have no choice but to respond. This wouldn't be a short, sharp tussle to try conclusions like what had happened at St. Albans two years before. The two sides were too evenly matched. It would be long and bloody and merciless; in London we had heard of how Flemish and Hanseatic merchants were already quietly slipping out of England, taking their gold and their goods with them, because they foresaw the coming storm. How could I win through and acquire the home and the income and the stability Melisande and I must have?

There was always the modern trump card, treachery. If I could manage to avoid inflicting too much injury and making too many enemies among the Yorkists, some day I might be in a position to turn my coat to a profit. Melisande would perforce come with me once we were sealed by the sacred bond of marriage and I was no longer dependent on the queen for the main prize. But in my heart of hearts, I knew I could not. Atrocious as she was,

whatever her motives, if Queen Margaret brought Melisande and me together then I owed her my life's fealty. My problem is I was born a century too late, I thought glumly as I lay there in the darkness. I belonged in the days of Crécy and the Black Prince, or even Agincourt. God, how often have I heard old John Brinton tell of St. Crispin's Day!

But Harry Fift taught his barons war as a way to wealth and chivalry had been going downhill ever since. I would not be a part of that decay by betraying my oath to King Henry the Sixth. I had to have an anchor for the beautiful and noble world I was going to build for Melisande and myself and all the children who would become part of our lives, a vessel to ride upon the sea of troubles now besetting us. That vessel, I decided, would be my loyalty to Lancaster. I would pass my eyes over Margaret's cruelty and vindictiveness and grasping greed, and instead I would always think on the virtues of kindly Henry, his kindness and his sanctity, the many schools and other institutions he had endowed, like the new academy for poor scholars at Eton. A realm ruled by a kind and gentle monk was a realm in danger, I knew, unless upright men with sharp swords could be found to support the throne. I would be one such. By the time I drifted off to sleep I almost had myself convinced that I had acted for the best out of purely unselfish and patriotic motives. That wouldn't last, I knew, but it at least got me through that night. The nights would be better when I could hold Melisande in my arms. Surely they would get better.

During the days which followed, however, I had not much time to ponder such deep affairs, for I bent my efforts to laying siege to my lady's heart. I spent every moment of time I could in her company. We always stayed together after the evening meal, and we would play cards or chess or games with dice. We went for long, leisurely rides through the countryside, discreetly followed at a distance by one of the castle duennas on a small palfrey, for even though Melisande and I were betrothed we were seldom allowed to converse with one another in complete solitude. The best way to avoid this surveillance, I found, was to take her for walks along the castle ramparts in the evening. We could still be seen from the courtyard and the casements overlooking the bailey, and there were enough people walking to and fro up there to give the illusion that we were in company, but if we kept our voices low we could converse unheard by the hovering duenna, and sometimes as the darkness fell even steal a kiss or two.

I even furbished my skill on the lute enough to play for her. One beautiful spring evening we sat on the parapet at Raby, and I strummed a rondeau, softly singing in passable Provençal:

Tant con je vivrai

n'aimerai aut rui que vous,

n'ai n'en parti rai tant con je vivrai,

ains vouse servirai loiaument mis m'i sui tous...

"Where did you learn that?" asked Melisande curiously.

"In seminary, believe it or not," I said with a chuckle. "The curriculum was quite diverse, I told you."

"I rather doubt your preceptors taught you frivolous love songs," she said, trying to be severe and disapproving but still unable to suppress a smile.

"Actually I learned that from Father Timothy. He wore a sword and a hat to hide his tonsure when he went out with his hounds in search of game, or went to certain houses in Exeter in search of other game."

"And did you go to those houses, John?" she asked timidly.

"Sometimes," I admitted. "Does that bother you?"

"Oh, I know all men do that kind of thing, and I am not so foolish to expect you to be any different. But John, when we're married..." she began to stumble, "I want to please you. I don't want you going to another woman. Even that kind of woman. Please, you must tell me, you must show me how to..." Her face was red with furious blushes.

I took her hand. "Sandy, there's two ways men do that kind of thing, as you put it. They swive a wench, or they make love to a woman. With us I want it always to be the second way."

Our betrothal was common knowledge, and I found the reactions of various people around the court interesting. Among most I noticed an immediate lowering of the snobbish barriers which had previously made me persona non grata in the upper circles. I had received a singular mark of favour from the queen, and I was soon to be allied with one of the realm's foremost noble houses. I was obviously a coming man, and this was well marked by those who made it their business to be in with coming men at court. Melisande and I were sought out and lavished with attention by the shakers and movers in the entourage. I was invited to play bowls with Lord Hungerford and other magnates, and I was diplomatic enough to let them win, but not too easily. I was included in hunting parties and racing meets, several of which Thunder won. I accompanied the queen on a number of excursions to local fairs and religious houses, and I acted as an equerry to Her Grace during one overnight trip into the city of Durham itself. I was officially enrolled as a retainer of the Earl of Wiltshire, a lord whom I disliked but who was one of the leading men in the kingdom and whose patronage was clearly a stepping stone to greater things. I even received the honour of serving the queen one night at dinner, where for a time I had to resume my role of ambitious and unscrupulous place-seeker while she quickly and efficiently picked my brains of everything I knew about local politics in Devon.

Fortunately, since my earliest years I had been a listener and not a talker in the halls of my father and John Brinton, where such topics were common, and I was able to satisfy Her Grace of my expertise. Towards the end of the meal Margaret asked me, "And how goes your tender campaign, sir knight? I am told you spend every waking hour in the company of your betrothed."

"I do, Your Grace," I admitted frankly. "I'm rather coming to like the Lady Melisande, and I hope the feeling is reciprocated. Political marriage or not, I hope we shall become good friends. Things will be easier that way."

"We are leaving Raby for Lincoln on the last day of April," she informed me. "I'll formally announce your betrothal that night."

"Walpurgis Eve, Your Grace?" I laughed. "An ill-omened day. Our country folk in Devon call it a devil's sabbath and stay inside on that night with their doors bolted." "The only devil who concerns me is Richard of York," she replied.

Yet all day on the eve of May a strange unease haunted me. There was no cause to which I could assign this odd malaise, but it was nonetheless real. All over the castle the grooms and pages and squires were preparing for departure. Servants were packing and loading carts with chests and baggage. All I possessed were my horse and my sword and a few odds and ends easily jammed into a saddlebag, but I understood that Melisande would be helping the rest of the unmarried girls get their packing and bundling done, so I didn't expect to see her in the morning. That afternoon I took Thunder for a long run and gave him an extra thorough rubdown and curry. Tommy Caxton approached me just as I was finishing. "Halloo!" he said loudly. "Sorry to startle you."

"Not to worry, I'm all on edge today," I replied. "No idea on earth as to why. Just got the fidgets to be off, I suppose."

"Walpurgis is an evil day," agreed Tommy. He must have felt it too, for his manner was somehow wrong, his laughter a little too loud, almost nervous. "John, milad, I've come to ask you a favour. Chanson is in the smithy getting re-shoed and I've a last minute errand of gallantry to attend to. Could I possibly borrow your horse?"

I hadn't heard Tommy had a girl anywhere, but I shrugged and tossed him the bridle. It wasn't until almost an hour later that I recalled seeing Tommy's mount Chanson being shoed two days earlier. My sense of disquiet began to grow, and the looks I was getting from the other courtiers who suddenly found other things to do when I passed by were further mystifying. I kept telling myself that I was conjuring phantoms, but nonetheless I fingered my sword thoughtfully and was truly reluctant to hand it over to the dinner squire as I entered the great hall that night Melisande had not yet arrived at our accustomed place at the board. Instead I found the Dowager of Kent, who informed me that Melisande was ill. "I fear she will not be able to attend upon you this evening, sir knight," said the beldame.

"Ill?" I inquired anxiously.

"Say rather fatigued from a long day. In any event she shall not be here." I dared not press her further and make a scene, but that Melisande should be absent on the night our betrothal was to be formalized sounded a tocsin of alarm in my mind. Nor was my mood improved when the seat on my right was brazenly appropriated by Jeanetta Talbot. I did not relish an evening of verbal swordplay with the saucy hoyden when other things obvious needed my attention. However, tonight she was unusually subdued, for which I was thankful. Some wary, insistent instinct warned me of the presence of danger; the whole atmosphere of the banquet hall now seemed charged and menacing. I was sure I detected sidelong, sneering glances in my direction. My ears strained to hear the low whispers I was certain were being uttered. When all the courses were through and the tooth-picking and belching stage had been reached, Jeanetta decided she was still hungry. "Would you pass me a comfit, please?" she asked politely. I picked up the trencher of sweets and leaned over to lay it in front of her. As I did she gripped my hand beneath the table. "Be silent," she said in a low tone. "Do you see that doorway behind Sir Geoffrey Moleyns?"

"What?"

"Say nothing and listen, dammit! Your life will depend on this! As soon as you can, you must somehow get through that door. You're being watched, so you'll have to make a break for it. If they catch you in the hall you're done for. Meet me at the postern gate beside the midden. I've got a way for you to get out of the castle. Tommy Caxton has Thunder tethered in the orchard, fed and watered and saddled. I hooked your sword from the armourer just before dinner. It is behind the arras at the end of the corridor."

"What the devil is going to happen?" I demanded, fierce and low. "You know something. Tell me!"

"Not now! Whatever you do, don't go out the main door! Hungerford's men are waiting for you!" Then before I could say another word she arose and left the table, a stunning breach of etiquette to do so before the queen had arisen. Simultaneously I saw that Melisande Grey was in the hall. Not looking at me, she walked quickly to the side of Sir Robert Morriss, who grinned wolfishly in my direction. They walked hand in hand to the center of the hall, and the queen signed for quiet. "Messires et mesdames, it is our pleasure to announce the betrothal of our most beloved and noble ward..."

Realization slammed into me like a fist. *Treachery!* How or why I knew not. But they did. All of them. Jeanetta and Tommy and Morriss and every slinking reptile in the court knew. They'd known all day, laughing at me behind my back. I looked neither to the right nor the left as my mind slipped down into madness. I gripped the table until my knuckles were white. The queen herself poured out a goblet and handed it to Morriss, who turned and faced the hall in triumph to offer a toast, a young bird of prey, handsome and golden. Melisande's eyes looked at me now in pity; never would I ever see them look at me in

love. *Sweet lamb of God, she's watching me!* howled the demon in my brain. *I am a dog to her, a dog...*

Morriss's voice rang out over the assembled throng. "My lords and ladies, let us drink to the night I shall lie with Melisande Grey!" Amid laughter and approbation he downed his wine, and I snapped like a brittle twig

I heard a voice ring out over the hubbub, a voice of steel that silenced the hall like the stroke of a sword. "*Nay, that you shall never!*" The voice was my own. In a single bound I was over the banquet board and my dagger flashed in a deadly arc. Morris had no time to react, for I hurtled into him like a thunderbolt, grasping his tawny mane in my left hand as I drove my poignard into his body, burying the blade upward through his stomach into a lung. Morris gave a babbling, bubbling cry of mortal agony and the cup clattered from his hand onto the floor. Beside him Melisande screamed in fear and horror; her face at that moment has never ceased to haunt my sleep. I savagely wrenched my blade from the dying man's belly and he dropped and flopped in a crimson froth and died. A fountain of blood spurted and roiled, drenching me and soaking Melisande's gown.

For a moment everyone stood motionless, frozen with shock and surprise, and then all hell broke loose. Four or five of Morriss's Cumberland knights bounded over the banquet board and all of a sudden I knew I was in the fight of my life. I swung hard and felt the jaw of one of my attackers break beneath my fist, as I knocked him back into his comrades. Then I jumped up onto the trestle table and ran down the board towards the doorway Jeanetta had indicated, sending trenchers and goblets and chewed joints of greasy meat flying. I heard Queen Margaret cry out over the noise and panic, and a huge looming form blocked the egress, her Angevin knight Hubert D'Agenais. Remembering my early wrestling days in Devon I leaped and hurtled into him feet first, and as he went down I could feel his teeth splinter beneath my feet. I rolled to my feet and sprinted down the passageway, Hubert bellowing behind me as he tried to stand up, groggily blocking the doorway and hindering my pursuers.

There was a jog in the corridor, and I nearly collided headlong with Jeanetta Talbot. "Well, fancy meeting you here!" she began, but I grabbed her by the wrist.

"*Come on!*" I shouted, dragging her several steps before she started running with me.

"You're covered with blood!" she exclaimed.

"I just spiked Robert Morriss!" I yelled back. We tumbled out into an alleyway between the great hall and the stables, and barely made it around the corner before a tumultuous clamour from behind told of pursuit. We ducked into the shadow of a small postern gate just as several men-at-arms and knights charged out into the courtyard, staring this way and that as if they expected to see me hovering nearby, bloody dagger poised.

"Here's your sword," Jeanetta whispered. "Come! We must get out of the castle while the moon is hidden, else the sentries on the wall will see us." From her sleeve she pulled a

long key, and fitting it into the iron lock she turned it slowly to keep it from squeaking. I wrapped the lanyard of my sword belt around the sheath to keep it from flapping and making noise as I ran.

"Where did you get that key?" I asked in a low voice.

"From the equerry of the watch. I must return it quickly. Come on." We slid out the small doorway and ran fleetly in hand for the orchard, in as much silence as we could manage. It was a narrow escape; in the castle behind us we could hear shouts and voices calling for weapons and torches as a systematic search was organized. I prayed that the clouds would hide us, would cover the waxing moon long enough for us to reach the cover of the trees. We were fortunate, for just as we reached the little dell where Thunder was tied the moon came out and cast a wan illumination over the grassy grove and the grim outline of the keep. Temporarily safe, we stopped to lean on Thunder's flank and pant.

"They'll...search...the whole...castle...before they figure out...you've gotten outside the walls..." she panted.

"I suppose...you...expect me to....take you with me...or some such nonsense?" I gasped.

"Bloody hell, no!...Don't be...stupid. You'd never get away with a woman hampering you." Suddenly I saw that my hands were wet with blood; my fingers glistened black in the moonlight. Jeanetta saw it too. "Did you kill him?" she asked.

"He'll never be any deader," I said in awed, dawning realization. "Right. Let's have it."

"Have what?" asked Jeanetta. I stepped forward and slapped her with my open hand, hard, knocking her back against a tree, and then I grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her like a terrier shakes a rat. "*Speak!*" I ordered her. "Why did Queen Margaret break her promise to me?"

"Because she had proof that you were engaged in treasonable correspondence with the Duke of York," said Jeanetta from her knees, perfectly composed. Comprehension dawned on me, as well as a rising anger. There might yet be another killing on my soul this night.

"What proof?"

"That day in the guardroom I distracted you by pushing the flint out of the lock and then by pretending to hear someone outside the door. I switched parchments on you, and I burned one of my own the same size and shape, an old letter with my father's seal. By the time you turned around all you saw was running ink and melting wax," she told me fearlessly. I could not see her eyes in the moonlight. "Later I tore off the top half of your letter from your brother and kept only the safe conduct from Duke Richard."

"You mean you came to that guardroom with a substitute document to burn, fully prepared to betray me even before you knew what my situation was?" I demanded, choking with rage.

"Yes," she said evenly. "I always cover every wager."

"An old friend of mine once advised me to do the same," I chuckled bitterly. "I should have heeded him. Go on."

"Yesterday evening I obtained an audience with the queen. I told her that you had sought to cozen me with flattery and fair words of love into taking a letter to your brother at Ludlow, assuring me it was only a personal, fraternal greeting..."

"What do you mean take William a letter?" I demanded, baffled.

"Oh, that's right, you don't know," she said, rising to her feet. "I'm leaving the court, going out to Hereford to join my father at his manor of Whitewood, which is very near Ludlow. No matter. I told Her Grace that curiosity had gotten the better of me and I had opened the letter. You can imagine the contents. All kind of items of military and political interest, including some very interesting and scurrilous commentary on the relationship of Her Grace with a number of lords and gentlemen of the court."

"Dear God!" I moaned, shuddering. "And she believed it?"

"You write like a seminary-trained priest, a very easy hand to forge. Of course, your safe conduct from the Duke lent the whole construction an undeniable authenticity."

"And how did you explain to the queen how you came to be in possession of my pass from the Duke of York?" I asked.

"I told her I rifled your saddlebags while you were out billing and cooing with Lady Melisande."

"And your motive for coming to Her Grace with this farrago of lies was of course your boundless devotion to our sovereign lord King Henry the Sixth?"

"Not at all! Good heavens, Margaret would never have believed such a thing! She'd have smelled a rat from the start! I told her I hated you because you'd taken advantage of my passionate nature. Swept me off my feet and right onto my back, you silver-tongued devil! You'll be amazed to learn that we've been swiving up and down in every bed and hayloft and corner, even against the wall on the stairways every chance we've gotten for the past six months. Then you dumped me for Melisande Grey. I told Margaret I wanted to see you hanged, drawn and quartered. That she understood. That she believed."

"So I'm a rake and a seducer now as well as a spy and a traitor," I grunted. "You threw away your own reputation, so eager were you to do me harm? May I ask why you have helped me escape the very fate you told the queen you desired for me?"

"Because it's not the fate I desire for you," she replied. "I told you, John, I want you for my husband."

"And I told you once before that your hope was a futile one!" I snapped. "What in the name of eternal God gives you the right to do this to me? Answer!"

"No one gives me permission or right to do anything," she retorted proudly. "I am my own law. I ask no let from man nor woman nor queen nor from God! God made me what I am. He can accept the consequences."

"Blaspheming bitch!" I raved.

"Blasphemer or not, no one spurns me, my lord, especially not you. You are mine, you are for no one but me, not ever!"

"So you have wrecked my life and made me a hunted outlaw, destroyed Melisande's happiness and made her hate and fear me for the murderer I now am, thanks to you?" My blood was boiling, my grief and overwhelming loss was becoming unbearable. In one brief moment everything I had wanted was gone. I slid my dagger from the sheath, still sticky with Morris's blood. I put the point against her throat. "God save me. I think I'm going to kill you, Jeanetta. I don't care if they catch me, I don't care if they hang me right now if I can watch you die first."

"Go ahead," she said calmly, her hands folded in front of her. "When I decided to do this thing, in order to stop this marriage of yours, in order to stop her, I knew I was wagering two lives. Yours first of all. You might not have escaped the castle tonight if I had failed in my arrangements, or if you'd been a bit slower. But I've staked my own life as well, because there's a chance you might kill me for it. By the by, this could still go bad, you know. Margaret may detect my double dealing and send me to the gallows instead of to Hereford, and if you don't get on that horse and start riding like the wind you may not make good your escape. We need to bring this nattering to a close and you need to be on your way. If you're going to kill me then do it and get the hell out of here!"

"Could you do it, then?" I asked in wonder. "Die unshriven and unforgiven?"

"Why should I confess a sin I don't feel?" she asked. "I have no need of God's forgiveness. He knows my heart, after I'm dead He'll do as He thinks fit with my soul, and there's an end of it. *Your* forgiveness is another matter, John. I have sense enough to realize I do need that if we're going to have a successful marriage. I hope you'll let me earn it. You've seen what I can do as an enemy, John. Give me a chance to show what I can do as a friend. Or else kill me now. Because it's the only way you'll ever be free of me."

I sheathed my dagger with a sigh, my rage gone, just weary now of the whole mess and painfully aware of the fact that I did indeed need to get on my way. "I admire your courage," I said, and I meant it.

"And I yours, impetuous though it be," she said with a laugh. "I never expected you to make so spectacular an exit, but then it stands to reason that the man I choose would have to be rather extraordinary."

"I'm sorry I got blood all over your dress," I told her as I swung into the saddle. "Now people will know you've seen me."

"I don't think anyone will notice," she said. "Besides, it's only fitting that Morriss's blood be on me as well as you. Where will you go?"

"To Ludlow. Where else?"

"Good. Call on me at Whitewood. My father won't object to giving you my hand, especially since it will soon be all over court that you've already had the rest of me."

"Jeanetta," I said softly, "Suppose you're wrong? Suppose you have sinned so grievously that God has turned His face from you? What if you're already damned, Jeanetta?"

She was silent for a moment, then jerked her head towards the castle. "Then I'll be in high-nosed company. Now for pity's sake, will you *ride*?"

The Progress of the Play

Summer, 1457

VII .

On a sun-drenched morning in May I cantered up the main street of the village of Ludlow and up a long, low ridge towards the castle. The town was a buzzing hive of activity, swarming with knights and soldiers and retainers of the powerful Yorkist lords like the Nevilles, Mowbrays, De Veres, Bouchiers, Fastolfes, and other lesser gentry. Attendant upon these, drawn like flies to a honey-pot, was an army of merchants, craftsmen, peddlers, hucksters, pardoners, pickpockets and doxies all plying trade with vigour, in addition to all the tradesmen and artisans of the town who serviced the castle folk. There were advantages as well as dangers to being the headquarters of the Duke of York, not the least being the stream of Yorkist gold which poured into the little market town. The Ludlow folk manifested their appreciation. It seemed that from every casement, spire, and rooftop in the town I saw banners and pennants fluttering in the breeze which bore

variations on the device of the Duke's eldest son Prince Edward of March, the white rose-en-soleil which had become the officially recognized emblem of the house of York.

I must look like a beggar, I reflected glumly as I trotted towards the castle gate. Thunder was coated with dust and smeared with mud still from a bog in Derbyshire where I had been forced to take refuge from a troop of red-rose horsemen who had been riding hard behind me down the road. I knew not whether these men had been hunting for me in particular or whether they were engaged in simple marauding, but they had set on me with alacrity enough, and I had been hard pressed to evade them. In the past few days I had slept in hedgerows and ridden mostly by night, charting my course by the stars, for I dared not risk an inn even if I'd had any money on my person.

The castle gates were open and the portcullis was raised, but steel twinkled along the walls and I knew I was being closely scrutinized. A stream of local people, tradesmen and hawkers and servants, flowed in and out beneath the great vaulted archway of the entrance, but when I reached the portal a sturdy sergeant in breastplate and casque helmet stepped forth, a tall billman at his back, and signed for me to halt. "Your name and your business within the castle, sir knight?" he demanded. At least he recognized me as a gentleman, mud-stained and disordered as my never overly elegant attire was.

"I am Sir John Redmond of Tavistock, in Devonshire," I told him. "I am brother to Sir William Redmond who serves the Duke herein, and a friend and neighbour to Sir John Brinton. If you can find them and bring them here they'll vouch for me."

"Oh, aye, I know both of them well," returned the sergeant. "Sir John said you might turn up. Enter, messire." I cantered into the outer bailey, a large courtyard than the one at Raby, filled with people and beasts and noise. Blacksmith's hammers rang, sheep bleated and pigs squealed from their pens, hawkers cried their wares and knights and varlets pushed through the crowd on their assorted missions. The sergeant called forth from the guardroom a young boy whom he sent to fetch my brother, and before long I heard my name shouted over the clamour in the bailey. William practically pulled me off my horse, embracing me and pummeling me on the back in greeting. He was taller than I, dressed far better in a velvet tabard bearing the snow rose and sun, but our hair was the same reddish tint and our faces limned in the same features, albeit he was far more lean and spare while I was short and thick-set. There was another round of shouting and pounding in the hall when we met with the Brintons, especially young Hal Brinton, who was of an age with me and who had been my closest friend and playfellow back in Devon from the time we were children. Sir William Brinton, the eldest son by Sir John's Scots first wife Lady Jane Robertson, was a normally taciturn man who seldom spoke, but who managed to favour me with a greeting for the occasion. Then came old Sir John, a lean and weather-beaten old veteran who took my hand in an iron grip. "By the Mass, it's good to see you here, lad," he said gruffly. "You don't belong with those Lancaster swine."

"Strange words about Lancaster from an Agincourt bowman," I laughed.

"That was forty years gone, lad. Times change. If Harry Fift had lived, or if this feckless Harry we've got now had turned out to be a quarter of the man his sire was then I would have upheld the dynasty with my sword and my life. I won't do shit for a French whore."

"Did you ever have need of that safe conduct we sent you?" asked William.

"I lost it in a manner which I shall relate to you," I told them. "Right now I'd like a wash and a good straw bed for a few hours, if you don't mind, and I'll tell you the whole story, but there is one thing all of you need to know right away. I didn't just walk out, I fled the court with every royal knight and man-at-arms hot on my trail. I...well, the truth is that I killed a man." William's eyebrows shot up, but he made no comment. Old Brinton merely guffawed.

"Is that all, lad?" he laughed. "The immediate reason I'm here is that I hacked up a couple of rogues in Exeter who tried to make me stand and deliver. In the king's name, of course."

"Now, Father, that's a very disrespectful way to speak of his majesty's revenue officers," said Hal with a grin.

"Bollocks. They didn't have a paper. Revenue enhancement officers nor whatever, if they don't have a paper proper signed and sealed you can kill them."

"A somewhat simplistic view of the tax statutes, don't you think, Sir John?" asked William, amused.

"Beitsoever, those two are now expounding the statute book to the worms," returned Brinton placidly.

"But what of this man you killed, John?" asked William with some concern.

"I doubt the Duke will like it," I told them worriedly. "It was a thing done in sudden anger, and truth to tell it wasn't really he who provoked me. The whole affair wasn't really his fault. It was the bloody queen I should have knifed. Her, and one other."

"A little casual bloodletting is nothing to worry yourself over," said Brinton with a shrug.

"Even when I slew him under the shield of courtoisie, right at the evening meal?" I was cut off by a sudden burst of wild laughter, much to my amazement, for I saw nothing amusing about my dishonorable deed.

"Marry! You don't mean to say you gaffed him right in front of Margaret herself?" roared Sir John.

"Yes, but..."

"Lad, you can be assured of a welcome here from every man of York," choked Brinton, nearly doubled up with mirth. And so it proved. I found that my act of butchery inspired admiration, amusement, and respect among my new companions. A hundred, even fifty years before I would have been outlawed, proscribed, regarded with revulsion and contempt and hanged like a common footpad when caught. Now the general opinion was that I had played a hearty practical joke on the hated queen. This low had the chivalry of England sunk.

They handed Thunder over to the boy and told him to take the mount to the stables. "I'll have Toby see to him personally," Brinton assured me. "He's a fine animal and you know Toby will make sure he gets proper care. Now we'll take you to the bath house. The Duchess of York makes sure everything at Ludlow is well run and clean and orderly, you'll find. There will be plenty of hot water and soap." So it proved, and I luxuriated in a long

soak and scrub with lye and pumice in a great leather tub. I am aware that many denounce bathing as a heathen custom, but I have never felt that merely because Saracens and Jews do something it automatically follows that Christians mustn't. I have always found bathing to be refreshing and healthful, so long as it is not indulged in to excess. Then I went to the chamber shared by William and the Brintons, collapsed on a palliasse and slept through the noon meal. That evening I awoke and when everyone was gathered, including Brinton's Welsh squire Toby, I told all of them what had befallen me at Raby, omitting none of the details as to my betrayal of them and my own betrayal by Jeanetta Talbot. William and Sir John interposed occasional questions, but mostly I was heard out in silence. When I was finished, old Brinton was impressed. "Quite a tale," he commented. "You have begun your career with a flourish, Johnny lad."

"I was going to join them and make war against you all," I said, hanging my head in humiliation.

"John, you had cause," said William sympathetically. "When the time comes for a man to choose where his loyalties lie, there are far worse motives than love. If you'd sold us out for money I would have qualms, but when a woman fills a man's eye and his heart he does things he would never consider otherwise. The foolish things men have done for women would fill a book."

"An entire library," growled old Brinton. "Have you ever heard the story of my first marriage, lad?"

"One of Toby's favourites," I laughed.

"And a right bully tale it is, bigod!" asserted Toby stoutly. "What other knight of these times has carried off a Scots princess, the betrothed of a regent, and stood off a three month siege to keep her? It is a legend in these islands and it is rightly so!"

"Sir John, I sometimes believe you keep this leek-chewing rascalion about you just to sound your tucket," said William.

"Leave be. Toby's in his dotage," chuckled Brinton.

"Dotage my dangling Cymric pizzle!" snapped Toby. "You are several years the elder of me, hoary loon!"

"But how will the duke react when he hears of what I was planning to do?" I asked worried.

"Oh, he'll hear of it," Brinton assured me. "There isn't a cat at court who births kittens without the duke hears of it. But John, there are men in this castle who have spent long years plotting against His Grace, who have murdered his retainers and laid waste to his lands, slandered him and impugned the honour of his noble lady, laid ambushes and plotted to assassinate him, and then turned their coats. Very few here have a completely spotless record of loyalty to York from the time they were in their cradles. What you did was mild, John, mild, indeed you didn't really do anything at all. His Grace will overlook your little peccadillo just as he overlooks far worse ones every day. If you're worried about others here, then as far as this group as concerned, we have not heard a single word you have said."

"Said about what?" said Hal Brinton with a wink.

"Don't ask me," muttered Toby. "I speak only Welsh. At times."

"Thank you all," I said, moved. "I've already paid for my wronging of you. My conscience has eaten at me ever since I left Margaret's chamber. But now my problem is this: what am I going to do with that Talbot vixen? You know her father is just a few miles from here at the manor of Whitewood, ostensibly serving as the queen's watchdog over you Yorkist ruffians. She'll be here in a few days."

"Why don't you just leave her in the lurch?" suggested William Brinton.

"That's no solution. If I tried ignoring her she'd start intriguing against me again, and God only knows what she'd do this time."

"Why not trot on home, back to Devon?" suggested my brother William.

"I'm a wanted man now, remember? Margaret is touring the West Country this autumn, and I've had enough of running from Lancastrian muscle men for a while. This is the only place I can be sure I can stay out of her reach."

"You'd think the old witch would get tired of marching about the countryside," commented Hal Brinton.

"She's not that old. Quite a beauty, in fact, although she's cold as ice. Witch, I'd hesitate to guess. I'm told there was something odd about the manner in which old Humphrey of Gloucester died."

"That was no witchcraft, that was straightforward murder by poison!" growled Sir John.

"I wouldn't be surprised," I said. "There's no doubt she's capable of it. There is black murder in her, against anyone who opposes her. She needs to be buried at a crossroads with a stake through her heart!"

"Oh, we've got our share of monsters and madmen," said Hal cheerfully. "You've not yet had the edifying experience of meeting Sir John Tiptoft, the Duke's spymaster. He personally interrogates all prisoners, and his pastime is inventing new tortures. He actually made a pilgrimage to Italy to study the art and to learn how to brew efficacious poisons, and he posed as a priest to observe the latest methods in the dungeons of the Spanish Inquisition. Then there's Captain Johann Krenzer of our Swiss mercenary contingent. He gets his jollies from flaying captives alive, and when he orders a man hanged he meets by the feet, not by the neck. Slower and more agonizing death that way."

"Charming!" I moaned. "And we'll be fighting against blood-drinkers like Courtenay and Lord Clifford. When war finally comes there will be an orgy of bloodshed the like of which hasn't been seen since King Stephen's wars three hundred years ago! Best not to think on it, I suppose. Getting back to my immediate quandary, what about Jeanetta Talbot?"

"Well, if you're open for suggestions, why don't you go ahead and marry the girl?" said brother William, rubbing his stubbled chin. "From a purely practical standpoint it's the best match you're ever likely to get a crack at. Hell's fire, as I recall Gerald Talbot's dowered the girl with two manors, including Whitewood itself! You'd be richer than Father, and if you render good service to His Grace the Duke your fortunes will be augmented even more. As for the personal aspect of things, I'm only vaguely acquainted with the lady. I think I saw her once or twice when we visited the court at Exeter, but as I recall she's beautiful and accomplished. I imagine she'd be an armful on a cold winter evening."

"There is also the cogent objection that she played me for one great fool, and by her treachery nearly got me thrown into Margaret's dungeon or worse!"

"There is that," agreed William. "But Lord above! If treachery is to be deemed a cardinal sin, then these days half of the population is damned!"

"You'll notice that I'm not laughing," I told him glumly.

"I've never met the lady in question," said John Brinton, "But from your description of her character, do you know who she reminds me of? Your sister Melissa, when first I knew her."

"Bigod he's right, John!" laughed William. "She was the eldest child and you the youngest, so you were too small to remember much when she was around the house, but she bullied everybody and had everybody dancing to her tune, including Father. By the time you were old enough to really observe things our wild neighbour here had pretty much gotten her tamed."

"If she's tame now I shudder to think what she was like before!" I exclaimed.

"Like Jeanetta Talbot, it sounds. The meanest shrew in the West Country, a bitch from hell with a tongue that could clip a hedge and a will that would be thwarted in nothing."

"I'll tell Mother you said that!" warned Hal

"Nothing I've not said to her face, lad, on more than one occasion. But Bill is wrong about one thing, John. I didn't 'tame' Lissa, as he puts it. Most women are ninnies, lad, but they've got more range of character than men do. The good ones are better, the sweet ones are more saintly, the brave ones are braver, and although truly evil women are thankfully very rare, when they do crop up they are far more soul-blackened and cruel than the even the worst man like Tiptoft. Your Jeanetta sounds like one of the extraordinary ones. My advice, John, is to marry her and be good to her. Give her something and someone to devote all that character and energy to, because if you don't and she goes sour she may turn into one of the evil ones, and it sounds to me like the world doesn't want that. You don't tame women like Lady Jeanetta, John, you take them into your life as a partner, respected and valued, and if you're lucky and you can find the right touch you will have found yourself an ally more powerful than any lord and an asset more precious than any treasure of mere gold. Melisande Grey is lost to you now. You've got to play the cards you're dealt, and it strikes me you aren't holding too bad a hand. You're alive, you'll be serving the winning side in this upcoming civil brawl, and you have a chance to get a grand estate and what sounds like a worthy and able wife. Take that chance. I know Gerald Talbot. He's no high-nose and he judges men by their character, not their birth or their wealth. There shouldn't be any problem there. Who knows, you may even find yourself getting to like the little bitch!"

I first saw the Plantagenet princes at a distance during the evening meal on the night of my arrival, tall blond young men each with his own retinue of followers. I was glad that mealtimes were less formal than they were at court and the men were allowed to sit together instead of being compelled to serve a lady on their right; I'd had quite enough of the female kind for a while. "Where is Duke Richard?" Asked.

"When he's busy he works through dinner," said Brinton. "Sends down to the kitchen for a joint and a pottle of ale."

"They are fine young fellows," I remarked, pointing to Edward and Edmund down the table.

"Aye, the old Plantagenet strain always did run to big golden blue-eyed men," agreed Brinton. "Edward's got a head on his shoulders as well. A bit on the idle side, but he'll grow out of that, I should think. He'll have to."

"I've never seen a prince of the blood before, except Margaret's little baby whelp, whom I suppose doesn't count."

"Didn't you see King Henry when you were in London?" inquired Brinton, his mouth full of beef. "Oh, I forgot, he was having one of his spells last Christmas, wasn't he?"

"Mad as a March hare," I confirmed. "They kept him locked in the Tower all the time I was there over Yuletide. We stopped in London for a few days in February, but I wasn't around court much. There were rumours of insurrection among some of the London guilds, and Hungerford put most of us out patrolling the streets to reinforce the city watch."

"Any idea where those rumours came from?" asked John Brinton. "His Grace was most displeased when that little project fell through. Probably some tradesman babbling in his cups on the London end. Nevertheless, lad, a word of warning. Keep your lip buttoned around here. Most of what a spy learns he picks up from simple chatter he overhears by happenstance."

"Well I know. It's standing orders at court as well," I told him.

"The younger princes, George and little Richard, are still in nursery at Fotheringay Castle," Hal told me. "That will be your bellwether for when the trouble is really coming, when the Duke moves them here or overseas"

"What about Warwick?" I asked. "I've heard much about him."

"Well, he is a very intelligent and cultured man," said my brother William judiciously. "A generous lord and an enthusiastic partisan of York. He's a bit arrogant and flashy but withal an able soldier. It was his generalship which won the battle at St. Albans for just two years ago."

"Hmmp!" snorted Brinton. "Beginner's luck! Warwick is a mediocre general whose good fortune was to be faced by a worse one. Somerset left a bleeding gap in his line wide enough to sail a fleet of galleys through, and Warwick made his assault at just the right time and place. That whole wretched affair was a bungle which reflects no particular credit on the commanders of either side."

"Horsefeathers!" said Hal. "You're just jealous because you weren't there."

"The fact remains that the Duke of Somerset was slain, and a major thorn in the realm's side removed, and Margaret failed at her first attempt to destroy us by force," said William. "I call that a Yorkist victory."

"Will the Duke want to see me, question me about the court?" I asked.

"Probably not," replied Brinton. "His Grace has spies at the very heart of Lancaster, whereas you were only on the periphery. He will know of your presence, though. I'm enrolling you as a retainer of my mesnie, John. The pay is sixpence a day and I make it a point to make sure my men get paid at least half of what they're owed, on time. Every now and then we go out and shake down some red-rose manor or merchant, so I can promise you occasional loot of a kind, but do not, repeat, do not take anything from any of the Ludlow townspeople without paying for it, not so much as an apple or a loaf of bread. You may have noticed as you rode up this morning that there's a gallows on the south parapet and it's not for show."

"I did notice," I remarked. "Who are the current tenants?"

"An archer and his doxy who supplemented their income with a bit of housebreaking," Brinton told me. "They did the dance at dawn today and they'll be there for a while. The duke makes sure that thieves swing where the Ludlow folk can see them."

For the next few days I simply relaxed, letting my spirit calm like a crossbowman easing his string. It was a welcome relief after all the tension and excitement I had been through. I hunted, shot longbow at the butts, and even worked on my tilting. The duke's chaplain kept a small library of books, mostly learned works of theology but with a leavening of classics and works by more modern authors such as Froissart and old King Richard's chronicler, Geoffrey Chaucer. There was a new and popular work on King Arthur by a friend of John Brinton's, one Sir Thomas Malory. I found the contrast between Malory's chivalric ideal and present day life both tragic and ironic, especially since I discovered that Malory had written the book while imprisoned in the Tower of London for rape. I even tried my hand at verse myself, but my Latin attempts were stiff and lifeless and when I switched to English I invariably ended up writing about Melisande, so I quickly gave up the muse.

One day soon after my arrival at Ludlow I was sharpening my sword in an armourer's stall in the bailey when I heard my name spoken, and I turned to find myself face to face with none other than the Duke of York himself. Hurriedly I bent the knee. "Your pardon, Your Grace, I did not see you..." I began.

"Nay, arise, Sir John, we stand not on ceremony here. I but wished to welcome you to Ludlow and to my service."

"I thank Your Grace," said I with a bow.

"I am informed that you left the court of our sovereign lady the queen under somewhat, ah, straitened circumstances."

"Under circumstances positively hasty, my lord," I replied.

Duke Richard laughed genially. He was a chunky, muscular man, his face broad and open if not exactly handsome. "I admire your valour in carrying your debt of honour to the banquet board," he said. "On the understanding, of course, that you don't do the same thing while you're here."

"That won't be necessary, Your Grace," I said quietly. "You won't betray me like Queen Margaret did."

"No, Sir John, I shall not. You will find that I don't play the game like that. Good faith and good service should be rewarded with justice and good lordship." The conversation ended after a few more perfunctory pleasantries, but I was left impressed and gladdened and confirmed in my new allegiance. Richard was perhaps not brilliant, but he was able and perceptive and truthful. Well I knew that he would make a far better ruler for England than feeble, pious Henry and his vicious mate. The thought of working towards so worthy an end had often consoled me for my loss of Melisande.

Several days later, on a warm May afternoon, I sat in Sir John Brinton's chamber idly plucking a lute. John Brinton came in. "Think you'll ever learn to play that thing?" he growled.

"Toby's helping me," I responded. "I doubt I've much of career ahead of me as a minstrel. Where is he? He said he'd try to teach me Air of the Rhuddlan Marsh."

"You need to learn to walk before you can run," said Brinton. "John, three items of news. First off, your erstwhile intended Jeanetta Talbot has arrived at Whitewood."

"Maybe I'd better get Toby to teach me Cadwigan's Lament," I commented glumly.

"Secondly, news arrived from court today. You are impeached for treason and murder, and a price of forty pounds has been set upon your head"

"An expected development," I said.

"Aye, I'm in the same case myself over those two so-called tax collectors. Fifty pounds in my case, which is twenty-five quid per head for a tax collector versus forty for your knight. All it means is that if we're caught the killing of us will be legal in the eyes of Lancaster. You should be fairly safe in this part of the country, but I wouldn't go riding too much further afield than Whitewood without company. Another fine class of fellow we're starting to breed in England is the professional bounty hunter."

"I understand. I'll be careful."

"The third item," said Sir John with a sigh. He pulled a parchment from his wallet. "A letter arrived for you today from the court at Lincoln. I opened it and read it. I can't have a man of mine corresponding with the duke's enemies without knowing the contents of such correspondence."

"I understand, my lord, and I have nothing to hide from you or from the duke. That letter is from Melisande?" I knew the answer already.

"Yes. I briefly sought to burn it and spare you more pain, but I don't have that right. A man's life is his to live, the bad as well as the good, the sorrow as well as the joy." He handed me the paper and left the room. I opened it slowly. My love's words burned like brands into my soul.

To a most cruel and bloody knight, J.Redmond eques, THESE:

You were false and perjured to me from the start, for all the time you spake words of love unto me you carried the duke's seal upon your person and did disport yourself in secret debauchery with my lady Talbot who did betray your wicked designs in a manner I cannot think but fitting to the treachery in your black heart. She is a whore and you are a murderer; wed her now, for you are well matched and shall serve one another as you each deserve. Yet when you were discovered you could not merely fly and have done; you slew that perfect gentle knight and spilled his blood on me, so mad were you to destroy that which you could no longer have. I thought mayhap you were not a beast like all the others, but I was deceived. You have dealt me a hurt which shall never heal. I pray unto God that I shall never lay eyes upon you again

-Melisande Grey

I lay upon my pallet and stared at the ceiling, watching the dust specks dance in the sunbeams that streamed through the narrow slit windows. Until now I hadn't really believed it was over. In my heart I had still hoped against hope that somehow, something might be recovered, but that was obviously out of the question now. I knew that I would go to Whitewood and take to wife the woman who had betrayed me. What would I feel when I saw her again? Anger? Hatred? Would I long for vengeance? I knew not, but I did realize now that Jeanetta was right. We were for none but one another.

The next morning I set out for Whitewood, dressed in my best doublet, my hair trimmed, buttons and sword pommel gleaming, and my steed Thunder fresh from grooming and currying. It was bright and deliciously cool. Peasants at their plowing, safe in the shadow of Ludlow's armed might, stopped to doff their hats and wave at me and I returned their salutes courteously. It looked like the classic scene of a young man riding to meet his lady love, but for me, making a match of pure expediency, it was a flat and weary formality that I only wished to be done with.

Whitewood stood just south of the Hereford-Shropshire line, in a pleasant stand of forest which dappled the sunlight with green as I rode. It was a goodly hall indeed, a hollow square of stone with a slate roof and diamond-paned windows where the arrow slits had been glassed in. The house had been built for gracious living rather than defense, but who could blame the builders of a bygone day when life was tranquil and war had not been seen in England since the days of Simon de Montfort? I noted with approval, however, that one corner of the hollow square was anchored by a stout tower, obviously older than the rest of the structure, no doubt the original stronghold of the Norman knight who first held these lands. The other rearward corner was buttressed by a bulky stone granary or storehouse which could be converted to warlike usage if necessary, while the whole manor park was surrounded by a stout wall of apparently recent construction, fourteen feet high with a heavy oaken gate which could be closed and reinforced. Once the gate to the park was closed, a few archers stationed at each corner of the house could command a lethal killing field against any force which tried to scale the wall. Whitewood was not impregnable, but given a minimum of warning the place could withstand a sudden attack by a fairly considerable force. Gerald Talbot was obviously a man of foresight.

I cantered through the gate and the front park and up to the door of the great hall. On the tiled steps sat a number of servants and idlers, among them John Brinton's Toby and a sandy-haired youth who was meticulously mending a bridle. "I thought you were making the beast of two backs with some kitchen drab," I said to Toby.

"Have some respect for your elders, puppy!" returned Toby, placidly munching one of his abominable leeks.

"I suppose she got tired of your jaw and kicked you out of bed."

"I'll have ye know, young sir, that the said woman is weary of something other than my jaw!" he informed me.

"One of these Sir John will make you marry one of these bawds you're always taking up with," I warned him

"That's my mother you're speaking of," interjected the sandy-haired young man. "Say, sir knight, are you John Redmond?" asked the boy. I was forced to confess that I had been brought up believing this to be the case. "Did you really spike some Cumberland clod right in front of Captain Marguerite?"

"Something like that."

"I wondered," said the boy. "Some of the things this gallows-ripe old villain comes up with are pretty wild."

"Toby is a shameless liar. If he tells you the one about John Brinton in the Sultan's harem, it's true. Everything else is horse manure."

"And all for the love of Mistress Jeanetta!" said the youth admiringly.

"Damnation! Is that the way she tells it, then?" I exclaimed in shock. "Why that little...that...!"

"Don't try," advised the youth. "It would be a shame to overtax that enfeebled intellect. Although any man who would wed Jeanetta Talbot has courage aplenty to make up for his lost wits." The boy was a servant and I a knight, yet he was not insolent, merely frank and forthright. I found myself liking him.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Jack Fletcher, milord. I'm groom, butler, and general dogsbody around here. My mother's Moll Fletcher from the kitchens, Sir Gerald is my father. Jen's my half-sister." That explained his unwonted familiarity and frankness; many noble households had assorted illegitimate by-blows about, and where they were acknowledged they often became an anomalous part of the household, more than servants yet not quite family.

"Well, Jack Fletcher, there was a good deal more to what went on at court than what you've evidently been told. Nor is it settled yet that I'll marry your sister."

"Oh, it's settled, all right. You're doomed," said the boy as assuredly. "We grew up together here, sir knight, and I promise you that whatever Jeanetta wants, she gets. It's a law of nature."

I chuckled and slapped him on the back. "Stay by, that may change. Since you're a groom, might I prevail upon you to stable my horse?"

"A fine animal like that is always welcome here, my lord," he said, taking the reins. "What's his name?"

"Thunder's my inheritance. I was going to be a priest but I bowed out of that, so my father in Devonshire spent almost a year's rents and tallage to buy me a good mount and a good sword."

"When you're lord of the manor here you can breed him," said Jack enthusiastically. "We've got five or six mares to foal for him but no stallion."

"No stud on a manor this size?" I asked

"We don't keep much in the way of staff or stock these days, in view of the situation with you lot up at Ludlow."

"I know Sir Gerald is Lancastrian sheriff of Hereford, but he doesn't seem to be giving or having any trouble with Ludlow," I remarked.

"Not yet, no. Sir Gerald goes through the motions, but his support of Queen Margaret isn't exactly enthusiastic. He has an understanding with the duke that you lads refrain from pillaging us, but by way of precaution he keeps very little here to pillage. We used to have every acre under tillage, plentiful flocks and a milking herd, barns full of sixty hogs in pen or rooting. But until this trouble's over we've moved all the best stock and most of the people here to other Talbot manors which are less exposed, so if you white-roses ever do come riding over the hill with your swords drawn we won't lose as much. I hope when you marry Jen you can get the place going again. It's a fine estate, milord, but since Lady Eleanor died the master hasn't really had his heart in keeping the place up. It was always her favourite home among all the family estates, you see. We'd all like to see it a home again, Sir John, and sooth I'd like to see Jen married to a good strong man. We've all been trembling to see what kind of fortune-hunting rogue, what smockfaced toffee-nosed git or bloody bandit she might bring home."

"Has her father never tried to arrange a marriage for her?" I asked curiously. "That's usually how it's done."

Jack looked at me for a moment, making up his mind if I could be trusted. "My lord, I will you the truth. There was talk last winter of a match for Jeanetta, with a young nobleman up at Ludlow. Prince Edmund of Rutland."

"A Plantagenet?" I gasped. "A prince of the Blood Royal?"

"Yes, milord. The Talbots are numerous, rich, and warlike, an excellent alliance for a second son of the House of York. It never got beyond the talking stage, though. Lady Jeanetta was at court and she sent back a letter refusing the duke's initial approach."

"Eh? Why, for God's sake?" I demanded.

"It seems, milord, that she had met someone at court, some bog knight from Devonshire whom she was determined to marry at all costs."

"Dear Christ, the woman is mad!" I breathed in awe.

"It's been said," agreed Jack.

"I'm surprised Sir Gerald didn't bring her back here and beat her into submission...no, no, what am I thinking? We're talking about Jeanetta here."

"Exactly, milord. Do you see now why I tell you that you're doomed?"

Sir Gerald's steward ushered me through the great hall and into his study. Talbot sat at a battered escritoire laden with account books, papers, ink pots, and quills. His appearance and his attire were careless and almost seedy, and his greying hair and beard disheveled. He looked as if he had just crawled out from under a tavern table after an all night drinking bout, but I reflected that living with Jeanetta was probably strain enough to drive

any man to drink. "Damned clerks can't be trusted to tot this up right," he said abruptly, glancing up at me and then returning to the ledger he was working on. "I use monastic scribes, pretty soon they start illuminating every page and appropriating sums for the abbey. Hired a scrivener down in Gloucester once, but he embezzled outright, so I lopped off his hands and ever since I've kept my own accounts."

I bowed nervously and addressed to older knight in a formal tone. "Sir Gerald, I am John Redmond, a knight of Tavistock in the county of Devon. I am in the service at arms of Sir John Brinton, of like place and county, who is in turn equerry and counsellor to His Grace Richard Plantagenet, Duke of..."

"You can have her, and welcome!" Talbot interrupted. "You'll get this manor with all furnishings, stock, and fixtures plus Brantley in Gloucestershire, which is about half this size and is leased by a knight named Hugo Pentadyne, a stout fellow who keeps it well. Her dowry includes four hundred pounds sterling, some miscellaneous gold plate, and certain jewels which belonged to her mother. Satisfied? Or do you want to haggle a bit?"

"Uh, certainly, messire," I said with a surprised gulp. "I mean the endowment is most generous and perfectly satisfactory. I did not expect to obtain your consent with such expedition..."

"Oh, she got it for you," said Sir Gerald. "Marched right in here and announced she was going to wed you. Cheek, brazen cheek, but God pity me if I'd opposed her! Not that I was unprepared. A certain mutual acquaintance of ours at Ludlow told me what cooked prior to her arrival. I know you not, sir knight, but this gentleman's good opinion of you is all I require."

"I thank you and this unknown benefactor as well," I said gratefully, knowing it was John Brinton of whom we spoke.

"She's out in the garden now, I believe," he informed me. "Off you go." I bowed and turned to leave, nonplussed, but he stopped me. "Sir John!" he called. "I want you to know that I heartily despise that evil turn she did you at Raby."

"Of course, I imagine she boasted of it," I said with a scowl.

"No," said her father. "Perhaps she is not totally beyond shame. Dear God, I hope not! It seems that as part of her scheme she blithely named herself a trollop to the queen of England's face. But no, the story she told me was...deficient in detail. Our mutual friend filled me in. I tell you this now: I know my daughter, and she is dangerous. You must keep a grip on her."

"I have noted that Mistress Jeanetta is, ah, flighty and given to intense passions..." I returned haltingly, trying to be diplomatic.

"Rot!" interrupted Sir Gerald. "She is stubborn, selfish, self-willed, treacherous and hateful. The workings of her mind are a mystery to me. I've never been able to control her. I was campaigning in France during her childhood and now when I do see her she reminds me so much of her mother that I can gainsay her in nothing, even when I know that she does ill. But I am under no illusions as to her character. This marriage is possibly her last chance to change her life; right now she is headed for infamy, crime and God knows what kind of horrible end. After you are wed you needn't worry about any interference from me. You'll have enough to worry about from her. You must rule her or she'll rule you and drag you into the abyss with her. There, that's the first and last piece of advice you'll get from me on the subject. And if you still feel she owes you a debt over that business at Raby, then do what you have to do."

"Forget, sir, I cannot," I told him. "Forgive? I don't know."

I found her in the garden, sitting alone beneath a shady oak. For a moment I was tempted to return to Ludlow and forget the whole thing. I had been manipulated like a mummer's puppet into this position, and I liked it not one whit. Again indecision and anger seized me. Why should I crown Jeanetta's deed of betrayal with success? But I found that I could not sever this one remaining link with what might have been. Call it weakness and folly, and it was that, but I was suddenly overwhelmed by a sense of fate. The chain forged at Raby held fast. So I approached her. She saw me and curtsied low, and I could not gainsay her beauty. She was arrayed in bright summer rose and gold, her tawny hair rippling down her back beneath alight but ornate headdress. I took her hand and pressed it to my lips.

"Hello, Jeanetta."

"Hello, John," she replied demurely. "I'm glad to see you safe. How was your ride from Raby?"

"Eventful. It was touch and go for a while in Derbyshire; I had a troop of Lancaster cavalry on my tail. I was tempted to sit tight at Ludlow for a while and let you simmer."

"Thank you for not doing that, John."

"Still full of that marriage idea?"

"Yes, John," she said quietly. "I want you."

"Well then, madam, I suppose you've got me. I just spoke to your father and he practically begged me to take you off his hands."

"Good. Well, aren't you going to kiss me? You're entitled now."

"Why should I?" I responded irritably. "I don't particularly like you." Jeanetta took it calmly and looked away.

"I understand, John." I was immediately struck with remorse. Regardless of my feelings, she was a noble lady and my bride to be, and she deserved courtesy.

"Oh, damn, Jen, I'm sorry," I apologized. "There was no call for that, it was churlish. If we're to be wed let's at least be friends. May I sit down?" I seated myself on the bench beside her. She took from her sleeve a paper packet containing some small honey biscuits, and I munched on the confection. "Why so pensive, lady?" I asked. "You should be jumping with joy now you've attained your end."

"Oh, I was just thinking about something before you came."

"Egad, don't do that!" I exclaimed. "Every time you start thinking someone is in trouble, usually me!"

She smiled. "*Ffff!*"

"And when we're married I want you to stop making that noise! Every time you do it I look around for a cat. Now, what happened after I left Raby?"

"Oh, it was a scene!" she laughed reminiscently. "Knights and sergeants chasing their tails all over the keep looking for you, chaos and hysteria in ladies' country! Margaret was fit to be tied, I can tell you, and I'll tell you who else wasn't too pleased by the proceedings, that Anjou knight Hubert. You really made a mess of his mouth. Morriss' Cumberland lads left court the next day with his body, cursing you and Margaret in equal measure. You did a good turn for York there, I'd say. Margaret isn't going to be too popular along the Scottish Marches for a while, allowing a Border lord to be cut down in her banquet hall and letting the killer escape." She paused. "Do you want to know about Melisande?" she asked quietly. "I won't say anything you don't want to hear."

"No, Jen. That's a wound I'd rather not reopen."

"I agree."

"My lady, I'd like to know something. I've heard that this winter you actually refused a possible marriage with Prince Edmund of Rutland. Is that true?"

"It never got to the formal proposal stage," she said. "I made my objection known to my father, and he is not the kind of man to force me into marriage against my will."

"Jeanetta, I know I don't have to tell you that if, God forbid, anything were to happen to Prince Edward, you might have been queen of all England! *Why*, Jen?"

"A few months earlier I would have jumped at the chance. But by then I had met you," she told me.

"I don't understand any of this, Jeanetta, and if we're going to be married and live our lives together, I need to understand it. What on earth is there about me that has obsessed you like this? It's not lust, I know. I don't flatter myself. You lied to the world about our alleged fornication, but the one time I actually tried to lay you down you damn near chewed my hand off at the wrist! I'm not only penniless, I'm completely conventional and the older I get, the more conservative and stodgy I'll probably become. *Why me*, for God's sake?"

"I can't really answer that, because I don't fully understand it myself, but I'll do the best I can," she said softly. She looked up at me. "I'm going to tell you something about myself you must promise never to tell anyone."

"I won't. You have my word."

"Yes, and I know you'll keep it. That's part of it, I think. You're the only man I know whom I can trust to keep a promise. But that's not the main thing." She took a deep breath. "John, you will have noticed that I haven't told you that I love you. That's because I don't. I can't. I don't know how. All my life I've never been able to love, not anyone, not anything. You can show me how to love. You *must*, John!" Never before have I heard such desolation in a human voice.

"God, Jen...why me? What makes you think that I alone can do such a thing?" I whispered in stunned awe.

"Because you alone can hurt me, for one thing. No one's ever been able to do that. You remember that time you made me cry? I didn't even weep when my mother died. And you alone can make me hate. I hated Melisande Grey. I still do. If ever she comes between us again, I'll kill her."

"Well, you need have no fear of that," I reminded her gently. "You have made very certain that will never happen. You want me to teach you to love, Jen? I've no idea how even to begin such a thing, but here's a start for you. Don't hate Sandy. If you want her to suffer, then she is suffering. Any injury you feel she did you has been more than amply repaid, believe me."

"All right," she said with a sigh. "I'll try." She rose and started walking, and I strolled along with her. "Well, then, when do you want the date of execution set?"

"My family will want to come up from Devon," I said. "And I assume that your relations will pour in as well, most of whom are Lancastrian. I hope we don't end up with a pitched battle in the banquet hall. How about Midsummer's Eve?"

"Suits." We walked along in silence, stopping by a small pond with golden fish and ducks swimming on the surface. For a while we watched the birds cavort and dive for the little carp. "John, do you think I'm a rash and impulsive person?"

"You're nothing if not that," I said with a chuckle.

"You're right," she said, and she pushed me into the water.

VIII.

In the weeks before my marriage I spent much time at Whitewood, going over accounts and inventories, touring and inspecting the lands which were soon to be mine, and getting to know the peasants who lived on it. I also came to know and respect Gerald Talbot, a wise and perceptive man who gave me good counsel and insight into the life of the manor. I was glad to learn that there were no villeins at Whitewood, and that all the peasants held their land of me by cash rent and boon work on my portion of the fields. "Villeinage is no longer a practical system," Sir Gerald lectured me. "It started to crumble at the time of the Black Death, when all of a sudden one man in three was dead and there was a crisis shortage of labor. Suddenly the peasant found he could sell what he had been giving to his lord, and there were always plenty of employers willing to pay for it. Then came the French wars which further drained the countryside of able-bodied men, and those who came back were veteran soldiers who found it more lucrative and easier to take service in some baron's gang of bully boys under our present livery and maintenance system than to poke seeds into the ground."

"I have always thought that serfdom was a moral evil in any case, my lord," I told him. "Not all the old ways were good."

My reeve was a tall, broad clodbuster named Tam Simkins, a brawny peasant with a massive barrel chest and flowing beard. A man of about thirty, he was both the blacksmith and the miller at Whitewood. "Tam is the greatest asset you'll have here," Sir Gerald advised me. "Cherish him and listen to his counsel. He's that rare bird, an honest miller. Never steals the corn or the flour and never gives short weight. He doesn't say much, but when he does he speaks truthfully and to the point. He will go out of his way to help any of the peasants who is genuinely sick or hurt and unable to work, but he won't tolerate slacking. On manor court days whenever anyone brings a complaint about petty pilfering or tries to argue with you over boon days, hear them out and then ask Tam; he'll tell you what the real story is. He's also damned good with a longbow. Our local outlaws have learned to stay clear of Whitewood."

The manor's curate was a rotund, ruddy-faced reprobate named Father Peter. "He doubles as a leech, and he's passably skilled at it. He can set a broken bone and stanch a wound as good as anyone in the shire, on the rare occasions when he's sober, and he's fairly knowledgeable with herbs and pharmacopeia, again with the proviso that you can sober him up long enough to get his proportions right. Any time you need him I've found it's best to send to the Blue Boar inn at the crossroads before you try the parsonage. He also diplomatically looks the other way on certain nights of the years when some of the manor

folk disappear into the forest in fulfillment of certain ancient traditional rites, the nature of which I have forborne to inquire into, a course I recommend to you."

"Witchcraft?" I asked, startled.

"The church would say so if it were brought to their attention, no doubt, but Peter doesn't. It probably goes back to the heathen days, but I gather it's mostly just harmless dancing around a fire and a lot of casual fornication. Peter doesn't want to make waves, for which I can't blame him. He's not a very good priest, can hardly read and just gabbles through the Mass by rote. This living is the best he can get and if he lost it he'd probably have to become a mendicant friar wandering the countryside. He is reputedly the father of a number of children in the district, but only by widows and sluts; he doesn't interfere with married women. He's been here for years. If you want a better priest I can understand that, but if you sack Peter at least give him a pension to live out his years on, eh? I rather like the old duffer and I wouldn't want to see him set to begging."

These two were the most important of my liegemen, and I was well content with them, for although their faults were legion they were neither of them wicked or indifferent men, and they were well liked among the tenants. Jeanetta occupied herself with preparations for the wedding, with all the attention and energy of a bride, and I was generally occupied with her father or waiting upon Sir John Brinton at Ludlow, so other than at mealtimes and occasional strolls in the garden I saw little of her. When I did we spoke of immediate matters or else of the inevitable politics. I found Jeanetta to be shrewd and knowledgeable on many things generally considered to be outside a woman's provenance, from history to military matters, and I told her so. "And well for you I don't keep my nose buried in my embroidery," she asserted. "I know in romance ladies are supposed to lie about languishing in their bowers and contemplating their knight-errant's deeds of valour, or else occupy themselves with producing annual infants, but in these times which are coming you'll need a partner as well as a hearth-mate. Nor shall you find me wanting. I can hold this place in your absence, even command the manor levy if I have to."

"A Yorkist Margery Paston?" I laughed, referring to the renowned amazon of Norfolk who had beaten off an attack on her manor house by an avaricious baronial neighbour, Lord Moleynes, some years before. "What would you do, push all your foemen into the duck pond?"

"I wondered why you've been avoiding that pond all evening."

"Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me!" "Actually I was planning on having a suit of armour made for myself and riding into battle at your side, like Isabel of Conches did of old," she added.

"Is that a jest, madam? I never know with you," I said uneasily.

"Well, I think I can hold off on the armour for the nonce," said Jeanetta with a smile. "But I'm serious about wanting to be your comrade as well as your wife, John. I of all

people know well enough how you have been maneuvered and manipulated into this match, and I want you to know that when all is said and done, you've come off with not so bad of a bargain after all."

"Fair enough, sweet friend," I said, and I finally succumbed and kissed her.

Several days before the wedding my family rode in from Devon. My sire, Lord High Redmond, was a settled middle-aged man with no taste for war or politics. He congratulated me on making so fine a match. "It would seem your sojourn at court was worthwhile after all, sir," he commented approvingly. "By the rood, a fine marriage indeed! I fear the best I would have been able to come up with for you, had you remained in Devon, was the daughter of Ralph Kiwell the hide merchant. You remember Lettyce?"

"That gawky thin girl with the pockmarks and the laugh like a colicky horse?" I exclaimed in horror. "Had I known that, my lord, I would have remained in seminary!" I waited for him to mention the revocation of his license to vend brewed goods in Exeter, but he said nothing of it, and the thought occurred to me that since Margaret now thought I had been a spy all along, she deemed the advice I had given her false and had not acted on it. It was a comforting thought. I was still trying hard to forget the fact that had my own designs prevailed, I would have met these my family and friends again only as enemies amid the carnage of battle. Jeanetta was being proven right; I hadn't come out of the whole Raby mess so badly after all. It certainly could have been far worse. My sister Melissa came up from Devon with father, and after embracing her husband and her sons she went off in search of Jeanetta. My sire greeted Sir John warmly. "Gadzooks, John, you look hale as ever. You'll bury us all!" he said, clapping Brinton on the back.

"I'll live yet to be hanged, you mean, Hugh,," laughed Brinton. Despite the fact that he was my own father's son-in-law, the Brinton was the elder by some years. Both had served in the French wars together. So had Sir Gerald, and I had no qualms about the two families meshing adequately if only the turbulent politics of the realm did not come between us. Both Talbot and my father were devotees of fine dogflesh and of the hunt, and within a short time after they met they were off to the kennels to examine the famed and powerful Talbot pack. Sir John called for our horses. "I must return to Ludlow," he told me. "You need to remove the last of your things from Master Fenwick's house, and you need to take care of the formality of getting yourself struck off my personal roll and engrossed as a formal liegeman of the Duke of York."

"You know that if ever you have need of me or of my muster, I am at your service," I told him

"I know it, lad, and I appreciate it." Our horses were delivered around the front of the manor by Jack Fletcher, the same youth who had prophesied my matrimonial doom. I broached a subject with him I had meant to discuss ere now. "Can you ride as well as you can groom?" I asked him

"I'll race you, Sir John, if I can ride one of the destriers," he responded.

"Not now. How would you like to come up in the world? I'm going to need a squire." The boy stopped, stunned. He was intelligent and perceptive; he knew exactly what I was offering him, which was no less than the first rung on a ladder which could lead as high as his talents and his ambition might take him. His future to date had been circumscribed; as the favoured by-blow of the Sir Gerald but without letters, not a fighting man, he might aspire eventually to the stewardship of Whitewood in the absence of the manor lord, but that was all. As a squire, his paternity gave him the dollop of noble blood necessary so that eventual knighthood was by no means out of the question, and knighthood, along with priesthood, was one of the two bases for government service and the accumulation of enough wealth and patronage to achieve landed estate. Well might his jaw go slack. "I could pick up one of the squires at Ludlow, but it will please the locals here if I tap a Whitewood lad for the job, and I think it's a chance you deserve," I went on.

"What about learning to carve a goose with style, throw my bones with the proper flourish, plunk on a lute and all that rot?" he stammered.

"I'll teach you what you really need to know, which in these times is very little. Mostly the courtoisie end of it will involve serving me at table on formal occasions, minor things of that nature. We're laying by a lot of the frills nowadays, what with a civil war coming. They belong to a bygone age and we take our killing too seriously in England nowadays to worry overmuch about whether you can remember the genealogy of a hundred noble houses or sing about Roland. You surely already know the peasant martial arts, quarterstaff and archery. What you really need will be swordplay, mounted maneuver, the skills involved in maintaining my equipment and your own in top condition, getting me in and out of my armour and getting the horses ready for battle quickly, and generally watching my back when it comes to the crunch. Between myself, Toby, and Sir John we can make you into a proper modern killing machine."

"You shall never regret this, Sir John," he said quietly.

"See that I do not," I replied gently.

"And never forget that part of your duties is to bruit about tales of your master's prowess," said Toby, coming up beside us leading his own mount.

"In other words to lie like a Gascon, like you do?" laughed Jack.

"I do nothing of the kind, puppy. I lie like a Welshman."

"Sir John, if I may be so bold, might I ask you a question?" said Jack. "This leek-chewing rogue once told a story regarding yourself and a Byzantine princess...?"

"That she offered to make me Emperor of the East?" said Brinton. "No, that's Toby's bollocks, although the rest of it's more or less true. We were caught *in flagrante delicto* and she started hollering rape, for which I don't really blame her, since her father had a habit of strangling relatives who embarrassed him excessively. I suppose she thought those Sicilians would finish me off, but I got two and Toby got two and their leader took the better part of valour and jumped off the wall into the Bosphorus. That was in our younger days, of course. I shouldn't fancy those odds now, what with Toby's joints cracking like brushwood every time he bends an elbow."

"There are fewer cracks in my joints than hairs on your head, and that's few indeed," retorted Toby.

"What happened to the princess? Was she strangled?" asked Jack curiously.

"Not then, at any rate. The lady wound up in a convent for her trouble, where I later heard that for want of male company she started seducing young female novices instead, and eventually somebody poisoned her. No telling who. Greeks are always poisoning one another."

"I always heard it was Italians," I said.

"Them, too."

"I doubt your life with me will be quite as adventurous as Sir John's," I told him. "I'm planting myself right here at Whitewood and not roaming Europe in search of adventure. But you know there's bad trouble coming, Jack, and who knows how things will end up? At least you won't spend your life shoveling horse shit in the middens."

"A good lad, by the look of him," commented Sir John as we trotted through the gate a few minutes later.

"I like him," I agreed. "Would it be permissible for me to invite His Grace the Duke to the wedding? I know he couldn't actually come, of course, since Sir Gerald is still technically a Lancastrian, but---"

"Oh, didn't I tell you?" broke in Sir John. "That's the business which takes me to Ludlow. As you know, your future father-in-law has never had any particular use for the queen or her party, and so he's finally decided to chuck Captain Marguerite. I bear a letter from Sir Gerald asking to be enrolled as a retainer of the House of York."

"That's good news, but sad in a way," I rejoined. "I know the rest of the Talbots remain steadfast to the queen, so there's another of the realm's noble houses divided against itself. I very much fear that..." Our mounts were ambling across a mossy stone bridge over a deep brook, probably built by the Romans. I looked up in time to see a tall man in a leather hood and a jerkin of Lincoln green drawing a bead on me with a longbow.

I shouted out something incoherent and spurred Thunder forward as two more men leaped up from beneath the bridge like some trolls of legend. I heard the twang of a bowstring, the brief deadly *whutt!* of a clothyard shaft, and a scream from Sir John's horse which told of a hit. The man in front of me swung an iron-tipped quarterstaff directly at Thunder, striking the charger painfully on the nose and making him rear. I lost my saddle and tumbled to the ground, but Thunder's flailing hooves knocked my assailant flat. A shadow flitted overhead as John Brinton leaped over my prostrate body, his sword flashing, and engaged the second outlaw on the bridge. I staggered to my feet, my attacker as well, and I managed to get my sword unsheathed just as he came at me again, bringing the quarterstaff down double-handed in a blow that would have crushed my skull had it connected. I ducked under it, just barely, shoved him back against the rampart of the bridge with my body and slammed the sword pommel into his belly. The rogue with the yew had thrown down his weapon and was running towards us, waving an axe. Out of nowhere Toby's flying body crashed into him and brought him to the ground; the Welshman had his long misericord dagger between his teeth as he leaped, and I saw the blade rise and fall. The outlaw facing me swung at me again, trying to choke up and shorten his grip on the staff; I parried and my sword blade glissaded down the staff and into his body. He shrieked and fell, going blood like a broached wine cask. Without thinking I wrenched out my blade, thrust the point into his throat and leaned on it with all my weight; he thrashed and scrabbled the dust and died. Something plopped onto the edge of the bridge and rolled off; it was the grinning head of the man who attacked John Brinton. I turned in time to see his decapitated body crumple like a woosack, and to be sprayed with blood from the stump of his neck.

We all three stood whole and hale, over three corpses. A pool of blood was rising on the paving stones of the bridge, and I heard buzzing as the flies began to gather. I realized I was panting and my body was beginning to aches from the bruising I'd taken when I fell off my horse. I leaned against Thunder's flank. "Not quite the same as knifing a man at the banquet board, eh?" commented Brinton, gasping for breath as well.

"Toby's creaking joints didn't seem to slow him up any," I panted. "That knave was trying to crush my skull," I said, oddly surprised that someone would do such a thing.

"Like an apple in a press," agreed Brinton.

"Why did they set upon us?" I wondered aloud. "Do we look rich?" Toby had said nothing; experienced soldier that he was, he had already stripped the body of the man he had killed.

"Bigod, we'd ha' been better off commanding *them* to stand and deliver," he said. "My man's packing a right hefty purse." He tossed a bag of coins in the air. Brinton fished around in the purse of the dead man before him.

"So's mine," he replied. "Maybe Lancastrian hired muscle, sent to pick us off."

"Surely Margaret doesn't consider me worth going to such lengths as assassination?" I protested.

"Not you, no, but perhaps me, or Sir Gerald if she suspects his impending defection," replied Brinton, calming his wounded horse, who had an arrow protruding from the shoulder. "They weren't very good at it, if that was their mission. Who cares? We're alive and they're not. We'll go back to Whitewood and send servants back to collect the meat. I need to get that arrow out of Bucephalus. I hear that jackleg priest of yours has skill as a horse leech. Get your man's loot and let's be off."

I shook my head in refusal. "I won't rob the dead," I said. "Not even such dead as that."

"Suit yourself," replied Brinton with a shrug, removing the purse of the dead man before me and pocketing it. "He'll have no more use for it where he's bound, to be sure."

Sir Gerald was in no doubt as to the nature of our attackers, and he proved that in extremis he too possessed the famous black rage of the Talbots. "*Tonnière du sangue!*" he roared, "Send her hired cutthroats to murder my guests, will she? *Cochonnesse du diable!* I'll send their heads to London in a sack, right to the bitch's court, baked in a pie! *Merde!*" When we rode out again we were accompanied by Sir Gerald, his squire, my father and brother and their squires, William and Hal Brinton, a dozen mounted archers, and my new squire Jack Fletcher, for whom we scrounged up an old breastplate, a casque several sizes too large for his head, and a light battle-axe of the kind called a *guisarme*. "The Duke will think Sir Gerald is coming to attack Ludlow," commented Brinton dryly. No more trouble offered to our formidable party, though, and we made it to Ludlow without incident.

When we arrived back at Whitewood the next day we found the sheriff of Hereford awaiting us. The truth of our affray was somewhat less spectacular than our fancied Lancastrian plot; the men had been common outlaws after all, well known in the district. That morning they had robbed a Gloucester wool merchant who had been so foolish as to venture out onto the high road unguarded, trying to get home from Shrewsbury market with his profits. The merchant had been found hanging from a tree limb by his heels with his throat cut, and the said profits were now in John Brinton and Toby's purses. With immense tact all around, the officer of the law refrained from pointed questions as to the whereabouts of the robbers' loot, Sir Gerald regaled him with wine and roast beef, and Sir John insisted on slipping him a small purse to compensate him for his trouble in coming out over so trifling a matter. All agreed that we had performed a public service in ridding Hereford of three undesirables I sighed, and made a mental note to build a gallows at the crossroads when I became lord of Whitewood.

On the morning of my wedding I rose early and dressed with care, in finer garb than ever I had worn before, my father's wedding gift made by the most skilled master tailor or Exeter. Before I did so, the Duke of York's barber trimmed my hair, then lathered my face with generous dollops of goose grease and shaved me as smooth as a baby's bottom with his fine razor of Toledo steel. Servingmen set up a great wooden tub lined with leather and hauled cauldrons of hot water up the stairs from the kitchens for my bath, and I scrubbed my whole body pink and raw with pumice. I have never shared the occasional prejudice one finds among the more pious against bathing. Just because Moors and Jews do something doesn't necessarily make it evil. Bathing is pleasant and healthful if practiced in moderation, although I agree that for a man more than once a month is vanity.

Then I arrayed myself in my father's gift wedding suit, with doublet and hosen of scarlet satin, an embroidered surcoat of silk, stylishly pointed shoes of soft leather, a bright blue wool hat, and a blue cloak trimmed with ermine. Around my neck I wore a large brass medal of St. George, polished bright, and at my side hung Sir John Brinton's gift, a slender and well-balanced sword of tempered steel from the famed forges of Beziers. A jewel gleamed darkly in the pommel, and it was sheathed in a boiled-leather scabbard with silver fittings. As I descended into the main hall I was met by Sir John Brinton, who led me towards the noisy throng which was already beginning to assemble. "I didn't expect so many dignitaries," I said in surprise. "It looks like all Ludlow is here!"

"So they are," he told me. "The Duke, Prince Edward of March, Rutland, Warwick, Salisbury, the lot. The Bishop of St. Asaph will be saying high mass in the Whitewood chapel."

"What far, in God's name?" I asked. "I'm not that big a fish."

"No, you conceited ass, but Gerald Talbot is. He is the first of the Talbots to come over to York, and this is an excellent opportunity for him to flaunt his new snow rose colours. Come along, lad, don't keep the big knobs waiting!"

I found myself hustled into the presence of the Duke of York for the second time to receive his congratulations and his gift, a jewel-inlaid poignard with a fine grip of polished ebony, a superb match to John Brinton's sword, equal in elegance and utility. "I give you this, Sir John, in the express understanding that you refrain from stabbing my knights with it at dinner!" said the Duke gravely. There was a rumble of laughter.

"I thank you, gracious lord," I said with a bow. "I wonder what Queen Margaret will have to say about today's festivities?"

"I shall pass on whatever I hear," His Grace said with a smile. "I do not believe she will be pleased. It is my understanding that this whole affair of yours has left our sovereign lady with the distinct impression that she has somehow been had. Your reputation as a subtle and Byzantine plotter has been greatly enhanced." The Earl of Warwick presented me with a pair of wolfhounds, magnificent animals who would grace the kennels of a

king and which drew approving comments from my father and Sir Gerald, and young Edmund of Rutland showed his well known piety in his gift to me of a Latin missal for the manor chapel. Father Peter could neither read nor write English, never mind Latin, but it was a beautiful book and the illumination would awe the manor folk who would be allowed to see and admire it on high holy days. But handsome young Edward of March proved the most munificent of all, for his wedding gift to me was no less than a suit of full Milanese plate armour. "Your Grace, I know not how to thank you!" I protested; the suit would have cost me almost a full year of Whitewood's revenues.

"Fret not," the golden youth assured me airily. "To be frank, it's an old suit I won in a tournament off some half-baked Burgundian who was fool enough to challenge me. I got your measurements from your brother and had my armourer scale it down to size for you." His voice grew serious. "You will be fighting for York, Sir John. It behooves us to see to it that you are properly armed and equipped."

"I am ever at the service of your noble house, Your Grace," I said with a bow. There was a bustle down the hall, and I saw that the Bishop of St. Asaph was arriving with his retinue from Ludlow. I hurried to greet him. Afterwards I remarked to John Brinton, "A solemn churchman. At least I trust the good bishop will stay sober until after the ceremony."

"You have obviously never seen the good bishop imbibe," grunted Brinton. "His servingmen will have to carry him out of the banquet hall tonight. If the Channel were wine England would soon cease to be an island." I myself was sipping but sparingly upon my goblet; however little I thought of Jeanetta, I was determined at least to show her the consideration of not coming into her bed on our first night drunk and spewing. "Where's the bride?" asked someone.

"Good question," I said. "It's almost terce."

"Settle back and relax, John," my father advised.

"I had to wait past noon for your mother." But it was in fact only a few minutes later that Jeanetta descended the stairs with her maids and girlfriends about her in a bevy. I met her at the bottom of the staircase, curious to see what she would wear. I had expected some fantastic creation of silks and streamers, but instead she was dressed simply in blue velvet, with a blue kerchief over her unbound hair and a light trimming of white foxfur on her gown. In her hands she held a rosary and, tactfully, a large sheaf of white roses. She looked stunningly beautiful, and I opened my mouth to tell her so. But then I was suddenly overwhelmed with another image, an overpowering vision of another wedding which was to have taken place in far-off London, and I found myself filled with a bitter longing to know what that other bride-to-be would have worn on her day. Some shadow of this must have passed over my face, for as Jeanetta's eyes came level with mine she looked long into them, as if searching for something. "Surely I don't look that awful!" she demanded.

"I was simply wondering what the devil took you so long to get into a simple outfit like that?" I responded. A tall, elegant figure strode up behind Jeanetta, but she did not see him as she replied, "I'd have made it down much sooner if Prince Edward hadn't been chasing me all about the chamber!"

"And had I caught you, my lady, I warrant you'd not have been down today!" said the Prince. There was a shout of laughter and Jeanetta flushed. We were playing to a gallery.

"'Tis said that marriage is the only Christian rite requiring a human sacrifice," intoned a drunken Earl of Warwick. I chuckled, and Jeanetta balled up her fist and punched me in the stomach, knocking the wind out of me.

"Behave, or I'll throw you in the pond again!" she commanded.

"Gadzooks, not even wed yet and already she's belaboring the poor wretch!" exclaimed Hal. Jeanetta grabbed my arm and pulled me towards the hall and the chapel beyond. "Oh, come on, before the jokers start a waiting line!"

That evening the merriment roiled on unchecked in the hall. Now the master of Whitewood, I presided contentedly over the roistering, hurling back ribald jests and pelting my friends with beef bones and other debris from the feast. The front half of the hall had been cleared, and musicians now played for dancers. I glanced over at my newly wedded wife, who picked at her food and pretended not to hear the bawdy jokes and lewd suggestions, although she flushed now and again. "Why, lady wife, you're blushing!" I exclaimed. "I thought you'd forgotten how."

"Is that any way to speak to an innocent maiden?"

"No, it isn't. I was speaking to you."

"Fffft!"

"We must come to an understanding about that revolting noise! It's got to go! For the moment, though, how do we get upstairs without all these sots forming a procession and escorting us up for that silly custom of putting us to bed? I know it's a merry old English custom and all that---."

"It is also the time-honoured prerogative of every newly wedded couple to try and avoid it," said Jeanetta. "How's your pavane?"

"Pretty rotten," I admitted. "I dance like a performing bear at a fair."

"You did all right with that hussy in London last Twelfth Night," she reminded me. "I'll wager she was better swiving than you."

"Don't be lewd," she said primly. "As to that, though, I trust you weren't planning on getting any sleep tonight?"

"Why not?" I asked innocently. "What else does one do in bed?" She kicked me under the table. "You see that door yonder? It goes out into the kitchen, then into the solar by the staircase. We catch the next dance, and towards the end we duck through the door and make a run for it. Understand?"

"Worth a try. We made it together through a side door like that the last time I was being pursued."

"There's a lively pavane now. Let's go." I led her forward so we could lead the dance, painfully aware that she cut a far more trim figure on the floor than did I. Round and round we went, until finally we past the kitchen door through which servingfolk brought viands. They scattered as we deftly slipped out of the dance pattern and charged through the doorway. Immediately a roar went up behind us, and a mob of drunken guests began to trample in pursuit. "Damnation! That was Hal Brinton who tipped them off!" I cursed. The servants laughed as we pelted through the kitchen, realizing what was afoot. I grabbed a handful of jelly out of a large bowl as we ran out the door, then raced up the stairs and down the corridor to the master bedroom, the crowd close behind us. Just before we slammed the large maplewood doors to the bedchamber shut, I turned and let fly with the jelly, catching Hal Brinton full on the brow. They pounded on the bolted panels and yelled a last few parting ribaldries through the doors before staggering off downstairs to renew their bacchanalia.

Jeanetta and I laughed uproariously, and she collapsed on the bed in mirth while I wiped the jelly from my hand and washed it in the basin. "Ugh! Sticky stuff." I took off my sword, cap, and cloak, and flung them on a chair, unbuttoning my doublet as I sank into the seat. "Well, Jen, tonight is your night of triumph. You promised me all I wanted, and I hope the feast turns out to be worth the chase."

"And quite a chase it has been," she said.

"Indeed. Do not think, madam, that I have forgotten how I came to be here tonight. Now, I have accepted the fact that Sandy is gone. I didn't, not at first. I spent the ride from Raby to Ludlow thinking up all kinds of ridiculous plans like leading a Yorkist raid on the court to abduct her and carry her off the Burgundy, and others even more asinine. But I've accepted the inevitable now, and for it I'm rich and landed. Well and good. But hearken unto me, Jeanetta. You are my wife now, and I have lawful authority over you, and the right to correct your behavior in whatever manner I see fit. If you ever lie to me, deceive me over anything no matter how small, or if you step out of line in any manner, I'll make you wish you were never born. That's not a threat. I'm not trying to frighten or intimidate you, Jen. Whatever your many faults, you've got courage in plenty and I know you can't be frightened or intimidated. You are going to do whatever you want to do. But decency demands that I let you know what is going to happen if you do not change your manner of living, and if you do not make me a dutiful and obedient wife."

She listened calmly. "Fair enough. I've done you great wrong, and I know you hate me. I owe you a debt, and I'm willing to pay it, in whatever coin you choose." She calmly went to a chest in the corner and took out a long rod of intertwined birch twigs, lashed together with cord. "I arose at dawn this morning, John, and I went out into the garden and cut this. If using it will ease the pain in your heart, I want you to beat me bloody. I'll stand quietly and take it without a word of complaint, without asking for mercy."

"A dramatic gesture," I said, bemused. "And a daring one. How can you be sure I won't take you up on it?"

"No, you don't understand. It's not a gesture or a trick, John. I want us to start with as much of a clean slate as possible. I humiliated you at Raby. Now you have me in your power, and if humiliating and hurting me is how to get that clean slate, then this is what I want."

"That won't be necessary," I said gently. "Cross me and I'll beat you quickly enough, Jen, but not tonight. And you're wrong. I don't hate you. In fact, I find much in you to admire. That's not a bad start for a marriage."

"Thank you," she said calmly. She threw the birch aside and took off her kerchief, flinging her tawny hair wide, and then unhooked something and slid out of her blue velvet gown. She was wearing a fine linen shift underneath. While she was folding the gown and putting it away in the chest, I spoke again.

"May I ask you something? More curiosity than anything else. You don't have to answer, but if you do I'd like the truth."

"From now on I will tell you nothing else, my lord."

"Have you been with a man before tonight? Or men?"

"I'm still *virgo intacta*. You're not getting used merchandise, John," she said with a smile, not offended. "I'm a Talbot. It's always been clear to me that I had to save myself for this night, for whomever shared my marriage bed. But I'm not totally inexperienced. There are other ways to give men pleasure, and I've used them occasionally. Every house has an upstairs window and a rear entrance as well as a front door, if you get my drift. But I've only done that when I wanted something from men. Never for love, John."

"And have you learned to love yet, girl?" I asked. "Do you love me, Jeanetta?"

"I suppose I must, if I'm willing to take a flogging so that your own hurt diminishes," she said pensively. She turned, and the shift dropped to the floor. Her body was tawny fire, gold and shadow. My breath stopped, and I stared. She took my hand and placed it on the firm warmth of her magnificent breast, and stroked her nipple gently erect with my finger. Trembling, I began to take off my garments, and while I did so she spoke. "Here's another way I intend to pay the debt I owe you, John. In this bedchamber I am now your

property in fact as I am in law. I freely give myself to you. All of me, John. Command me and I shall obey. Take your pleasure with me however you desire. There are no limits, nothing forbidden. I don't ever want you to go to another woman's bed, John. Whatever you want, you'll find it here, and more. Now tell me, sweet friend, how will you take the first payment on my debt?" She leaned over, and her tongue lightly touched my neck, her breath warm on my flesh.

"On your back!" I said, my voice hoarse with lust. I grabbed her shoulders, hurled her onto the bed, and as she lay there gasping with anticipation I snatched her shift from the floor and ripped long strips of linen from it, with which I turned her over and lashed her wrists behind her back. "You are mine now!" I growled, frenzied with an animal, carnal madness I had never felt before. "You are going to do it bound tonight. All night. You're a bitch and a slut, and now you're going to do it all. Everything a woman can do."

"Yes!" she gasped fiercely. "You know! Praise God, you know! I've always wanted it like this! Make me do it all, John!" she begged, the madness possessing her as well. "Everything! I want to do it all tonight, tied up like a slave, like some slut dragged out of a tavern to service a troop of soldiers! Everything, John!"

She wrapped her legs around my waist as I impaled her and wrenched from her lips a scream of pain and pleasure. Thunder had been rumbling low all evening, and now it burst forth like a barrage of cannon as a sudden downpour of rain smote into the roof and windows of Whitewood. All that night I mastered her, used her in every way a woman can take a man, left her body glistening with sweat and bruised with my grip. We lay apart for a while after each bout, speaking little, I bunching her hair in my fists and running my hands over her flesh in jealous possession, she covering my face and body with kisses, until roughly I commanded her to her knees or on the bed or against the wall and we began again. As the sun rose I finally cut the bonds from her wrists. She lay on her back, sighing and rubbing them. The madness in me had subsided. "I hope I didn't hurt you too badly," I told her, drained and sated.

"My body aches like you really did work me over with that birch," she whispered. "I feel like I've been raped by wild horses, like I've been split open. I can taste you in my mouth. Dear God, I loved every minute of it!" she sighed. "The sun is rising, I haven't slept, and already I cannot wait until tonight."

"As long as I can get a night like that in your bed, Jen, you've no need to worry about me straying," I told her.

"Heavens, I hope not every night!" she giggled. "I'll be crippled before I'm twenty." Finally we drifted off to sleep, lying as close to one another as ever we would come.

The Rending of the Realm

Summer 1459 - Spring 1461

X.

For two years we lived peacefully at Whitewood. This was far longer indeed than I had expected the tranquillity, if such it may be called, to last. We were fortunate in that our manor lay in the shadow of the Duke's great strong hold of Ludlow. My other manor, Brantley Hall in Gloucestershire, was less fortunately situated, and in the autumn of 1458 I lost the whole harvest there and several tenants murdered when Lancastrian marauders ravaged the holding and briefly besieged Hugo Pentadyne in his house before withdrawing.

But life at Whitewood remained calm and peaceful, as close as we were to Ludlow. I lived the placid existence of the petty rural gentleman, increasing my stock and produce, improving my lands, holding manor courts and festivals, a pleasant routine of sowing and harvesting, working and feasting, births and deaths and weddings. We kept our Christmases and high holy days at Ludlow, and I often hosted such prominent Yorkist guests as Warwick, Edward of March, and the duke himself at Whitewood.

During that time Jeanetta and I developed a mutual respect for one another that never quite crossed the borderline into love, but that and a healthy level of good honest lust in the bedchamber made life quite tolerable. She turned out to be an industrious and efficient housekeeper with a thrifty eye who ran kept the manor house spic and span, the maids and other servingfolk well maintained and busy, and the larder well stocked. Always there were fresh rushes on the well swept floors, the water ewers were full, there was firewood and clean linen. I soon realized that I could trust her absolutely to run the place in my absence, a great worry off my mind. She presided over the hall with grace and courtesy when there were guests within. We never argued; if Jeanetta thought I erred in some way she pointed the fact out quietly yet cogently, and more often than not it turned out she was right.

We never spoke of Raby. Only once did the old pain hit with almost unbearable force, and that was when I heard that Melisande Grey had been married to some Norfolk knight I never heard of. I spent a single evening alone in the hall drowning my maudlin grief in wine; with a tact I deeply appreciated Jeanetta found things to do elsewhere, and when I passed out she and Jack dragged me upstairs to bed. I woke up at noon the next day, dragged on my clothes and staggered downstairs in mortal agony. Jeanetta was in the hall cutting bolts of woolen cloth into winter dress lengths. "Are you all right, John?" she asked.

"I am not," I groaned. "A rat is inside my skull gnawing at my brain, a cat has pissed in my mouth, and in a moment when I am a bit steadier I intend to find that bagpiper and kill him."

"That's not what I meant," she said, looking at me.

"I know what you meant. I won't be doing this every day from now on, lass, if that's what you're worried about." I pulled her to me. "Hush, sweet friend, I won't offend you by rattling old bones. We closed that book on our wedding night, remember?"

When she told me she was with child it seemed that my cup truly ran over. The girl was born in March of 1459, and we named her Melissa after my sister, John Brinton's wife, but the infant was sickly and lived only a few weeks. For the first time since I had known her, Jeanetta lost control of herself. She bolted herself in the tower and refused to eat, and she spoke only to curse God for taking the child from her, with such vehemence that I feared for her reason and the horrified Father Peter feared for her soul. I was about ready to have the tower door broken down for fear she would starve herself to death, when on the third morning I found it open. She was leaning against the casement, looking out over the countryside, and I went to her and took her hand. "Ready to come down?" I asked her gently.

"Yes," she said. "I've been making a fool of myself."

"No," I replied. "You had cause to grieve. She was a beautiful baby. It's sad that we shall never come to know her. There will be more children, Jen. No one expects to have every child born to a family live."

"God thinks to break me," she said bleakly. "He won't do it."

I let the blasphemy pass and kissed her face gently. "I missed you, sweet friend," I told her

Finally it came. On a hot day in August of 1459, a sweat-streaked messenger hurtled through the gates of Whitewood on a lathered horse. He brought me the summons to arms of my lord and master Richard Plantagenet, Duke of York. I was commanded to Ludlow forthwith. This time there was no doubt. The fire was ignited and England would soon be ablaze. Margaret of Anjou, King Henry in tow, was marching against us with an army. I gave the rider a fresh horse to replace his exhausted mount, and a pottle of ale to refresh him for the journey, and then sent him on his way, for he had a dozen more stops before dark. I sent for Jack Fletcher. "Find Tom Simkins and tell him to get all the men in out of the fields," I ordered him. "The entire manor is to gather at the lych-gate of the church, and I will speak to them there." I found my lady in the hall, counting early apples into baskets.

"I saw a rider come in," said Jeanetta. "Then I saw Jack running for the fields. From Duke Richard?"

"Aye. Margaret has raised her standard at Coventry. This time it's war for certain." The maid gasped.

"Steady on, Mary," commanded my wife in a firm voice. "Go find Gervase the butler and Wat the steward. Tell them to gather all the house servants and begin packing. Then come back here to me. We must prepare as well." My wife and I had often discussed what was to be done when the final crisis in the kingdom was reached, and as it was almost certain to center around Ludlow we had determined to place everything of value in nearby Talton Abbey, where it would hopefully be safe. Even Margaret, as unbalanced as she was by her hatred, would not willingly court the anathema of the Church by allowing her troops to sack religious grounds and buildings. Or so we hoped. Along with a number of other local landowners I had already come to a financial arrangement with the abbot of Talton on the matter. Unfortunately, there was no way to save either the bulk of the furnishings or the standing grain and fruit ripening for the harvest. I did however plan to have the manor boys drive our stock into the forest to fend for itself, even down to the poultry. If the Lancastrians were going to feed at my expense let them chase down their dinner.

We ourselves would go to Ludlow, I to lead my mesnie and Jeanetta and her women for safety. In any conflict of yore her sex and her noble birth would have placed her above danger, but this was civil war in a time of anarchy, in a land where the fabric of knightly society was frayed and twisted, and I was not inclined to risk my lady's life and honor on Lancastrian chivalry should she fall into Lancastrian hands.

When the men gathered at the church gate I stood on the stile and addressed them. "The day which we all knew would come is now upon us," I told them. "The Duke of York has called his retainers to arms. Queen Margaret has gathered an army at Coventry and she will soon be marching into our country to bring fire and sword among those she calls her own subjects. I am told that in this Lancaster army there are not only her English supporters, but a heavy contingent of her own despicable countrymen as well. French mercenaries!" This last bestirred them as I had intended it should, and a low growl went through the assembled peasants. Not only was the thought of armed Frenchmen on English soil a galling one to yeomen raised on the legends of Crécy and Agincourt, but they now knew that their crops were as good as gone. "This manor owes in service of arms one knight and twenty-four archers," I continued. "Before I ask for volunteers from among you for this levy, I want you to know that I hold none of you bound to come with me. You are farmers who acquit your tenancy to me by cash rent when you've got money and boon work upon my portion of these lands when you don't, not my waged men-at-arms. I can if necessary raise the required muster by other means. There are always men who fight for hire."

"Nay, Sir John!" called out a voice. "You'll not have to pay cutthroats to take our place because Whitewood men are too craven to stand by their lord!" A babble of assent and a few scattered cheers greeted this assertion, and I called out to the brawny young ploughboy who had spoken.

"Well said, Francis Green! Then I take it you are the first to step forward?"

"Aye, lord, I am!" cried Green, suiting the action to the word. A chorus of voices now clamored to go, and I pointed out each man I wanted by name, endeavouring to select the youngest and fittest and unmarried in preference to older men with families. "You, Willikin. You, Richard Polehouse. You, Walter Fisher, and Nicholas Felton, and Simon Bagwell. Tom, will you come?"

"Your Honour couldn't keep me away," replied the big reeve. "Nothing for me here. French *écorcheurs* ain't like to leave much standing, milord, the women and children will be fled onto the heath or the highway, and Father Peter can handle what's left. I want a crack at Captain Marguerite and her bloody frogs meself. I can shoot the truest shaft of any betwixt here and Shrewsbury."

"Good. You're my sergeant, then, since these clodbusters are used to having you order them about. Go to the house and get the keys to the armoury from my lady Jeanetta. All the men have their own bows, and have them bring all their arrows. We have six or seven big sheaves of clothyards in the armoury. Distribute them evenly around; I want every man to carry at least forty arrows in his quiver. Also pass out jacks and sallets and what few helmets we've got, and extra bowstrings."

"Stakes and mauls, milord?" asked Tom.

"Aye, one stake per man and one maul per three. We'll carry them in the baggage carts. Also, in the armoury you will find two metal tubes with long wooden stocks, called handguns, and a few lengths of tarred twine, which is a kind of slow match used to put fire to them. We don't have any bullets or any powder, but I assume we can get some at Ludlow, and who knows? The silly things may be of some use. Take two tarpaulins as well, and get pots and utensils from the kitchen. We will take all the salt meat we've got cured, and I'll have the kitchen women bake every bit of flour in the bins into bread. Where's Jack?"

"Here, my lord," said Jack, stepping from the crowd.

"Jack, I'm giving you Black Prince for the duration of the campaign, however long or short. Serve me well and he's yours. Your first task is to ride your new mount swiftly down to Brantley and summon Sir Hugo Pentadyne and his levy. Tell him to join us at Ludlow with everything he's got. We of the Whitewood troop will assemble here at noon tomorrow for the march. Got that, Tom?"

"Aye, lord," returned Simkins. Returning to the house, I found that Gervase, Wat, and several others begged to come with me as billmen and personal attendants. With me and Jack, Sir Hugo and his squire, and the Whitewood and Brantley men combined we would be bringing York four mounted lances and fifty-odd archers and spearmen, not a bad little force to field. Later that day, a fifth mounted knight was added to our little column when to my surprise and pleasure my old childhood friend Hal Brinton rode in and asked if he might serve beside me in the coming fight. "I already spoke of it to my father, and he gave his consent," said Hal.

"Where are Sir John and Bill and Toby riding?"

"With the Duke, of course."

"You mean you gave up a chance to ride in the Duke of York's bodyguard to fight in my bog-knight's levy?" I asked in surprise "I'm honoured, Hal."

"Remember we always wanted our first battle together? Remember how we were going to run away and join your brother on the Guienne expedition before your father stuck you in that plaguey priest-hole? Here you've killed two men already and I haven't even seen a blade drawn yet."

"I suspect you'll get your fill," I replied.

The next day we marched out, escorting a procession of carts, most of which turned off at the crossroads and headed for the shelter of the abbey. The roads were crowded and dusty with similar columns of men in armor marching to Ludlow, women and children fleeing the area, and vehicles headed for any place where it was thought safety might abide. I turned in the saddle and looked back through the hot afternoon. I could see the tower of Whitewood through the green leaves of the stately oaks in the park; the place was now deserted except for Father Peter and his doxy who promised to remain on the land as long as it was safe. Below the tower I could visualize the gardens, the hall, the duckpond wherein Jeanetta had pushed me on that day two years before, when I had asked for her hand. *Shall I ever see it again, I wondered? Or will the ravens on some distant battlefield pluck my dead eyes from their sockets, while my bones sink into some bloodstained stretch of earth?* Beside me, riding sidesaddle on her palfrey, Jeanetta turned and looked back as well. I took her hand. "I think I came pretty close to being happy there," I told her. "Thank you, madam. It was a good time, all told."

"It will be better when we return," she told me quietly. I turned and rode down the road, towards my liege lord and my duty.

The first few days after our arrival at Ludlow the atmosphere was tense and expectant. Retainers of York rode in hourly, their armed mesnies at their backs. There were Lord Clinton, Lord Powys, Sir Walter Devereaux, Sir John Howard, and most welcome of all, Sir John Brinton with a large troop of Devonmen. But we still waited on our major reinforcements, just as Margaret awaited hers at Coventry. These consisted of one column under the Earl of Salisbury comprising the massed levies of the extensive Neville holdings in Yorkshire and the Midlands, stiffened with a contingent of Swiss pikemen under the redoubtable mercenary captain Johann Krenzer, and a second force which was marching for Ludlow under the Earl of Warwick, who had crossed the Channel with every man he could muster from his Calais command.

Meanwhile, Lancastrian war parties continually dribbled into Coventry, where the Queen's commanders doubtless advised her to destroy us piecemeal while she still could.

She made no move to besiege the castle, which was wise, for the two converging forces would have caught her and hammered her to pieces against the anvil of Ludlow. In early September Warwick appeared one morning in the streets of Ludlow, trumpets sounding, leading a long column of grim armoured men. Two banners flew above them, the snow-rose-in-sun of York and the bear and ragged staff emblem of Warwick. The core of this body was a force of sailors led by a grizzled ex-pirate named Andrew Trollope, a professional mercenary who had served under Henry the Fifth but like so many had been forced to turn to crime to maintain themselves after the collapse of English rule in France. Most of the naval brigade had been pirates with Trollope, but when Warwick met them and defeated them in battle in his capacity of Captain of Calais, so impressed was he by their courage and their discipline that instead of hanging them from the yardarm he hired them to augment his own forces.

Several days after Neville's arrival, I was detailed as part of a strong mounted party commanded by Sir John Brinton to seek out the Earl of Salisbury on his line of march, to urge him to greater haste and to report back to Ludlow on his estimated time of arrival. We bore despatches as well, detailing the latest military developments, carried in a sealed pouch which we were charged to defend with our very lives and destroy rather than allow it to fall into enemy hands. We found Salisbury's army on the march in the Midlands, delivered our despatches, and after sending several couriers back to Ludlow we determined to accompany him. We knew that a large Lancastrian force under the joint command of Lord Audeley and Lord Dudley also sought to find us and stop our joining the Duke, and we anticipated action. We were not disappointed.

On Sunday, September 23rd, we were approaching Market Drayton from Newcastle-under-Lyme. At a place called Blore Heath near Market Drayton, we found our path barred by a bristling hedge of Red steel, including many crack archers recently recruited in Cheshire. Our outriders informed us of the enemy's presence, and Salisbury calmly and efficiently drew us up in battle order with our backs against a wooded hill above Hemphill Brook. The previous night had been wet and the ground was muddy, but the Earl set us to fortifying our position with ditches and stakes. Our carts and wagons carrying the army's provisions he ordered circled into a fortified stand on our right flank.

Perhaps seven hundred yards down the road, at the bottom of the long gentle slope, the Lancastrian army sprawled directly in our path. They were a noisy undulating mass of steel and colour and noise above which waved a forest of lances, pikes, pennants, and banners. We armoured knights dismounted, and our horses were led to the rear. This was a tradition going back to Agincourt, a time-honoured custom which let our foot soldiers know that we would not mount and flee should the battle go against us, but would die at their head where we stood. Behind us massed the archers, who took their mauls and drove wooden stakes into the ground before them at an angle, which they then sharpened to wicked points, an additional line of defense. Armoured men-at-arms and billmen anchored and protected our flanks, while we knights stood in the center. At the forwardmost point stood a mass of men in a solid impenetrable wall, these were the huge blond-bearded Switzers with their twenty-foot pikes. Salisbury's helmet was off, his grizzled beard and iron grey mane flowing over his backplate and gorgeton. A light breeze

fluttered our banners, and the leaves in the golden orange wood behind us rattled and fluttered to the ground. Autumn was coming on, and there was a delicious coolness in the air. "A good day for a buckle, eh, my lord?" asked Sir John with a grin.

"Aye, old gossip," returned Salisbury with a nod. "I was right afeared we'd end up fighting in the summer heat or else the winter rain and cold. With a little luck we'll settle this lot here, then take out the Coventry levy when they march on Ludlow and get Captain Marguerite's lovely neck into a noose by All Saints."

"A fitting sacrifice to the Devil she served if we might send her to hell on Hallowmass," agreed Brinton. I realized with a shock that they were quite serious about executing the Queen if she fell into our hands, but on reflection, what other remedy was there? She would do the same to any of us without compunction. I knew quite well what my own fate would be if I were to be captured: up a long ladder and down a short rope, as the saying went. My chivalry revolted against staining our cause with the blood of a woman, the royal blood of a queen at that, but I understood that it had to be. This was à l'outrance, to the death. I could not afford to be squeamish.

A young Lancastrian knight bearing a green staff of truce, symbolic of the olive branch of peace, came trotting up the hill. Along with Sir John Brinton and Hal, I accompanied my lord of Salisbury a few paces forward to hear what he had to say. The young knight cantered up to us and removed his helmet, revealing pale handsome features and golden hair. Salisbury recognized his features and called out to him, "I can not say well met, Sir Roderick, for I would we were met elsewhere than this. But speak your piece for them who sent you, lad, and speak it well."

"My lord earl," the youth intone formally, "The lord James Audeley commanding yonder royal levy sends you these presents. He demands in the king's name that you forthwith disperse this warlike and unlawful following, that you forfend all treasons and surrender yourself and diverse other knights and gentlemen in your company for trial and judgment at the king's mercy."

"What king is that?" asked Salisbury. "Didn't know we had one nowadays."

"Well you know that I mean King Henry of England, sixth of that name!" flared the envoy.

"Well I know that England's ruler at present is a French harlot and her parcel of thieves and oppressors," returned the earl. "We serve the rightful heir to England's throne, Richard Duke of York. We go to join him now, and you can tell Audeley if he tries to hinder us we'll cut him up into callops and feed him to the dogs."

"Then we offer battle here and now, my lord!" snapped the young man.

"Well, we didn't come here to play shuttlecock," responded Salisbury softened a bit. "Come, Roddy, will you not dismount and drink a quick cup with me? No fear we'll delay the business. There's daylight left for slaughter aplenty."

"I don't drink with traitors, my lord," returned the herald with frigid dignity. "Not you, not Richard, not any other Neville who betrays his king and his country and draws his rebellious sword to shed the blood of Englishmen. I but thank God that on this day at least one of us shall maintain the besmirched honour of our line. Farewell, my lord!" With that he broke the staff over his knee, wheeled his destrier and galloped down the hill. Salisbury turned away without a word and walked back to our lines, and I thought I saw a glimmer of wetness in his eye.

"My lord of Salisbury knew that knight?" I whispered in curiosity to John Brinton.

"His youngest son," Brinton told me. We returned to the lines. At the top of the hill gunners were hauling half a dozen great bronze cannon from the siege train into place, heavy and uncertain pieces which were as likely to burst and kill our own people as to inflict damage upon the enemy. Behind us our archers sat or lolled on the grass, idly thumbing their bowstrings and plucking long stems of grass to chew on, passing leather skins of wine and ale to and fro among themselves. I envied them their light padded leather sallets and jerkins of Lincoln green, while there I was sweating and itching in my heavy plate armor, wishing for nothing so much as a good scratch. Down to our right, the Swiss fifes struck up a lively air from their Alpine cantons. To the rear priests and monks chanted benedictions and heard last-minute confessions. Messengers galloped back and forth shouting orders, queries, and exhortations. Murmured conversation and shaky nervous laughter wafted through the air

I stood in the line, Jack Fletcher behind me to cover my back and to stand over me if I fell. Hal Brinton stood beside me on my left, Sir John on my right, and Sir Hugo Pentadyne and his squire stood stolidly to the right of Sir John. My sword hung in my hand like lead and I couldn't seem to keep my shield up. "Well, this is it," said Hal with forced carelessness. "Remember all those boasts back in Devon when we were young, about all the deeds of valour we would perform when we won our spurs? We must make shift to prove them now."

"Here they come," said Brinton calmly. The steel-clad hedge before us had arrayed itself, and with a sound of tuckets and rolling of drums they began to advance. From what I could see through my visor it looked as if they were crawling forwards in little spurts and stops like an inchworm. Even over the babble of our own lines and the wail of the Swiss fifes I could hear the swish of the long grass, the sucking of the moist autumn earth as steel trod it, and the chinking of their armour as they moved towards us. Without waiting to be told, our archers rose and took up their bows, and laid half a dozen clothyard shafts out on the ground before them. The Swiss fifes fell silent, and the long pikes lowered to the guard position, making a hedgehog of steel no charge could penetrate. Our trumpets blared and behind us the cannon cracked in unison and threw their huge balls of stone and

iron down into the red-rose ranks, churning up great fountains of earth and dust. But they still came on, mail and spearheads gleaming and banners billowing in the breeze.

Suddenly I knew I was afraid, terrified. I trembled, my stomach churned, and I almost retched, but the thought of vomiting inside my closed helmet was so reprehensible a prospect that I choked the bile down. My feet were rooted to the ground, which was as well, else I might have turned and fled like a craven. I wanted to weep, to fall upon my knees and beg for mercy from God, that He might suddenly transport me away from here, away from that grim and remorseless thing that was approaching to break my body and darken my eyes and take away my wife and my home and my very existence. I did not want this, I wanted life and good cheer and my friends around me. But they *were* there, right beside me

Barely turning my helmeted head, I whispered, "Old friend of my father's, give me strength!" The old knight turned and faced us, raising his visor briefly to study Hal and me

"Don't worry, John," he said in a low voice. "The funk will pass. You should have seen me at my first buckle. Agincourt, no less. We were in far worse shape than today, starved and exhausted and soaked through to the skin, outnumbered ten to one. On that morning my hand so trembled on the bowstring I damned near shot King Harry in the back. Yet here I am today."

"I shall stand firm, my lord," I told him. "Forgive my moment of weakness."

"And you, Henry my son?"

"A bit rocky, my lord, and I'd give a thousand crowns to be anywhere else but here," said Hal with a rueful laugh. "But I too shall stand. Lancaster won't see the backs of any of us today."

"Aye, lads, that's the spirit!" growled the old man. "Spit in their eyes, and remember, they're just as scared as we are. We've much the better ground here. Audeley must be mad to attack us, drawn up like this!"

"Mad or not, they draw nearer," I observed. Behind us, the archers' officers began calling out the cadence for *enfilade*.

"Nock!" Two thousand cloth-yard shafts were thumbed into bowstrings.

"Draw!" Two thousand bowstrings slid back to the ear. The air hung heavy and still as the wind died, and our banners drooped loose in their shafts. "Loose!" The white feathered shafts leaped into the air like a snowstorm suddenly spurning the earth and returning upward to the sky whence it came. A solid sheet of arrows soared like some great winged falcon and then paused, reversed, and fell into the Lancastrian host with a deafening ringing of steel on steel, intermingled with screams and howls. Again the

cannon split the air with forked tongues of lightning and smoke. A whoosh as our men launched another flight-and then the sound came again, but this time from the enemy at the base of the hill, and now the shafts were falling among us like steel-tipped raindrops. One struck the edge of my shield rim and showered sparks into my visor, blinding me for a moment. *"Don't look up!"* bellowed Brinton as I involuntarily glanced skyward. "You'll get one in the eye, right through the visor!" Trumpets screamed in cacophony, and in the advancing lines before us banners dipped and swayed as they broke into a shambling uphill run. In the vanguard of the enemy were several hundred close-ordered blond giants with long gleaming pikes; it seemed we were not the only ones who appreciated the fighting spirit of the beer-guzzling troopers of the Alps. Above the whizz of the arrows and the din of battle I heard the voice of Johann Krenzer bellowing out to the charging pikemen, *"Schweiz! Zurich!"*

"Lucerne!" bayed a huge figure at the head of the oncoming pikes, and with deft precision they executed a lateral slide slide, never staying or slowing their charge, which moved them away from us down the line off to our far right, off the front of their fellow mountain men. "Look at the Switzers!" shouted Hal Brinton. "They won't fight each other!"

"That's because they've better sense than Englishmen!" shouted his father. All of a sudden the distance between us and the mailed enemy vanished, and they were on us. I remember taking the full force of the rush on my shield, crouching low and staggering back, trying to deflect the blades of the polearms upward and away from my face. I dug my heels into the earth and stabbed with my sword point, for there was no room to swing it. I saw blood spurt; presumably I found a chink in someone's armour. It was a howling mass of pushing and shoving and clanging of metal on metal, beyond my power to describe. I felt my legs sinking into the earth, so hard was I pressed; I knew I had to stay on my feet, for if I fell I would be trampled into the earth and smothered in my helmet. Fortunately in a sense, the press was so close that it was actually difficult and at times impossible for me to fall to the ground. I hacked and stabbed and ripped wherever I could see in front of me; spurting blood and flying dirt and dust obscured my visor so I was almost always thrusting and shoving blindly. Blows rained down on my shield, my back, and deafened me when they struck my helmet. Over everything the arrows from both sides hissed like deadly rain, flying indiscriminately striking down friend and foe alike.

How long it went on until the wall before me abruptly collapsed, I couldn't begin to guess. The Reds had broken and they were running back down the hill in a sudden panic. Our arrows streaked among them, knocking them down from behind. A few of us staggered forward in a clumsy attempt at pursuit, but were dragged back into formation by our knights banneret. "Hold your line, lads!" roared Brinton in a hollow voice, echoing from his closed helmet. "Let the archers finish them off, they're light!" The command was unnecessary for me; I sank to my knees in ground that had turned into a sodden mush, steaming with hot fresh blood. Men in Lincoln green shoved past us and ran downhill, leaping on fallen men in armour in twos and three, thrusting long misericord daggers through visors and beneath armpits. Here and there some of the enemy wounded staggered to their feet and fought back, and some escapes were made.

Cries of agony filled the air, begging for water, screaming for mercy from God, sobbing out the names of women. I wrenched up my visor, sticky with blood, and saw a cloud of steam billow from within my armour.

Not ten feet away, Sir Hugo Pentadyne's squire knelt weeping over a still armour-clad form. I struggled to them on my hands and knees, unable to rise from exhaustion. I saw that Pentadyne was dead, a clothyard shaft protruding from his visor. "He must have looked up," I said stupidly, to no one in particular. Below us were scattered shouts and cries as the Lancastrians tried to reform in the lengthening shadows. "Dear God, they're not coming again, are they?" I moaned.

"No, I don't think so," said Brinton, shading his eyes and looking down the hill. "We've got enough archers down there now peppering them so they won't be able to form up again. Still, we need to stay in place until we're told otherwise."

We rested in place for a while, and up and down the line I saw a bit of what men in war are capable of. Local villagers and peasants emerged from the woods where they had been watching the battle, and they began to loot the dead men on the fringes of the field. Closer in our archers, men-at-arms, and even a few knights broke ranks and began to strip our fallen foes of their armour and possessions. Several impromptu kickball games began with severed heads. The Swiss mercenaries were especially savage. A page boy or else a young squire from among the attackers had followed his master too closely into the press and somehow had been captured alive by the Swiss; amid gales of laughter they stripped his garments like tearing paper and stretched his naked body plunging and writhing over a wagon wheel. Then a group of them unlaced their points and proceeded to use him as a woman, right in front of the whole army. No one in authority seemed inclined to put a stop to this revolting recreation. Even Brinton shrugged it off.

"That's the Switzers for you," he commented, pulling on a wine skin which he then handed to me. "Handy with those pikes right enough, but an uncouth bunch of bastards for sure. I've seen them fuck sheep and calves as well. Not as bad as the Turks, though. Most invading armies kill all the men and rape all the women. With the Turks it's vice versa."

Finally, when it was almost dark and the air had grown damp and chill, the Earl of Salisbury rode up and gave us orders to form up for march, and we shambled up the hill to recover our horses. "Bring Hugo's body," Brinton commanded us. "He's a knight and so he gets a Christian burial. With any luck the local churches will have pity on the rest of these poor devils and say a few words over whatever pit they toss them into. If not, the worms get them."

Jack Fletcher and Pentadyne's squire lifted the broken corpse between them. There came a final scream of agony as the Swiss castrated the boy they had been raping; I turned to see him tottering off into the gloom, white and naked, doubled over holding his crotch. Salisbury had determined to slip away into the darkness rather than try to finish off the Lancastrians. They were still lurking in the woods and fields below us, apparently

disorganized, but there were still a lot of them and more battle than one had been lost on the second day. They were in a bad way for leadership, for Lord Audeley lay dead on the field in his smashed armour and Lord Dudley was our prisoner, Salisbury having bought him for money from the Swiss who captured him and thus saved his life. I never did find out what happened to Sir Roderick Neville, Salisbury's son who fought for Lancaster that day, but I did learn that two of his Yorkist sons, Sir Thomas and Sir John Neville, were captured by the enemy and dragged to Acton Bridge in Cheshire, where they were murdered. We abandoned our cannon, but they served us a final turn when a valiant Augustinian friar stayed behind all night, periodically loading them with laborious effort and then touching them off, firing blindly into the night. The balls hurtling down from the hill into the trees among them served to convince the Lancastrians that we were still about and they had best stay put. At sunrise the next morning the friar blithely explained to the chagrined Lancastrian commanders that he had done all this in order to keep up his spirits with the jolly noise.

On the 25th day of September we reached Ludlow Castle, bloody and tired and dispirited. As I dismounted in the courtyard I heard my name cried out above a hundred others, and my wife was in my arms. She took me to a little bower we had made in that crowded keep by hanging a leather curtain up in a carpenter's tool shed, and she helped me wash and fed me and filled my goblet. "We heard there had been an engagement," she told me, her voice trembling. "No one knew for sure. No one knew who was coming back. I thought I would go mad."

I laid aside my cold bacon joint and pulled her close to me, stroking and kissing her hair. "I made it, Jen. This time. If it be God's will I'll make it through the next one as well."

Thus ended the battle of Blore Heath. It was a bloody and indecisive brawl now forgotten, save by the few remaining men who were there, and perhaps a chronicler who noted it with a line or two of ink and then moved on. It had no long-term effect of any kind on the outcome of the war. It was a pointless act of butchery which produced nothing but death in fear and pain, grief among the living and food for the worms and the ravens. Brave men died at Blore Heath. May God remember them, always, long after England has forgot.

XI.

On the afternoon of the twelfth of October, the banners of the Lancastrian army appeared down the valley of the river Teme. From the ramparts of Ludlow we watched them, a long metal-clad serpent twisting in and out among the orange and gold hues of the autumn forest, their armour and lances glistening and twinkling in the sun.

They came from Leominster to the south, where they had camped the night before and our scouts had made first contact with them. All night long couriers had ridden in telling us of their progress, and all that day a stream of refugees had passed through Ludlow,

peasants and townspeople from Leominster telling of rapine and pillage. Now it was late afternoon, and they were upon us. They crossed the Teme by the fine stone bridge and debouched eastward through the hedgerows and fields, halting not half a mile from the earthworks we had thrown up. Margaret's captains knew their business, for they saw quickly that we had built barricades in the town of Ludlow and were prepared to fight them street by street and house by house should they attack us from the south. They flanked the town and clearly meant to launch a direct escalade against the great castle itself.

It was too late in the day to begin such an assault, and the enemy began to make camp, posting sentries and raising tents. They cut down fences and pulled down cottages in the area for firewood, dragging the shattered beams and thatch behind into the camp. A group of us, knights and ladies, watched from the castle walls. "Look, there's the duke!" said Jeanetta, pointing. York and a group of his advisors, John Brinton among them, appeared on a tower to the south of us, observing the Lancastrians and noting their dispositions. I saw Sir John pointing and gesticulating.

"Well," I sighed, "I suppose tomorrow will be the day."

"No doubt," agreed Jeanetta. "We're outnumbered but we've a much stronger position here, and I think our leaders are better and the quality of our troops is higher."

"The view of an experienced warrior is always welcome," I laughed.

"I need no experience to know that tomorrow will be a bloody mess," she said grimly. "John, I beg you, take care! I don't want a dead hero. I want I live husband."

"I don't plan on committing any heroics," I assured her.

"Heroes seldom do."

"In a way I'm almost relieved," I said, my arm around her. "Far better to get all this over with in one gigantic bloodletting than to fight a long drawn-out civil war which would devastate the realm. At least this time tomorrow night England will know the name of her king. Where's Jack?"

"He went out when the tucket sounded. He wanted to get a closer look at the Reds."

"He'd best not get too close a look," I said, worried. "I noticed their forward units sending a few shafts at our scouts. Jen, I need to arm and get down with our Whitewood lads. They need me with them and I want our troop ready to respond to any situation or command of the duke."

"I can help you into your armour," she said. "Come." We descended from the walls and walked hand in hand across the courtyard and up to our little chamber. I sat down on the straw-stuffed pallet and she sat down next to me, and we held hands silently for a time.

"Jen, when we were first wed I expected a right Medusa," I told her gently. "But you've been a good wife and a friend as well. I've much praise and no complaints. It's been a good two years. Thank you."

"No complaints here either," she whispered. "I've not forgotten that you love another, but you've never reminded me and you've given me full measure. Thank you."

"We must speak of what may happen tomorrow," I said firmly. "If I fall but York wins the day, then all our goods revert to you, since everything we possess was your wedding portion. You'll be a very eligible widow. Choose your next husband carefully, Jen, and don't be sentimental about it. For some reason I still don't understand you took a wild gamble on me, but next time you might not be so lucky."

"I don't want to hear this," said Jeanetta, her lips trembling and her eyes dampening.

"You must hear it, Jen, I'm worried about you and I don't want you to be alone. You'll get bored and grow all weird again and get into trouble when you're on your own, and you'll hurt yourself and others. Just make sure he's someone who will respect you and won't beat you unless you've done something."

"I don't *want* anybody else, ever again," she sniffed, tears coursing down her cheeks now. "Damn you, John, you're making me cry again! Stop it!"

"These things have to be said, Jen," I told her. "I might not get another chance. If the Reds win tomorrow and I die, then it's going to be tough for you. Your father is a prominent Yorkist, you will be a Yorkist widow, and Margaret may be inclined for revenge if she thinks you diddled her back at Raby Castle. I honestly don't think she'd go so far as to put you to death, but you never know with a woman like that, crazed with blood and vengeance. She will probably seize all your property, Whitewood and Brantley, and she may imprison you. The best thing to do is to get away however you can. It's too easy to forget people who disappear into dungeons. Whatever happens, you will have only one certain weapon. Use it. You are a stunningly beautiful woman, Jeanetta. Do what you have to do in order to survive and win a new life for yourself. When I am dead, you owe me nothing."

"The question doesn't arise, John," she told me calmly. "No other man will touch me, I promise you. I've thought about this, and I have already decided. If you die, then I will die."

"That is a mortal sin and bloody mad to boot!" I cried. "Christ's blood, Jen, I don't ask that of you!"

"I'm not asking for your permission, John. That's just the way it's going to be."

"*Why*, in God's name?" I demanded.

"You are all I care about on earth, all I ever will care about," she told me. "When we have children I will care for them only in that they are a reflection of you. That's just the way it is. Please leave me your razor. Hanging is for peasants, jumping off the castle walls is dramatic but it might leave me alive and crippled, and if it comes to that I don't want to use some rusty bread knife. Only the finest bright honed steel for this lady's alabaster throat, thank you."

"Dear God, that's a ghoulish request," I sighed.

"I have another, not quite so ghoulish," she said, slipping her gown off her shoulder, taking my hand and sliding it into her bodice. With my other hand I ripped the gown from her body and shoved her back onto the mattress.

When we had finished she helped me into my armor with silent efficiency. I slipped the jupon over my breastplate and girded on my sword, and after a long, lingering kiss I descended to the stables to saddle Thunder. I had just finished when there was a wild shouting and clamour in the keep. I rushed out and met John Brinton running towards the great hall. "What has happened?" I demanded of him.

"We are shent!" shouted Brinton. "Treachery has overwhelmed us! That whoreson Trollope and every man jack of the Calais command have deserted our ranks and joined the queen!" Leaping the wall I saw it with my own eyes. Our earthworks were deserted, and the few of our men left upon the meadow were fleeing towards the castle or into the woods. Beyond the fortifications I saw a milling mass of men on the fringes of the enemy camp, some still sporting Yorkist emblems on their backs, shouting and embracing the Lancastrians and ripping the White Rose off their jupons and jacks to replace them with royal colours. It was a disgusting spectacle. I reeled in shock down to the great hall, where a hurried council of war had been assembled. From the few remaining Calais men we learned that bribed by promises of rewards and royal pardons, Trollope's pirates had begun a mutiny and had managed to swing most of their number to their side while Warwick was absent in the castle. Neville was in a mad rage.

"God's own blood, I'll break Trollope on the wheel!" he shouted. "He shall be pulled apart by wild horses, and every one of those misbegotten sea snakes I lay hands on will do the dance!"

"The man was an outlaw and a pirate all his life," responded the duke wearily. "I suppose the prospect of pardon and a place under the queen's shield was too tempting for him. But your rantings are sleeveless in the face of this disaster, Dick. Let us rather take counsel on what we must do now."

It was growing dark, and in the great hall torches and cressets were being lit. The flickering torchlight glinted on armour, and servants directed by Duchess Cicely rushed to and fro, bringing us beer and meat and preparing horses, for it was quickly determined that we must flee. Trollope knew all of our battle plans, and our array was so depleted and demoralized by this act of craven betrayal to try and make a fight of it would be

suicidal. Our only option was to escape, and we must abandon the remnants of the host to disperse as best they could in the darkness. I sent Jack Fletcher to tell Tom Simkins as much, bidding him see to the safety and dispersal of the Whitewood and Brantley troops. My farewell to my wife was necessarily brief.

"Jen, I *must* leave you," I told her in utter anguish.

"Of course you must," she returned, all business. "It's that or your head over the gates."

"My God, they may sack the castle! Remember what I told you," I said, crushing her to me. I could not feel her body through my armour, but I crushed her hair in my hands, kissing it, kissing her mouth hungrily. "Live, Jen! Do whatever you must, just be here when I return."

"I still have your razor, John," she said.

"No! No, Jen, please! Don't kill yourself!" I begged.

"I have no intention of doing so while you live, dear. I fully intend to use it on the first man who tries to rape me, though, and he shall find himself ill-equipped to repeat the offence in future. John, come back to me!"

"I'll make a point of it," I assured her.

Our horses and squires were waiting for us in the darkness below the west rampart, and we slipped over the walls on ropes, lest the Lancastrians see that their birds were about to fly and raise the alarm. I hit bottom, rolled on the damp frosty grass, and was in Thunder's saddle in an instant. "I hope he's fresh and fed, for we ride hard tonight," I whispered to Jack.

"That I gathered, lord," chuckled Jack. "No doubt some day the troubadours will render all of this a great adventure ballad. Somehow I don't feel in the least adventurous, just chilly and a bit queasy from the nearness of the noose."

"Ah, but this is a daring exploit, boy!" exclaimed young Edward of March gaily. "I look forward to hearing these deeds sung abroad in verse, seeing myself as history shall see me!"

His father the duke spoke up from the gloom. "If you cease not this badinage and ride not speedily, my son, you shall me history sooner than you might wish." Single file, we walked our horses towards the forest. The moon was behind a cloud, and we made it.

On a bleak hilltop in Wales we camped several nights later, and made our plans to disperse our party into several groups, each to go in search of its own refuge. One band comprising the duke, Edmund of Rutland, Sir John Brinton, my brother William and a few others headed for the coast in an attempt to reach Ireland. The duke had once been Viceroy there, and York had many sympathies both among the English settlers of the Pale and the native Gaelic clans. A second group including Edward of March, the Earl of Warwick, the Earl of Salisbury, Hal Brinton, myself and some others rode south, our objective being to reach the coast of Devon or Cornwall and thence seek a ship for Calais. Warwick had but recently been ruler there in that last English enclave on French soil remaining out of all Harry Fift's empire, and he assured us that the men he had left behind him to garrison the town were loyal. "As loyal as Trollope and his men, Dick?" inquired the duke skeptically.

"I hand-picked each man who remained behind in Calais, lord," returned the earl quietly, warming his hands over our tiny spluttering fire, his back to the wind. "Nothing is so fragile as faith in these times, as we have all of us found, but it is a chance we must take." We intentionally broke up family groupings, Sir John and William Brinton and my brother riding with the duke, Hal Brinton and me with the prince and the earls. Thus if either group was intercepted and taken, the Lancastrians could not wipe out entire families at a single stroke. Thus ran our logic, cruel but correct. We doused our fires at dawn and after a brief, grim leave-taking we mounted our smoke-blowing horses and sped on our separate ways.

Our party inched ever southwards, skirting large towns and swinging miles eastward through the Cotswold hills to get around the city of Gloucester. Occasionally we saw columns of smoke rising into the late autumnal sky. Sometimes we rode by night and slept by day in the forests and hedgerows. Slowly the countryside changed from field and woodlands to moorland and heath as we crossed Somerset and glimpsed the first red frieze upon the green heather and brown bracken of Dartmoor. The elevation mounted higher as we entered into the crisp heath and fells. "If the Reds catch up to us and we die tomorrow, at least we have seen this land again," I said to Hal

"Dartmoor men are born with that tiny pinch of heather in their blood," agreed Hal. "You can stay in your Hereford hall until you're ninety, John, but it will still be there."

That night we reached Redmond Hall. It was a bleak homecoming. My father had left days earlier with Hal's mother, my sister Melissa; no one knew where they had gone, but we knew they would be attempting to find John Brinton, and so I assumed they would end up in Dublin. The servants had fled and the manor house was stripped bare of stock and valuables, whether by looters or by our own people seeking to hide and protect their goods I could not know. We could see people on the fell tops far away, but they all fled at the approach of horsemen in armor. Well they might, for we soon discovered ample evidence that red-rose troops were in the area. When we rode on the next day to Brinton Hall, three miles away, we found it burned to the ground. The place where Hal and I had shared so much of childhood and youth together now lay in a heap of blackened stone

and charred timbers. An incinerated corpse swung from a burned beam, probably one of the family servingfolk, but the body was unrecognizable. "I'm glad, John," said Hal after a time, as we rode away.

"Eh? Why, for God's sake?" I asked.

"Now I have a reason to kill them," he told me calmly. "I wasn't quite comfortable with this business before, truth to tell. Killing other Englishmen. Now I can cut the bastards down without a qualm. I want to be there when Margaret's head falls. I will enjoy watching her die."

Two days later we reached the coast, and the Earl of Warwick expended the last of our gold to purchase a ship, a small sailing lugger, and hire a crew. It was the first time I had ever been at sea, and that late in the year the waters were choppy and inclement. I was so wretchedly sick I could barely stand as lookout against enemy sails, but by the time we arrived I was starting to adjust and get my sea legs, so I could fully appreciate the warm welcome we received as we sounded into the port of Calais. The harbor cannon cracked, and for a moment I thought we were being fired upon, but it was only a welcoming salute from the garrison, who lined the quays and cheered lustily for Warwick and Prince Edward. We eased into the dock and I stumbled onto the stone pier, almost falling to me knees from the unexpected sensation of solid ground beneath my feet

Warwick quickly resumed command of the town and quartered us in the governor's palace on the great market square. There we rested and set about recovering our fortunes, for from the very day we set foot on Calais dock we were obsessed with but a single thought, to return to England and smash Lancaster. Over the following weeks the news from England trickled in slowly. We learned that on the morning of October 13th, the queen had taken possession of Ludlow and allowed her troops to sack the town like it was a French village. She made prisoners of all of noble rank she found within the castle, including the Duchess Cicely and the two little Yorkist princes, George and Richard. Her Grace the Duchess had been publicly insulted and abused by the queen, then manhandled and lightly beaten with bowstaves by archers, but she was not stripped or raped; Margaret appeared unwilling to go too far until all her quarry were in her hands. Cicely was manacled and shipped off the London where she was led through the streets on a chain like an animal to the Tower of London, her two young sons being forced to accompany her and watch. There was no news of Jeanetta or the other Yorkist ladies who had been at Ludlow, and whether this was good or bad I was uncertain. "I'll wager she's all right, John," said Hal encouragingly. "If any gentlewomen suffered during the sack of the town, or if Margaret had gone into a rage and hanged them, I'm sure the story would be all over Europe by now. News like that flies on wingéd tongue. Worst case, she's in the Ludlow dungeon, and certainly that's bad enough, but we don't even know that for certain."

"That's what worries me," I told him with a sigh. "Jen's got a tongue smooth as silk and a wit as sharp as a sword's edge and of all women on earth she should be able to survive, but I still have nightmares about her buried beneath all that stone. I saw Tiptoft's collection of torture gear down there once."

"Why on earth would the queen torture Jeanetta?" scoffed Hal. "She knows no military or political secrets."

"You never met Margaret," I told him. "I have. You don't yet understand what we are dealing with in her, Hal. She would torture Jeanetta for the pure pleasure of inflicting pain. She might give Jeanetta to Courtenay of Devon---God, I can't bear to think of it!" I shuddered. There was nothing I could do, and it was maddening.

We heard the Lancastrians assembled a gimcrack parliament back at their old stronghold of Coventry, and they passed bills of attainder and death sentences in absentia against every Yorkist lord and knight, although in my case it was purely a formality since I was already under capital sentence for slaying Morriss at Raby Castle, and they could hardly execute me twice. Then began a campaign to consolidate Margaret's rule, and although we were over the seas her hand fell heavily on those who remained behind who had ever opposed her, or who had ever offended any of the magnates who now served her. Houses were sacked and burned, men were imprisoned or killed for hearsay accusations, informers abounded, entire families were stripped of their homes and all their worldly wealth and driven into the wildwood naked. I grew ever more worried for the fate of my wife.

But the news was not all bad. We heard that the duke and his party had arrived safely in Ireland, where English barons and native chieftains alike flocked to his standard. The Irish Parliament took the first step and declared Richard of York to be king, and when royal messengers brought a demand for submission from Queen Margaret the offending documents were publicly burned and the men who brought them sewn into sacks and cast into the river Liffey.

Warwick's Calais-based fleet very quickly gave us virtual command over the seas, and regular communications were established between Dublin and ourselves. The next phase of our enterprise was to replenish our coffers, for war requires gold as well as steel and blood to feed upon. Although technically speaking we had made peace with France, our enemy for over a hundred years, we of York had never recognized that arrangement. It has been a bought peace, with the provinces of Anjou and Maine surrendered in return for a French princess named Margaret who had been nothing but trouble ever since. A few years after that deplorable marriage we lost Normandy as well, either through collusion with the French on Margaret's part or military incompetence on the part of her lover of the time, the Duke of Suffolk. Probably some combination of both.

So now we proposed to resume our war against our ancient enemies, and in small bands we rode out from Calais and ravaged the countryside systematically, looting anything of value which we could convert into hard cash. The past ten years or so of peace had plumped the nearby districts and made them lazy and relaxed in their vigilance, so we found somewhat more to steal than our fathers on similar duty would have done a generation earlier. We stripped French houses of plate and furnishings, robbed travelers like highwaymen, and levied blackmail on villages and small towns. These raids were

hardly proper warfare, mostly just little hit-and-run affairs, but I learned the handling of men and horses in troops of thirty or forty at a time, and it was valuable experience.

We had several sharp brushes with small French constabulars trying to protect certain of our wealthier targets, but my men were mounted archers and it took them but a jig's time to dismount and string their longbows. Two of them were captured while drunk by a French knight from the district, named Vauquelin, who followed an old practice and severed the first two fingers and the thumbs of the archers and sent them back to Calais. The maimed men were now useless, both as archers and for most useful labour or crafts, their lives and their pride destroyed forever.

Honour demanded vengeance, not to say a prudent regard as well for the danger of allowing such an example to be set. I got fifty extra men from Warwick, determined the location of the Sieur de Vauquelin's chateau some twenty miles outside the Calais Pale, and then took my war band the entire distance in a swift night ride. We surrounded the manor church while the whole household was at morning mass, then broke the doors and came into the church swinging sword and axe. The peasants who escaped the first onslaught I allowed to flee, the sergeants and men-at-arms were cut down without much resistance, and the knight himself captured alive, raging and cursing. I had him dragged outside, stripped and bound to an upended wagon wheel. The two men he had mutilated came forward and meticulously burned his genitals off with torches; his screams of agony were indescribable, like nothing I have heard since. Vauquelin's manor was plundered to the rafter beams, his wife and thirteen-year-old daughter were gang-raped in front of his eyes, and a few of my soldiers who were so inclined buggered the priest. Before we left I personally cut Vauquelin's throat and hanged the two ravished noblewomen on a tree, as a necessary part of the message we were sending to the French about this mutilation business.

In my own defense let it be said that I allowed the women to put their torn shifts back on and receive absolution from the priest before they were executed. To his great credit, he was able to render them the last rites despite his own half-crippled state. Nor would I allow the priest to be killed or the church itself burned. That would have been overdoing it and brought the ecclesiastical authorities down on our necks for sacrilege. Had this Frenchman simply killed the two archers he captured I would have accepted such as the fortunes of war, and so would all of us in the English army, but this cutting off of fingers could not be allowed to go unpunished. Had I not done as I did, my own soldiers and comrades would have held me in contempt. As it was I gained the reputation of a fierce and solicitous commander who looked out for his men, and that was something I needed in order to serve the duke and best to help my love in captivity in England. That is all the excuse I have to offer for a terrible crime, the sin of which I acknowledge and for which I know I must answer some day when I stand before the throne of God.

"Isn't my lord of Warwick afraid we'll bring down a whole French army on our backs if we continue to comport ourselves in this manner?" asked Hal as we rode back into Calais, escorting the plunder-laden carts.

"There is method in his madness," I said with a chuckle. "Warwick acquired a good feel for the frogs when he was here all those years. They're as brave as their leaders, no more and no less. Give them a Du Guesclin or a Clisson or Joan the Maid and they'd turf us out of Calais tomorrow, but it would seem that the present French King Louis is extremely parsimonious and doesn't like to spend money on expensive indulgences like armies. He prefers to buy us off. We haven't done anything really major by way of damage, and eventually we'll come to an arrangement with Louis." So it happened. Several days later we received emissaries from the French monarch, a bargain was struck, a cartload of gold changed hands, and we rode no more into France.

Calais was defended by several stout fortresses on both the seaward and the landward side, and in late December we awoke to alarm bells clanging throughout the city. Sticking my head from the casement window I called out to an archer who was running past in the street below, his bow strung and a sheaf of clothyards in his hand. "What's happening? Is there a fire?"

"Nay, lord," he told me, not stopping. "Lancaster men in the harbour!" I leaped to my arms, and with Jack Fletcher's help I was encased in steel in record time, my sword drawn and shield slung, and so into the street. By now other knights had armed and were pouring out of their houses along the square, and in a loose formation we clanked down to the wharf. But we were forced to sit this one out, while Warwick's sailors battled the Lancastrian ships which had sounded into Calais roads. We outnumbered them, and soon black tarry smoke was pouring from the burning enemy vessels and roiling into the sky. But under cover of this several ships, having bound anchors to the guard chain across the Calais roads and thus sunk it low enough for them to cross, slipped up to the quay of the castle of Guisnes, the strongest of the seaward redoubts. "Have they lost their senses?" cried Hal. "Our archers on yonder walls will cut them to pieces!"

"Nay!" I shouted. "Something's wrong! Look! They're raising the barbican. More treachery! Isn't any of this Calais lot loyal to York?" I was right. Osbert Mountfort, castellan of Guisnes, had turned his coat and handed his fortress over to the Lancastrians, who were commanded as we learned later by the young Duke of Somerset, son of the man who had died at St. Albans and who had sworn revenge on all those responsible for his father's sticky end. But the skill of Warwick's seamen had sent most of young Somerset's fleet to the bottom, and we laid siege lines around Guisnes and bottled him up.

"It is the way of England these days," I overheard Edward of March tell Warwick carelessly. "Hearken, my lord, when the shoe is on the other foot and York is winning, we'll see how quick the queen's liegemen are to turn their coats from red rose to white."

XII.

For weeks we did siege duty on the lines around Guisnes, but the fortress was too strong for us to risk an escalade and the Lancastrians within too few to risk a sortie, and so for the time being the situation was stalemated. Then Warwick received word that a large Lancastrian force was assembling at Sandwich in order to sail to the relief of young Somerset. "Well, well," said the earl when he digested this news, rubbing his hands together in sudden glee. "I think, messires, that we have run like frightened foxes before these hounds for too long. Let us show them the fox has a sharp tooth."

Just past midnight on the seventh day of January we sailed from the Calais roads with a small flotilla of warships, caracks and round-bottomed vessels like tubs, mounted with small cannon called gerfalcons, and with a few carefully hoarded jars of Greek fire to spurt flame at enemy ships should they attempt to board us. I sailed with the personal guard of Prince Edward, and we set course over choppy winter seas for Sandwich. "Will we surprise them, lord?" I whispered to the prince, trying to get my mind off my queasy stomach.

"I think so," he replied. "They will not be expecting us to attack them across a winter Channel at such an ungodly hour. By the mass, they caught us by surprise in like manner! We're just out of port, Sir John, and they cannot hear us in Sandwich. Why do you whisper?"

"The sea does not agree with me, sire," I said with a lurch.

"Well, if we see any enemy sails I trust the sight will restore you instantly to full vigour," chuckled Edward. "Hopefully, though, we'll be in England before first light and they won't have time to take ship. Why are you wearing only a jack and a pothelm?"

"A choice of two evils, my lord," I replied. "I prefer to risk death by the sword or the arrow than to fall overboard into the sea wearing full plate armour and sink like a stone. A cold and terrible death, my lord. I'd like to at least try to swim a few strokes if that happens."

"You can swim?" asked Edward curiously. "How odd. I thought only sailors swam."

"I must needs be skillful in the art, my lord," I told him. "My wife has the habit of pushing me into open bodies of water. Have you not had any word of the ladies left at Ludlow?"

"I have tried to find out from our spies in England, Sir John, but no one seems to know anything about them," replied March. "There are a number of knights and gentlemen in our company who are in the same straits, no news at all of their wives or daughters."

Margaret must have done something with them, but we cannot ascertain what. When we land in the morning, Sir John, remember who it is that we battle."

Our brief return to English soil was hurried and violent. In the cold clear starlight of the pre-dawn hour we slipped into Sandwich roads unnoticed and beached quietly a little up from the town. We were all numbed with cold, but we climbed over the side of our vessels and through the freezing surf, stopping to tow in several small boats full of more Yorkist troops from vessels farther offshore. Other York men took to their boats and quietly boarded the Lancastrian ships riding in the harbor and slew the sleeping men they found on board. All throughout the town the same sloppy discipline prevailed. No sentries posted, no watch fires, not a soul stirring. "These arrogant fools shall be brought down this day," muttered Warwick as we trotted down the High Street past the fishmongers' guildhall. There were sudden shouts and a clash of steel off somewhere in the darkness, and a single cannon shot from the waterside suddenly broke the stillness. Our little army in Sandwich was descried at last, and down the High Street a single bell began to ring the alarm. "To the Blue Dove inn on the market square!" called out Warwick to our squad of knights and squires, about twenty-five men in all. "I have it well that the Lancastrian commanders are lodged there!" We broke into a run and debouched into a wide square. In the gray light of dawn we could discern a creaking tavern sign bearing a blue dove, and we quickly surrounded it. A stable groom staggered out into the street, pulling on his trousers, his eyes bleary with sleep, and a sergeant cut off his head with a flying slash and kicked his blood-gushing corpse into the gutter, flopping. Warwick's brawny squire and the Earl of March were about to lay into the door with battle-axes when the bolt rattled within and the head of a sleepy-eyed, pudgy-faced man appeared, eyeing us stupidly. He did not at first recognize us as enemies, and demanded of us, "What makes that tocsin, messires?"

"It maketh cold meat of you, my host!" laughed Edward of March. He pushed the door open and the landlord backed into the taproom, suddenly comprehending, but before the innkeeper could scream the prince's axe clove his skull in twain like a ripe melon. He collapsed on the floor, blood and brains all over his greasy smock, and we leaped over his body and charged up the stairs. We found the two Lancastrian admirals, Earl Rivers and his son Lord Woodville, desperately trying to pull on their armour in their bedchamber. They reached for their swords and made to defend themselves as we burst in, but Warwick leveled his point at the older man's throat

"I would have you yield, my lords. I promise you your lives if you do, and death the very instant you lift those blades!" he snapped. The two noble men threw down their swords in disgust. Not giving them time to dress, we dragged them from the inn and back to the wharves through streets now clamorous with running figures, screams, and the clash of steel. The enemy were caught completely off guard, confused, and ill-armed, and we met no serious resistance. We shoved our prisoners into boats and pulled hard for our own ships, as the pitch-black smoke of the burning Lancastrian war fleet roiled up into the morning air. The Earl of Salisbury had fired every vessel in the moorings, the wooden wharves were burning as well, and a few rooftops in the town were already ablaze from sparks or because our men had set fire to them as well. It was a conflagration even more

thorough than that which had been wrought upon the town by the French raider Piers de Bréze a few years before.

With a half-turn of the hour glass we had landed, burned the red-rose fleet, captured the two Lancastrian leaders and killed a number of enemy soldiers and sailors, as well as a number of townspeople who got in the way. Some of our men returned to their ships carrying kicking, screaming young girls over their shoulders in various stages of undress, but when I pointed this out to Prince Edward he roared to the offenders, "Loose those wenches, you lot! My lord of Salisbury, make sure no man on your ships is carrying off any women prisoners! Those are Englishwomen! Who the devil do you men think we are, Vikings? Until we return home for good you can damned well make do with French whores!" Disappointed, the abductors dropped the girls into the sea. The water was freezing cold but fairly shallow, and most of them probably made it to shore. By nightfall that day we were back in Calais, toasting our success and chiding our chagrined and hapless captives for their wicked allegiance to feckless kings and French harlots.

Our fortunes were clearly on the rise as the new year approached. Every ship from England brought more and more volunteers for our cause, and soon the taverns and lodging houses of Calais were filled with drinking, dicing, brawling Englishmen, waiting for spring and the wind which would take us home. We learned from letters that the duke was experiencing a similar increase in his fortunes in Dublin.

One such volunteer who arrived in February was none other than young Francis Green from my own manor of Whitewood, finally bearing news of my lady. "She and other Yorkist wives are being kept under house arrest at Whitewood, my lord," he reported. "The queen has confined them there and they are guarded, in the event they may serve as hostages."

"You mean Jeanetta is being held captive in her own home?" I demanded angrily.

"Aye, Sir John," he confirmed. "But she is well treated, as have we all been. The new lord of the manor is a Lancaster knight from Stafford not wholly lacking in chivalry, and he has not slain or oppressed any of our folk. But I have not yet spoken the best news of all. My lady bids me to tell you that she is with child again."

"Is it so?" I cried, my heart leaping. "Francis, my lad, will you return and bear a letter to my wife?"

"I am at your service, my lord, as are we all at Whitewood," he said. "Tom Simkins bids me to tell you that when we hear reliably that the White Rose has come into England again, we who fought for you before will all steal away with our bows and make haste to join you again." Hastily I scrawled a letter to Jeanetta telling her of my joy and assuring her that I was safe. That is all I said, a harmless letter from a husband to a wife who was a friend as well, no more. Francis Green sailed on the return tide, but I never got a reply from Whitewood.

Months later I learned that he had almost made it home when he was taken by a troop of Lancaster horse on the road near Ludlow. The red-rose scum either could not read the letter he carried or did not care about its contents; it was enough that it was written by a knight of York. They hanged the boy alive in chains from the walls of Ludlow Castle. A man who was there told me he moved and made noises for days before finally turning silent in the wind.

XIII.

As the winter wore on and we made plans for our return, I was brought much into the company of Prince Edward of March, and well I liked what I saw. He was handsome, witty, brave and debonair, the very ideal of what a chivalrous prince should be, and the thought of his eventual succession to the throne was gladdening. He spoke often to me of his plans and ambitions, of how he would help his noble father rebuild the realm, renew the French wars and recover the empire of Henry V, revitalize trade and industry and husbandry, and restore the debased English coinage. After we had fought together on the Sandwich raid and I became enrolled in his personal mesnie he kept me more and more about him, an association I found flattering and helpful as word spread around the town that I was one of the prince's cronies and confidants.

The Sandwich raid put an end to all Lancastrian efforts to relieve young Somerset, who suffered the humiliation of being bottled up in Guisnes and gradually starved into surrender. In March he finally capitulated, and Warwick had the grim satisfaction of watching Osbert Mountfort's head hacked off on the Calais sands. "We are sending a message," he remarked. "Betraying the House of York carries a price. In future perhaps some will be more reluctant to shed the white rose from their jackets." In the meantime, we had kept busy preparing for our return. We sent out spies and agitators, troubadours who sang stirring odes to the duke and scurrilous, scatological ballads about Queen Margaret and her little bastard princeling. Yorkist agents throughout England posted seditious bills and lampoons on church doors and tavern walls, attacking the government and proclaiming the imminent return of York. Margaret's minions replied in the same coin, with songs and libels and bills of their own, and bloody reprisal fell on the head and the household of anyone who showed the slightest disloyalty. When the Master of the King's Ordnance was attacked and slain by Yorkist partisans between St. Albans and Dunstable, and the train of armaments he was escorting to the Tower of London was made off with, the Lancastrians retaliated by sacking the duke's town of Newbury.

In early spring we began assembling ships and laying in supplies for our invasion of England, and the Earl of Warwick sailed to Ireland to coordinate a two-pronged thrust into our homeland. We would land in Kent while the Yorkist army from Dublin would come ashore somewhere on the Bristol Channel and strike first for Gloucester. While we

took London, the duke's forces would march into the Midlands and cut Margaret off from reinforcements from the north. Daily our fleet anchored in Calais roads grew in size, with more and more ships bobbing on the waves or tied up onto the quays loading supplies and provisions. From England we heard of Margaret's frantic preparations to receive our landing. This would be the death grapple which would save or lose a throne, and all of Europe knew it.

We Calais men landed first. We came ashore on the twenty-sixth day of June, 1460, on a deserted beach some leagues north of Sandwich, and no one awaited us save a few shepherds and woodpickers along the beach who fled at our approach. There were perhaps two thousand of us, a few mercenaries but mostly exiled knights and their retainers like myself and Jack Fletcher, but we had no doubt that soon thousands of the yeomen of England would rise and join our standards.

That evening we obtained our first bloodless victory as we marched into Sandwich with drums beating and banners flying. The iron-shod hooves of the knights' horses rang on the cobblestones as we rode grimly through the deserted streets, massed spearmen and bowmen behind us. Pale faces looked out between the cracks of shuttered windows. Obviously the townspeople remembered our last visit. We learned that the mayor and aldermen and what few Lancaster troops there were had fled at our approach. We made our headquarters in the same Blue Dove inn where we had captured Earl Rivers and Lord Woodville. "Serve us only the best," Prince Edward told the trembling landlord, "Else we shall serve you as we did your predecessor in this hostelry."

"Nay, bully lord," the innkeeper assured us, wringing his sweaty hands, a ghastly grin on his face. "I've no love for Lancaster. 'Twas that villainous brother of mine."

"Cease maundering and knock open every wine cask in the place," growled Warwick. We all sat down to an impromptu feast, sack and ale and roast capons the dripped fat from their spits, trenchers of eggs and sausages, and bloody slices from a roasting side of beef. More and more knights and lords of the army joined us, and our scouts reported that not an enemy could be espied between the coast and Canterbury. We relaxed and unbuckled our armour. It was a long summer's night, warm and soft, and we were in England.

Our prince was not only a prince, he was tall and handsome and generous, and as young as he was his skill at luring fair maidens into bed along with his prowess once he got them there was already legendary. During the evening no one could have failed to notice a tall, lissome wench with fiery red hair, apparently the landlord's daughter, who kept our goblets full and our trenchers heaped, smiling and laughing and flirting. The prince seized upon her early, whispering to her and making her giggle, and soon she was part of our celebration. As darkness finally descended no one was surprised when Edward hefted the slightly tipsy maid into his arms and ascended the stairs with her into Earl Rivers' former chamber. "My lord of *March couches his lance* yet again!" Warwick called out gaily. We shouted in hilarity and thought no more about it, while some of the knights spoke of going out to look for girls of their own. Suddenly there was a crash from above

and a shocking uproar of shouts and screams broke out. "*York!*" we heard Prince Edward bellow, "*To me!*"

We charged up the stairs, clumsily drawing swords and daggers, and found the door of the prince's chamber bolted against us. Inside we heard the sounds of a desperate grapple taking place, smashing furniture and the sound of blows. A dozen of us strained at the door, which would not budge. "Nym! You have an axe! Sir Rembert, with your mace! Bring that door down *now!*" shouted Warwick. We stood back and the two biggest men among us, Warwick's squire and a mountainous knight from Suffolk swung mightily in concert, hammering at the oak which splintered under a dozen crushing blows. Warwick reached in and slid aside the bolt, and we trampled into the chamber. I fell flat on my face as my comrades leaped over me. By the time I got to my feet the Yorkist knights were gripping the half-naked girl, the innkeeper, and a strong fiery-headed youth who kept lunging at Edward with mad determination. It took four men to hold him, two of them gripping his legs.

The prince was slashed with a shallow wound along his collarbone and bruised about the face and shoulders. His doublet was slashed, but he calmly pulled it off him, ignoring our urging to call his physician and let us deal with the would-be assassins. "I thought you loved not Lancaster, my good host?" inquired Edward, his voice deceptively mild

"I loved my brother, prince," said the man sullenly. "He who was landlord here, whom you slew at his own door."

"My father!" cried the girl in tears of rage. "Now kill us like you killed him, down where Tom Balstrode died! The beams of the taproom will hold our weight, and you can watch us swing while you guzzle our wine and eat our meat! But by Christ, you prince of slaughter, you ought to be hanging right beside us, and someday it will be your turn! One day our noble queen will give our murdered souls justice!"

"Hold your tongue, Kate!" broke in the youth. "My lord, I was the one who stabbed you. I am a man of Lancaster, squire at arms to the Lord Peregrine Stratton. I am thus doubly bound by honour to seek your death. All of this was my doing. My sister and my uncle are common folk, beneath your notice. Surely you don't want to admit in public that you could be trapped by a tavern-keeper and a maid? Hang me and let them go!"

"So you sought to slay me while I lay in yon lissome arms?" demanded Edward. "Tell me, young Brutus, how then did you and your accomplices plan to escape from the scene? The doors are guarded, the inn is full of my knights, the whole town is occupied by my soldiers. You had as much chance as a mouse at a conclave of cats."

"I wasn't concerned with that, my lord," said the boy with a scowl. "You murdered my father, you damned near drowned Kate in the freezing sea, now you're coming to kill more Englishmen. You had to be stopped. My only regret is that I have failed."

The innkeeper was weeping now, and he fell to his knees. "My lord, Robin is but a soldier doing his duty. Kate is only fifteen! For sweet pity's sake, you took Tom from us, now take me to slake your vengeance, but don't slay our whole family!"

"I want to die with them, my lord," said the girl quietly. She smiled at her brother, her lips trembling and her face white, but her voice was calm. "When we were little you were always trying to leave me behind, Robin. I wouldn't let you then and I won't let you now."

"Bloody touching!" spluttered the Earl of Warwick angrily. "Surely you're not going to forgive an attempt on your very life, my lord prince?"

"When do you gain your spurs, young squire?" asked Prince Edward of the youth.

"Never. You're going to kill me like you killed my father. Get on with it!" growled the youth.

"On your knees!" commanded the prince; the men holding the boy shoved him down hard. Edward picked up his sword and unsheathed it, and we stood back, assuming he meant to strike the boy's head off without further ado. Instead he stepped forward and spoke. "You struck at me to avenge your father and fulfill your duty to your lord and the cause you serve, however ill that cause may be for the realm. You did so in the face of certain death without a thought for your own life, which is the hallmark of valour. You also knew that the lives of your sister and your uncle would be forfeit as well, but you went ahead, which shows that you have the potential to be a leader of men. Sometimes leaders must sacrifice the lives of their friends and their very blood if it be for the common good, the hardest thing of all to do. Courage and leadership takes many forms, my young friend, not all of them on the battlefield." He touched the boy's shoulders with his sword. "Be thou a good and faithful knight. Arise, Sir Robert. Depart from this town and take your lovely sister and your somewhat less than hospitable uncle with you. Here is a purse to speed you on your way." The stunned new knight was dragged to his feet. "Someday all this is going to be over, Sir Robin," continued the prince. "I hope you live through it. England and my house of York will need your services." He turned to the staring girl and kissed her hand. "Madam, I only regret that your bloodthirsty relations delayed not their dramatic entry tonight by a half hour." He gestured. "Now get them out of here and find the leech. Perhaps he can succeed in killing me where this fellow has failed."

That was Edward. Like all of us, he did his killing efficiently and in plenty, but unlike some, he could use his enemies with mercy. Sometimes.

And thus was my first sight of Kate Balstrode.

Several days later, our forces already swelling with volunteers and landholders' mesnies, we began our march northward towards London through the Kentish fields and lanes in the rain. It turned into the wettest summer anyone could remember, and the weather rusted our armour but never dampened our spirit. The news was all good. London had refused a demand from the queen to provide soldiers from the guilds to reinforce the Lancastrian forces, and the outnumbered and unpopular red-roses abandoned the city. On the second day in July we entered the capital and were welcomed by cheering throngs who stood in the drizzle for a glimpse of Prince Edward, their future king.

We camped around the Tower and out on Smithfield and waited. Hundreds and then thousands of knights, archers, billmen from the city trained bands and others joined us. We heard that Margaret was massing her army once more at Coventry, and that she had started south to recapture the capital. "This may be the big fight we've been anticipating," said the prince.

"Any word of the Dublin force, my lord?" I asked.

"Bad winds. My father's fleet is still in the Liffey estuary." He grinned. "The more glory for us, eh, Sir John?"

All around London, I sought travelers or anyone out of Hereford who might tell me news of Jeanetta and the women imprisoned with her at Whitewood. There was nothing. Then just before we marched out to fight, a large column of men commanded by none other than Sir Gerald Talbot arrived from the west, and with them was Tom Simkins and forty men from Whitewood and Brantley. They brought joyful tidings. Two days before they slipped away into the night, taking their longbows with them, my wife had been delivered of a healthy baby daughter. In defiance of her captors, Jeanetta had named the child Cicely, after the Duchess of York!

XIV.

On the wet afternoon of Tuesday, July 10th 1460, we arrayed ourselves for battle before the Lancastrians. The royal army was encamped in a meadow outside Northampton, between the village of Hardingstone and Delapré Abbey. Behind them was the river Nene, flowing deep and flooded due to almost two days of solid rain, at once an extra protection from surprise attack and a deathtrap if they were defeated. Deep ditches were dug around the Red encampment, protected by a palisade of wooden stakes. The road from London was covered with cannon, but it had rained all morning and the enemy's guns were mired in mud, their powder damp, mostly unusable. The sun had now broken through the lowering sky, great black mountains of thunder clouds rolled across the firmament, laced with golden columns of sunlight.

The enemy stood behind their earthworks, ready to repulse us. The Earl of Warwick had sent forward envoys, the Bishop of Salisbury and the Papal Legate Monsignor Coppini to make the usual ritual offer of negotiations, which were of course refused by the Duke of Buckingham, the actual commander in charge despite silly old Harry's presence.

By two o'clock that afternoon we were marshaled three bowshots away across a stretch of stubby hedgerows and muddy green fields covered with summer wheat and barley, a deceptively verdant coverlet for ground we knew to be a soft and dangerous quagmire. "My lord, I like this not!" I ventured to protest to the Prince. "A mounted charge across that broken ground which will turn into a quagmire beneath our horses hoofs and under shot from massed archers all the while? Can you not remember Agincourt?" My analogy was a pertinent one, for at that great battle the massed chivalry of France, ignoring past lessons, had charged on horseback over muddy ground straight against thousands of the mighty English longbows, and it had turned the field into a slaughterhouse. The powerful longbow, when shot en masse by yeomen trained from their birth in the use of the weapon, could stop any charge on foot or horseback. Romance still hymned the mounted knight and filled itself with the shock of lance on shield, but in actual practice the longbow ruled the battlefield and had for two centuries.

"Fear not, John," replied Edward steadily. "In the first place, we must cross that ground somehow and scale those works in the teeth of their arrows, come what may. We shall cross it more speedily on horseback than on foot. Secondly, my lord of Warwick has a surprise in store for Captain Marguerite, although she knows it not. Prepare to advance banner!"

At the sound of the tucket hundreds of mounted knights jockeyed into position, urging their horses into line, snapping shut their visors and gripped lances in the rest. Our army was divided into the usual three battles or sections, and each of us were to attack the enemy fortifications from a separate side. We of the Prince's personal guard gathered beneath a great snow-rose banner, born this day by Sir Edward Brampton, a swashbuckler with a reputation for courage and ferocity. Prince Edward drew his sword and raised it high. "Forward banners!" he commanded in a firm voice. "At the walk until we're within bowshot, then canter, then when they loose the first volley into the gallop; we'll try to move forward and under the first loose."

On both wings our footmen marched forward with us and behind them came our own archers. It was our purpose to break through the center of the enemy works on horseback if we might and roll up their line while our footmen fell upon their flanks. We hoped that our own bowmen would be able to shoot over our heads and over the breastworks into the unseen enemy enough to hamper their own shooting, but my heart still misgave me, for we would be charging a fortified position over bad ground, and we would be terribly scourged by the deadly rain of grey goose shafts. "What was it Harry Hotspur said before Shrewsbury fight?" asked Hal, riding at my side. "When he was told his squire had left his favourite sword behind in camp, did he not exclaim, 'Now my plough has reached its last furrow?'"

"I am not afraid," I told him truthfully. "Even though this looks like a deathtrap to me. I suppose I must be getting inured to it, to be so calm, but somehow I know as I did not before that my fate is in the hands of God and He alone shall send me good deliverance."

"I shall be happy if He sends me any deliverance at all," laughed Hal. "Ah, to be in merry old England!"

"Come lads, buck up!" said the Prince. "Let's set on those whoreson Reds and do a deed or two to be spoken of in palace and taproom for years to come!" We began cantering steadily closer to the black beetling earthworks, over which the Lancastrian archers waved their flags and shouted defiance. We could see long green leeks in their caps. "Welshmen, messires!" called out the Prince.

"The very inventors of the longbow and still the world's best archers," chuckled Hal grimly. "This is going to be sheer murder."

Our horses iron-shod hoofs crushed the green shoots of grain into the muddy ground and churned up clods and great gobbets of earth, splattering their fetlocks but not yet hampering our forward movement too much. Around me the lances weaved and bobbed like a forest of willow saplings in a strong breeze. Then we heard the shouted cadence from the barely seen ranks of archers behind the earthen ramparts. "Nock! Draw! Loose!" A huge cloud of wood and steel and white feathers leaped from the earth and hurtled down towards us. "Nock! Draw! Loose!" A second eccentrically shaped dark sheet of death leaped into the sky from the swift and deadly Welsh bows, even before the first volley hot. Then the clothyards hissed among us like sleet, striking sparks on our armour and raised shield-rims, and sending screaming horses and riders crashing down into the mud. "Sound the charge!" boomed Edward's voice. Our trumpeters and drummers burst forth into a strident and discordant fanfare. I leaned forward in my saddle and spurred Thunder forward, striving to keep at Prince Edward's side beneath the snow-rose standard as I loosened my lance from the rest and prepared to couch it. The steel wall of men and horses was slowly speeding up to a gallop, a lumbering forward surge that threw a shower of sticky mud-clods into the air.

The hail of steel-tipped death fell among us again, and suddenly Thunder screamed beneath me and surged forward in a wild abandoned burst of speed. I saw an arrow protruding from beneath the pommel of my saddle, the shaft buried almost up to the feathers in the horse's body, and I knew that I must leap clear. Kicking the stirrups loose, I drove my lance into the ground and vaulted from the saddle just as Thunder stopped, shuddered, and fell over dead. By wrenching my muscles and sliding along the shaft of the lance I managed to land on my feet in the mud, which was fortunate, for had I lit on my back I would surely have been trampled by the charging knights riding behind me. But even as they thundered past I saw more horses going down, including the Prince's steed, and he barely managed to leap clear in time to avoid being pinned beneath his fallen charger. The arrows were doing their worst work on the lightly protected horses, but here and there lay twisted steel-clad forms writhing in the mud with shafts through their visors or gorgeons.

But the charge had served its purpose in carrying those of us who survived across the widest stretch of open ground, and no sooner did the prince climb to his feet than he summoned his standard-bearer back to him and took the banner with his own hands, holding it aloft as he trotted toward the earthworks on foot. "York! To me!" he cried. "Up, over, and at them!" The few remaining mounted knights who reached the earthworks dismounted and began clambering up the soggy slope, and we trotted after them. In truth, this close the Lancastrians' fortifications worked in our favour, for had we been on open, level ground they would have shot us straight down like so many butts of straw, but as they were sheltered behind their ramparts and we were now somewhat below the, they had to shoot at a high angle. Nor had our own archers behind us been inactive, for as I strove to climb the muddy incline I could see through my visor-slits that the earthwork was bristling with arrows like a pincushion. All the time we had been sloggng over that muddy field, our own bowmen had been enfilading the Welshmen, which is no doubt why we weren't all lying stark dead.

Above and ahead of me I saw that the enemy had implanted stakes on the crest of the earthwork, and even as I watched the prince and the first of our knights reached the top and buckled with the Lancastrians defending the position. I strained myself to catch up, but my greaves and my legs were weighed down with pounds of mud, and I inched up the rise slowly like an old men mounting a staircase. The din around me was indescribable, and I was so hot and sweaty inside my armour that I was sure I would swoon without striking a blow.

I finally staggered up behind Prince Edward as he wielded his sword like a switch, and again I knew the endless ripping and tearing and hacking as I chopped insanely at anyone and anything before me. The enemy archers dropped their bows and came at us swinging their huge mauls, and these heavy hammers crashed onto armour all up and down the line in a deafening clangour, like some hellish unimaginable blacksmith's shop with thousands of men pounding anvils. Our own archers crowded in behind us swinging their own mauls, and in places the press became so thick that men dropped their weapons and throttled one another with their bare hands.

Then suddenly a cry arose among the enemy, a cry often heard before in this sorry conflict. "*Treachery!*" came the sudden shout. "We are betrayed! Lancaster is betrayed!"

The enemy lurched back in sudden confusion, and looking down the line towards my right I saw that their whole front was reeling and suddenly they were fleeing the earthworks. Looking to my left I saw why, for our troops on that flank, commanded by the Earl of Warwick, were swarming over the ramparts unopposed. It was the rout of Ludlow in reverse. The entire Lancastrian right wing had suddenly changed sides, hoisted white-rose pennants, and with shouts and calls of encouragement were now helping our men over their own breastworks.

It was a shambles after that. I sat on the ground exhausted, and gratefully pulled off my helmet to ease the furnace-like heat inside my armour, but there were not lacking light-armed archers and mercenaries to pursue the broken red-roses and butcher them and rob

their bodies. I heard another cry which was to become terrible familiar in those times-an order for pursuit. "Spare the commons!" came the command. "*Kill the lords!*"

The chivalry of England was exterminating itself.

The massacre was great. Among the enemy dead were the Duke of Buckingham, Lord Beaumont, Lord Egremont, and the head of the Lancastrian Talbots, the Earl of Shrewsbury. Scores of lesser lords and knights were slain as well, and Yorkist troops who found King Henry the Sixth in his tent were with difficulty restrained by their sergeant from killing him as well.

As we feasted that night in celebration on the battlefield, I learned that the Lancastrian right wing which had turned traitor and given us the battle had been commanded by Lord Reginald Grey of Ruthin and his mercurial son Sir Thomas. Watching them laugh and chaff with their new liege lords and allies, the drunken Sir Thomas Grey standing with his arm about the neck of the equally drunken Prince Edward, I reflected ironically that had I married Melisande Grey as planned at Raby, my alleged schemes against the Grey holdings would have borne fruit, although not quite in the manner I had laid out to the Queen. I would now be the lord of all the Ruthin appanage through the attainder of Reginald and Thomas for treason, always supposing of course that Lancaster won.

I briefly considered engaging our new allies in conversation and asking after the welfare of their niece and cousin, Lady Melisande, but decided against it. There was no point in reopening old wounds.

XV.

I had expected us immediately to pursue Margaret and finish her off, but instead the Yorkist host marched back to London. "We won a great victory at Northampton, John," the Prince told me, "But we must not be overeager. The duke my father is still delayed in Ireland by bad weather, and we need him at the head of our endeavour here. We have run the Lancastrians out of the south of England and East Anglia now, but the rest of the country is still under their rule. We have much sympathy throughout the realm and we must now sit down for a while and get our strength together.

And so we sat in London for almost two months. They were not uneventful, as we routed out a few little pockets of Lancastrian resistance and set up the machinery for a regency which we had now decided must replace the existing government now that we had the king's pathetic person. My priestly education stood me in good stead, for I spent many hours in Westminster with the Prince and Warwick helping them go over reams of documents and trying to sort some kind of order out of the legal and administrative chaos which was the legacy of Lancaster. The duke did not arrive in London until late September, but by then we had assembled a parliament of sorts. I myself stood for Hereford, which was still in enemy hands, and many other makeshift arrangements were

made; our member for Leicester was a saddler and we had a former chimney sweep representing some district in Northumberland.

Duke Richard, after much consultation with his barons, decided that the regency idea was unworkable. It had been tried twice before and twice sabotaged by Margaret, and so the time had come for him to take the bull by the horns. On the opening of Parliament he advanced to the empty throne, put his arm upon it, and claimed the crown.

There was not a man in London who was not sick unto death of Margaret's misrule and who did not long for Duke Richard's firm hands upon the reins of government, but immediately a great dithering arose over a single seemingly insurmountable problem, and that was simply that a duly anointed king of England already existed in the dazed form of Henry the Sixth, now a prisoner in the Tower of London. The king's mind was obviously clouding under the strain; his halting speech wandered and he was in no fit condition to rule or even participate in a regency. But what to do with him? The humane sergeant who had saved his life from the soldiers' swords at Northampton might have better stepped aside and thus spared the realm a bloody bone of contention.

Eventually a compromise was reached, one which disappointed many of the duke's supporters but which at least provided for a sane and stable government without the need for deposition and/or regicide. Henry would remain king in name only for the rest of his days, while Duke Richard would rule as permanent regent an heir apparent and would assume the throne on King Henry's death. I had a sad suspicion that once the last Lancastrian army was defeated poor old King Henry was not long for this world.

The immediate problem, however, was what to do about Henry's ferocious wife, who was now touring the northern counties in her old manner, raising a formidable army for a second push on London. We also knew that Jasper Tudor, the Earl of Pembroke, was assembling a Lancaster levy in Wales. Unless we moved quickly we would find ourselves under attack on two fronts.

During all this time I chafed impatiently, worried about Jeanetta and my child at Whitewood. At last I laid my cause before the prince. "Surely something can be done to free her, my lord?" I urged.

"We have repeatedly offered through intermediaries in the Church to exchange hostages with the queen, but she refuses," he told me.

"The last I heard the women at Whitewood were being treated well, and my father has made it clear that York will avenge any harm done to them. You know our war plans?"

"Sound strategy, my lord," I replied with a nod. "One army goes north to deal with Margaret, the other marches west to meet Pembroke."

"I am to command the western column, John, and I give you my word that when we get out there I will do my best to liberate Whitewood. Many other knights in my following have wives or sweethearts or sisters there."

"Aye, lord, my own brother's wife is immured there," I remarked, "Although I am not certain he'll thank me for the return of her."

"Indeed?" laughed Edward. "Perhaps that's why Margaret won't exchange or ransom them. The ladies husbands have bribed her to keep them in durance."

"No doubt to protect them from you, my lord," I replied gravely.

On the ninth day of December we marched out from London. I rode with the prince, Hal beside me, and Sir John Brinton as well, recently returned from a diplomatic mission at the court of Burgundy. On the same day another force headed north, commanded by His Grace the Duke, the Earl of Salisbury, and young Edmund of Rutland, who was getting his first taste of military command.

We marched through the bleak winter countryside, banners dipping and spear points glistening in the frosty air. Sometimes groups of peasants lined the roads and village streets to cheer for us, and our forces grew by the day as bands of archers and small groups of mounted knights and men at arms joined us. Also, sometimes our foraging parties returned with dead and wounded, stragglers were ambushed, while sudden arrows sniped at us from the close-crowding forests and from behind stone walls. Lancaster did not lack for sympathizers among the peasantry.

We reached Leominster in seven days and received our first confused reports of the wily Jasper Tudor. He lay across the River Severn in Wales, evidently hoping to entice us into more hostile territory rather than battle us in the largely Yorkist March country. One morning Prince Edward summoned me to his pavilion and gestured me to a seat on a settle. "Think you can handle a small independent command for a while, Sir John?" he asked me.

"I am at your service, my lord," I replied, dazzled by the honour.

"Fine," said the prince. "I want you to take a few men northward and probe. If you don't find any Lancasters between here and Ludlow I want you to start making enough noise for Xenophon and the whole Ten Thousand and set a token siege around Ludlow Castle. Before you do, of course, I'm sure you'd like to retake Whitewood."

"Are they still there?" I asked, my heart leaping.

"As of two days ago they were, according to a travelling pedlar who came into camp this morning. The Lancastrian banneret may move his prisoners to the castle, but if you're fast enough you might catch him napping. There are only about twenty-five or thirty archers and men-at-arms in Whitewood. Just an outpost, really."

"How many men will I have?" I asked.

"A good-sized cavalry troop, 50 lances and sergeants, about a hundred and twenty mounted archers, plus your own Whitewood troops of course."

"Ludlow is a huge keep, my lord!" I protested. "The garrison will outnumber us nigh two to one!"

"No, Tudor's stripped the place of men and weapons and supplies, and there's supposed to be a scant two or three score left. He must have overlooked that company at Whitewood in his haste. The reason I want it to appear as if we are attacking Ludlow is to give him the idea we're performing a two-pronged thrust at him. That should draw him out to attack one of us, and I am gambling it will be me. Tudor will think my forces are more depleted than they actually are. He won't expect to come up against the full might of my host."

"And if Tudor marches to relieve Ludlow?" I asked.

"Then you run like a started hare before the hounds and it becomes a race for me to catch up with him before he joins Margaret. But I don't think he'll go for you. He won't be able to resist the potential glory of beating me and sticking my head on a pole. I was going to give this job to John Brinton, but he seemed to feel that you were capable of the task and it was time you tried your wings." I was extremely flattered and said so. "He must be serious, because both his sons are going with you. Brampton has your muster roll, so get on with it."

"Aye, lord!" I said, rising from my seat.

"One thing," said Edward. "I advise you to move against Whitewood quickly but with care. I don't know what orders that Lancastrian has regarding his prisoners, nor do I know the man personally, so I cannot gauge his mettle. He's some Stafford lance I never heard of, his name even escapes me at the moment. Nevertheless, you don't want to get yourself into a situation where he's holding a knife at your wife's throat."

Edward left unspoken another chilling thought. It was just possible that the vengeful Margaret, maddened by her hatred of everything Yorkist, had ordered her gaoler to execute his captives rather than allow them to be rescued. When I took the northern highway hours later, my horsemen and my archers behind me beneath a snow-rose banner, it was with a grim sense of foreboding.

It was cold as we crouched along the base of the wall encircling Whitewood. Our breaths were frosting white in the air, wreathing our lips in a cloud of vapor. All along the wall my soldiers hunched, fingering their weapons impatiently. Three hastily knocked-together ladders lay ready for the escalade. We had reached the wall apparently

undetected, for all was silent and still in the winter air beyond. I had looked the manor house over very carefully before approaching but it was totally devoid of any movement or any evidence of habitation, grim and bleak in the grey morning. My alarm was growing, but I clung to the idea that the manor's garrison had fled to Ludlow, taking their captives with them.

Jack Fletcher slipped to my side, coming to me from Bill and Hal Brinton, who had circled around to the front gate with half the force. "They're ready to move in," he told me. "We won't have to scale the wall on that side. The front gate into the park is standing wide open."

"Any signs of life?" I asked.

"None. To be truthful, my lord, I think our birds have flown."

"They may be lying in wait for us," I asserted. "There could be a dozen archers up there in the tower ready to shoot through the arrow slits, and we wouldn't see them. We'll go over the top now and advance on the house. If they're in there they'll be diverted, their attention on us, and then I'll sound the tucket for the gate party to attack." I beckoned to a sergeant and told him to pass the word to go over the wall as quietly as possible. "I'll try the center door to the buttery first," I whispered to Jack. "It opens in on that little jog in the passageway, remember? They can't have reinforced it too strongly." Silently I gestured, the ladders went up against the wall, and the seventy-odd men swarmed over rapidly, archers clutching arrows in their teeth for quick use if need be. Within seconds we were over the wall and trotting towards Whitewood manor house. I must build that wall higher, I reflected fleetingly. It had been entirely too easy to scale.

Every moment I expected to hear the deadly *whutt!* of a clothyard shaft and a scream of pain, but there was only silence from the lifeless mass of stone before us. We reached the granary and huddled in the shrubbery. Silently I motioned for Jack to accompany me, and we slid down the wall trying doors. They were all locked. We came to the one I intended to use and found it barred from within. I beckoned to the knights in my party and they ran clanking to my side, along with the trumpeter. "When the horn sounds, go at the door with your axes," I told two of them. *Dear God, are we going to find them all dead in there?* I wondered to myself, not daring to voice the thought aloud. I was about to blow for the attack, when we were all startled by a silvery laugh from above us.

"Why don't you try the front door? Most visitors do."

I looked up and saw Jeanetta leaning from the window casement, laughing at us. "Well, ah, hello there," I stammered.

"Hello yourself. I say, why don't you go around front rather than skulking around back here in the shrubbery? It's your house, you know."

"Where are those Lancaster blokes?" I asked.

"Took off yesterday morning," she informed me. "A messenger arrived bidding them make haste to join the Earl of Pembroke. Ludlow's been abandoned as well. Too vulnerable, they say, which is codswallop. The Reds are unsure who's going to win and they don't want to fight until they figure it out. Then, too, I imagine the men who were here feared your wrath when you discovered they've spent the winter burning your furniture for firewood."

"And what of the ladies kept here in durance?" demanded a young knight at my side, pulling off his helmet. "What of Lady Agnes Elginbrodde?"

"She is quite well, Sir Martin," Jeanetta informed him. "As are we all. The rest of the girls are in the cellar. My woman Mary told us there were armed men approaching the house and we didn't know who you were. If you will come in we can poke up the remains of John's study desk and you may warm yourselves. Or else you may continue to stand there with your noses turning blue."

I sent Jack to bring in the Brintons and the gate party, while Jeanetta descended to let us in. Soon we were doffing our armour in the hall, and several men were passionately embracing weeping women. I looked around in despair, for my lady spoke true. The place was almost denuded of furnishings.

"Saints assoil us, they've stripped the place bare!" I moaned.

"Just about," agreed Jeanetta. Mary approached us bearing a small bundle. Jeanetta took it from her and presented it to me. "Your daughter," she said softly.

She was a beautiful infant in truth, with a small delicate face and big green eyes like her mother's which appraised me steadily, not wandering as so many babies' eyes do. I stroked the little head tenderly, and then leaned over and kissed Jeanetta. "This is the greatest gift of all," I told her softly. "From my heart I thank you, lady."

"The next shall be a son," she promised me. "How long can you stay?"

"I'll have to occupy Ludlow," I told her. "With a little luck Edward will leave me in command there as temporary castellan. On the other hand, if he commands me back to the host then I must go. The whole idea of my coming up here was to act like a second Xenophon and convince Pembroke that Edward has divided his forces and is sitting down there at Leominster weak and vulnerable. It doesn't look as if he's falling for it so far. We'll have to wait and see."

"But a few days at least, my lord?" she insisted.

"Oh, for certain. You and these ladies can all come to Ludlow. Most of their husbands are here in my force, as you can see." Around the bare hall were almost a dozen couples laughing and talking, some of the women weeping with joy at their reunion with long lost menfolk. I was glad to see a little happiness in the midst of this tragic civil war. "We shall

stay here tonight, but I want to be off to Ludlow first thing tomorrow. There might yet be a Lancastrian counterattack in this district and besides, it doesn't look as if I've facilities to receive so many knightly guests, the way they sacked the place. Who was that Lancaster oaf in charge here, anyway? Be damned if I don't settle with him for all this destruction!"

"I hope not," said Jeanetta anxiously. "It was Tommy Caxton."

"Oh," I said, blinking and exhaling. "Well then, I'm glad I didn't have to fight him. I owe him my life for helping you organize my escape from Raby Castle that night."

"He was good to us, and to me," Jeanetta told me. "Margaret wanted to throw me in the dungeon that morning when her army occupied Ludlow, but Tommy asked her to grant him custody of me as a prisoner, and she agreed. I drew my dagger on him when we were alone, because time and war changes a man and I feared his intentions, but he took it away from me and told me to stop being a silly goose. Since then he has looked out for me and made sure I never went hungry or suffered abuse. He managed to wangle this job as a glorified turnkey, and he kept us here as prisoners on the queen's command. Early on, he and I came to an agreement. We would not escape or cause trouble, and on his part he promised that we would be treated honourably and that he would protect us from being murdered if he could. We fared well, thanks to Tommy."

"I hope he makes it through the fighting," I said sincerely. "I shall thank him personally if he does. Meanwhile, though, it looks as if some of the knights shall have to sleep on the floor with the men, a sore fate indeed for the wedded ones, and you know that a good commander always shares the hardships of his soldiers." Jeanetta's eyes widened in alarm.

"You wouldn't!" she gasped.

"War demands an ascetic discipline," I intoned sternly.

"Oh, John, it's been so long..." But then she saw the grin I was trying to suppress beneath the back of my hand, and I laughed and took her about the waist.

"For me too, sweetling," I told her with a laugh.

"Oh?" she said, making a face. "I'm sure you found comfort enough with those camp doxies and silky French ladies at Calais."

"No, Jen!" I said urgently, taking her by the shoulders. "That's not true! All that time, Calais, London, in the field, I've never touched another woman! I didn't even rape any French girls while we were raiding in Normandy!"

"I spoke in jest, sweetling," she said with a soft laugh. "You don't have to swear to me, for I believe you. Nor would I blame you if you did take lemans, for I do not expect you

to live miserably for my sake. You know that there is only one other woman on earth whom I fear..." She stopped abruptly, then looked around. "Well," she continued briskly, "We do have a fairly full larder, again thanks to Tommy, so we can give you and your men a hearty feed tonight. But what will we use for fuel?"

"Oh, hell," I moaned, "Smash up another table!"

I took possession of Ludlow Castle the next morning, finding it deserted except for one old man who had been left behind to feed the hounds and the falcons. For ten days I was master of the great keep, keeping a merry Christmas there, and well I enjoyed this brief reunion with my wife and child. The military situation remained uncertain, with no clear word on what was happening amid all the rumors that floated in to us from the countryside. Pembroke had apparently crossed the Severn as expected, goaded into moving by the loss of Ludlow. He was a canny old commander, though, and despite our hopes he quickly discerned that my small column was a feint and that he had been tricked. He and Prince Edward edged and maneuvered warily across south Herefordshire and down into the Cotswolds, each looking for an opening.

Then one day a messenger galloped into Ludlow Castle, shouting my name from the courtyard and dashing into the great hall in frantic haste. "Lord John, my lord of March bids you to abandon all here and return to the army with every man you can raise. Disaster has struck York! Our very heart has been cut out!"

"Eh? What has happened?" I exclaimed.

Suddenly the man fell down on his knees and began to weep unrestrainedly. "My lord, Duke Richard is dead!" he sobbed.

"*What?*" I shouted, leaping to my feet as the man around me gasped and cried out in horror. "Speak!"

"It befell outside Wakefield, in Yorkshire," the man stammered dismally. "We halted our host at Sandal Castle to keep our Christmas, and we thought we had a truce with the Reds for the twelve days, but on the last day of December they fell on a party of our foragers, and the duke and my lords of Salisbury and Rutland led a mounted charge from the castle to rescue them."

"It was a trap?" I asked with chill foreboding.

"Aye, lord. There were thousands of them hiding in gullies and behind hills. The duke and many others were cut down straightaway, and Salisbury was taken and beheaded that night."

"And Prince Edmund?" I demanded in growing shock at this catastrophe.

"He fled and was overtaken by that brutal savage Lord Clifford, and when that fair youth fell upon his knees and begged for his life Clifford but laughed like a devil and told him, 'As thy father slew my father, so shall I slay thee!' and murdered him on the spot!"

"Sweet lamb of God!" I breathed, sinking into my seat in consternation at the magnitude of this defeat.

"Still more evil was done," continued the rider. "Queen Margaret ordered all three noble Yorkist heads placed above the city gate of York itself, and upon the duke's brow she placed a crown of paper. Now she marches straight for London with a great host, English and Frenchmen and Scots and Danes, ravaging the countryside all around. It is said the Queen has gone mad in her hatred and means to slaughter the whole realm. The prince bids you to hasten, my lord, for we must smash Pembroke's army and beat the Lancastrians back to London, or else the cause of York is lost!"

In one moment's swirl of battle we had lost our leader, his son, and one of our best generals, but somehow I knew that while Edward of March lived there was hope, and so I informed my men whom I gathered in Ludlow's great hall. I told them briefly of the terrible events at Wakefield, and I went on, "Thus has our well beloved liege lord departed from us and from this life. But let there be no tears or lamentations among you! There shall be time enough to mourn all of England's dead when the tyrant bitch has been hurled down into the mud and these murdering, truce-breaking vipers have been punished! We have had a shog, aye, we have had a tumble, but the Earl of Warwick still holds London for us and our noble prince has sworn bloody vengeance upon his father's murderers! We march to join him now, and we will render our last homage to Richard of York in the blood of his enemies!" A rousing cheer greeted this speech of mine, and with fury and determination we all prepared to march. The knights were saddled and the archers fallen in when once again I bade farewell to my lady wife within the walls of Ludlow Castle, once more to leave her for an uncertain fate.

"This will be the death grapple, Jen," I said, taking her hands. "One way or the other, it will be over by the time the new buds appear on the trees this spring. I feel it."

"Woman's fate is to hang her life and happiness on the wars of men," she responded in dull pain. "It has always been thus, and I accept that. John, I must put something to you now, but you must promise that you shall not part from me in anger over it."

"Speak."

"What will we do if York loses but you live?" she asked. "Have you thought of it? In this war men have turned their coats back and forth like the changing of the seasons. Ere he left, Tommy Caxton asked me to ask you to help him if you could should York triumph and he survive, and he in turn promised me that if Lancaster triumphs and you live through it, he will do all in his power to bring you back into the Queen's favor if you will turn."

"Can you really think me so dead to honour, Jen?" I asked her slowly.

"I want you back with me and our daughter at our own hearth, John, however that may be done, and I care not for honour, John," she said flatly.

"Then you wedded the wrong man," I told her. "I will live and die with York."

"Forgive me?" she asked tremulously.

"Never doubt it." I kissed her passionately, turned and mounted and rode out the gate at the head of my soldiers. *God'swounds!* I cried in my soul's agony, *Will we never make an end of this horror?*

XVI.

Up until now Edward of March had conducted his campaign at a leisurely pace, but with the news of the disaster at Wakefield he suddenly became transformed into a veritable demon of energy. He sent word to Warwick in London to hold the city at all costs and began to pursue the Welshman Tudor like a hound coursing a hare. Early on the morning of Candlemas Day, February 2nd, 1461, we brought the wily Pembroke to battle near a small hamlet called Mortimer's Cross, in Hereford, between Ludlow and Leominster. We slept on cold ground the night before and rose stiffly in the dawn to confess our sins and to prepare for combat. Relying on the advice of Edward's friend Sir Richard Croft, a local landowner who knew the terrain, we took up our position before Wig Marsh, blocking the road to Worcester. The river Lugg, more a small stream really, was at our back. As we arrayed ourselves across a frozen stubbly field the fog suddenly lifted and we could see the Lancastrian army perhaps a hundred rods off, advancing from the wretched village. The fog muffled the chink of armour and the blowing of the horses, and a strange silence seemed to envelope the field.

Then the sun became visible through the white mist, but in a strange optical illusion there suddenly seemed to be three suns hanging there, gleaming through the white shroud and looking startlingly like the prince's rose-en-soleil emblem. Prince Edward, standing before our lines clad from head to toe in polished steel, pointed to this phenomenon and bellowed in a voice which could be heard by every man in the opposing armies, "Look to the skies, men of York, be of good comfort and dread not! God Almighty himself upholds our cause! See! He has set mine ensign in the heavens above us, not once, but thrice! Let us therefore have good heart and go against our enemies!" A wild cheer went up from the Yorkist ranks, and an audible groan and shouts of dismay from the Lancastrians. "By the saints, we have them now!" exclaimed Edward exultantly. "The

omen fills them with terror! The quake so badly they cannot strike a blow! Advance banner!"

We moved forward on foot, in good order, our band of armoured knights in the center around the rose-in-sun standard, our pikemen and archers on the wings, and two small constabulars of mounted knights on the far flanks. The Lancastrians sounded their own trumpeters for advance, but we could tell they were confused and discouraged, and we saw their heads keep turning skyward where those three baleful orbs hung in the morning mist of winter. Wiltshire's men attacked our right wing and Pembroke's our left, but without success. The fight was short and easily won, for the three strange suns in the heavens had completely unnerved the enemy. There was a brief, fierce encounter beneath the snow-rose banner as a group of Lancaster knights led by Jasper Tudor's aged father Owen Tudor, sensing the impending panic and defeat of their army, leaped onto their horses and made a mounted charge against the prince and his guard in an attempt to slay him. We saw them coming and shouted to the archers, who raked them with arrows and shot most of them off their horses before they reached us.

But a few of them did manage to break through and smash into us with their great chargers, and one of these men sent me sprawling and nearly trampled me beneath his destrier's hooves. I jumped up and aside and slashed at him just as a billman caught the knight's jupon with his long hooked bill and pulled him out of the saddle. An archer was on him immediately, his dagger flashing, and stabbed him through the visor, from which welled a bubbling fountain of blood as the armoured man twisted and thrashed and died on the ground. Then the frightened and harried Lancastrians suddenly began to break, throwing down their weapons and fleeing, and the simple butchery of pursuit began. Some of our knights who were mounted rode them down, skewering them with lances, while archers and men at arms sank shafts into their fleeing backs and hunted them through the fields and ditches. We learned that both Lancastrian commanders, Pembroke and my old nemesis the Earl of Wiltshire, had taken to horse as soon as the fight had gone against them and were now spurring east to join the queen.

The usual round of executions followed after the battle of Mortimer's Cross, including Tudor's father Owen, who had founded the line by disporting himself with Queen Katherine of France, the widow of Henry the Fifth. As he knelt down on the scaffold he remarked calmly, "That head shall lie upon the block which was wont to lie on a queen's lap." After he was dead a madwoman rushing from the crowd of onlookers snatched up the head and carried it to her house, weeping. There she washed the blood from it, combed the grey hair and beard, and set it before her door with lighted candles all around it. I forget what eventually became of the head.

We were not allowed time to savor our victory, save with a few quick cups of mulled wine that night around a blazing bonfire in the freezing cold of our camp. "Now we must march as we have never marched before," ordered the prince. "We must reach London before the Queen does and combine our forces with my lord of Warwick to defeat her!"

But we were too late. As we hurried through the Midlands by forced marches we met stragglers bearing tales of disaster. There had been a fight on the seventeenth day of February, hard by the old St. Albans battlefield, when the queen had fallen on Warwick. The earl had prepared elaborate defensive lines like those the Lancastrians had erected at Northampton, including earthworks and barricades and strange nail-studded devices called caltrops. But the queen's army had managed to steal a march and fall upon our army from the rear, and despite Warwick's personal bravery and the caltrops the Yorkists were defeated and broken.

Or so we thought. As we marched through Hertford we met Warwick, who had rallied his men into a semblance of order and was coming to meet us, his bear and ragged staff banner flying proudly. He brought almost unbelievable news. "London is holding out!" he told us as we gathered round him at a roadside inn. "Tradesmen and apprentices from every guild have armed themselves and the Lord Mayor has refused Margaret's demand for submission.! We can yet catch her in the field betwixt our hammer and the anvil of London!"

"Are the reports of rapine and pillage true?" asked Edward quietly.

"Horribly so, sire. Those Frenchmen and Scots of hers have burned a swath in the land thirty miles wide on their southward march," replied Warwick. "London is full of refugees. No wonder they are determined to resist!"

"And the king? I mean, ah, Henry of Lancaster?" corrected Edward, slightly flustered and unused to his new dignity.

"They've got him again, I'm afraid," Warwick told him. "We feared a Lancastrian plot to rescue him from the Tower, so we took him with us to the field. The madness has seized him again. I'm told the Lancastrians found him beneath a tree talking to imaginary people."

"Damnation!" cursed the prince. "Mad though he is, Henry is a powerful counter in their hands. Well, my lords, we press on to London, to see if our realm will have me or an old lunatic for their monarch."

The next news we received as we approached the capital was well-nigh unbelievable. Margaret was falling back. Unable to control her savage Scots and mercenaries, unable to prevail against the stubborn Londoners, she began a tactical withdrawal which ended up as a disorganized rout, nor was she able to reassemble her army until they had scrambled all the way back to York. The Londoners had resisted stoutly, fighting off the Lancastrian raiding parties in the suburbs and hanging captured looters, and when some nervous merchants tried to placate their Gorgon of a queen by sending her money and provisions, a mob seized the carts and divided the contents among themselves. We entered London in triumph, and on the fourth day of March in St. Giles' Field thousands of knights, soldiers and commons cheered themselves hoarse as our lord was proclaimed Edward the Fourth

of England and anointed in a brief but dignified ceremony of coronation. Then we were off to the north to deal the final blow against Lancaster.

We caught them between the Yorkshire villages of Towton and Saxton, and on Palm Sunday, the twenty-ninth day of March, we fought what chroniclers have since called the bloodiest battle ever fought on English soil since the time of Boadicea.

My memories of the day are hazy, obscured as the driving snowstorm obscured the battlefield, and I have always thanked God for that merciful forgetfulness. The other times were bad enough, but the battle of Towton was hell on earth.

Edward was determined to find and destroy the Lancastrian army as quickly as possible, despite the terrible winter conditions. On the fifth of March he sent to Duke of Norfolk into East Anglia to raise troops, Warwick going to the Midlands on the same errand. On the thirteenth of March we left London, marching northward at a withering pace, leaving the city through Bishopsgate to the cheers of the people. Our army's horses and carts made the winter roads northward even worse than usual. Since it was Lent, our troops' staple diet was meant to be salt herrings washed down by small beer, but Margaret's plunderers had left little in our path and by the time we reached Towton we were hungry and not over scrupulous in observing the season. We ate anything we could get our hands on, looting as badly as the Lancaster horde had done. To make matters worse, Margaret's retreating army had broken down the bridges and we had to rebuild them as we came to the fords. King Edward had sent out a proclamation to the northern shires, explaining that he had taken the crown upon himself not only by ancient right of blood but in order to remedy the evils Margaret had inflicted upon the realm, but the peasantry fled at our approach nonetheless, nor can I blame them. The queen had replied with a proclamation of her own stating that "...our great traitor the late earl of March hath cried in his proclamation havoc upon our true liege people and subjects, their wives, children, and goods." The pot calling the kettle black.

We arrived at Pontefract on Friday the 27th of March, some of us straggling in at dawn the next day. The king had sent an advance party under Lord Fitzwalter to seize the crossing over the River Aire at Ferrybridge, which was swollen with snow and rain and supposed to be unfordable. Early on Saturday morning a party of mounted Lancastrian archers led by Lord Clifford, Edmund of Rutland's murderer, attacked and seized the bridge. Thinking that the noise was some kind of quarrel between his own men, Lord Fitzwalter snatched up a poleaxe and ran out of his billet without bothering to put on his armour, and he was immediately cut down, together with Warwick's half brother, the Bastard of Salisbury. The Earl of Warwick himself was wounded by an arrow in the leg but saved the day by killing his own horse with his sword and shouting out to his men, "Let him fly who will, for surely I will tarry with them that tarry with me!" He drew our soldiers up in a hasty defensive formation and fought off the Reds. King Edward arrived in time to drive them back, but it had been a close thing, and Edward felt it necessary to

post an order that there would be double pay for any of our men who killed Yorkist troops attempting to flee the engagement.

Clifford destroyed the bridge by having his men hack it down piece by piece with axes, but he left a few timbers on which we hastily erected a temporary bridge. The Lancastrians counterattacked and destroyed that. In the meantime, while all this was going on, Lord Fauconberg succeeded in crossing the river at Castleford four miles upstream, trapping the Lancastrian archers in a small valley called Dintingdale and wiping them out. Lord Clifford, for some reason of heat or pain putting off his helmet, was shot in the throat by an arrow. Thus was young Edmund of Rutland avenged, who might have made my lady Jeanetta a queen.

We now had the main body of the Lancastrian army in sight. They were positioned on a low plateau about a mile wide between Towton and Saxton, eight miles southwest of the city of York. Their right was guarded by the steep valley of Dintingdale, at the bottom of which flowed Cock Beck, a tributary stream of the River Wharfe. It was very flat country and this was the highest ground the Lancastrian commanders had been able to find to defend. We moved forward slowly; they made no attempt to stop us from crossing the Aire. But by now it was twilight and many of our troops had not arrived yet, nor did the Reds seem to be in any hurry to give battle.

That Saturday night which I spent in the open is one I would rather forget. It was freezing cold and both snow and hail fell intermittently from the sky, so much that men and horses we were in a pitiable state. There was no food. Between the two of us we were the largest armies England had ever seen on her soil, I think. There has been a lot of nonsense talked about the number of men involved at Towton on both sides; I have read chroniclers who gravely assert that we Yorkists alone had two hundred thousand men, which is bollocks. But God knows, there were enough of us who had marched all across England from the four corners of the realm in order to die that day. If I absolutely must put my own figure on record and thus add to the confusion, I would guess that we had about fifty thousand men that day and the Lancastrians somewhat more, but I don't insist on it. I will say this much: some centuries will go by before any similar number of Englishmen ever gather in arms again.

The next morning we arose amid a snowstorm and moved forward, approaching within bowshot of the enemy on the plateau just south of Saxton, with our backs to the village, about ten miles south of the city of York if I recall me right. Our line in battle formation stretched for at least a mile along the ridge. The Lancastrians were drawn up before Towton itself, six miles north of Ferrybridge. Their commander who led the center was the Duke of Somerset, supported by the Duke of Exeter; his wings were under the Earl of Northumberland and Lord Dacre of Gillesland. Our own army was commanded by King Edward himself, Lord Fauconberg, and the Earl of Warwick. The battle did not start for some hours. We stood in the icy cold waiting for the arrival of our East Anglian contingent, which had been delayed by the Duke of Norfolk falling sick at Pontefract. The Lancastrians did not attack; they saw no reason to abandon the plateau which gave them a marginal advantage. This field would very shortly become known to history as the

"Bloody Meadow", but I do not remember it as a meadow. I remember only an agony of cold as my freezing steel armour stuck to exposed pieces of my flesh, standing there staring at the dark milling Lancaster army across a stretch of churned-up mud and snow. Finally, about eleven o'clock in the morning King Edward gave us the order to attack, commanding that no quarter be given or taken.

It began to snow again, and as we attacked I kept trying to claw my visor closed, because it had become frozen open. I succeeded just in time. The wind was at our backs. We began shooting arrows at the enemy, and the wind blew both our shafts and the snow into their faces. The Lancastrians replied in kind but in view of their lack of visibility most of their shafts were off the mark. Lord Fauconberg, commanding our vanguard, ordered his men forward to fill their quivers with captured Lancastrian arrows and leave some sticking in the ground point upwards to act as obstacles to an enemy charge.

The Lancastrians finally attacked, led by Somerset and the traitorous Sir Andrew Trollope, who had been knighted for his treachery at Ludlow. They mixed it up badly with one of our mounted units, but a simultaneous attack by the Earl of Northumberland's wing was beaten back. From that point on I recall little; the battle became a confused and bloody mess in the driving snow wherein we could none of us see hardly anything at all. I was told later that the Duke of Norfolk finally brought his men up and we overwhelmed the Lancastrian left wing and rolled up their line, but I know not. All I know is that it went on and on and on. The next day an area six miles long and three miles wide was soaked with bloody snow.

I remember meeting a knight in the swirling snow. Both of us were exhausted. His jupon was soaked with blood and I could not see his blazon, and I suppose it must have been so with me as well from his point of view. "York or Lancaster?" I demanded, waving my sword vaguely in the air, utterly exhausted.

"Lancaster," came his voice from beneath his helmet, cavernous and deep.

"York," I said. We both stood there tottering for a bit, and then he said,

"Another day?"

"Another day," I agreed, and he staggered off into the snow.

Then more running figures materialized, stumbling archers with steaming breath and fear-haggard faces, carrying mauls, and one of them struck me down into darkness with his hammer before I could even raise my sword to defend myself.

XVII.

When I awoke it was abruptly, to stare into the lowering sky and the anxious face of Jack Fletcher. "Saints be praised!" he cried. "My lord, we'd thought you dead!" My helmet was off, and as I staggered to my feet and shook the snow from me I could at last see the whole battlefield in the darkening evening, the ground scarlet with bloody slush and the heaps of dead everywhere. Archers, soldiers, and knights were going from body to body, identifying the slain and stripping them of weapons and armour.

"Have we won?" I croaked.

"Aye, lord, if you call this slaughterhouse victory," returned Jack. "We hold the field, and the Reds are broken and destroyed. We all got separated in the *mélee*, and Sir Henry and I made search for you and the others as soon as the weather lifted somewhat."

My head was ringing and I was unsteady on my feet. I looked at my helmet lying on the ground and marveled that I was not slain indeed, for one side of my basinet was stove in from the archer's maul. I leaned on Jack for support. "Where is Hal now?"

"Still searching the field for his father and brother."

"Come, then, we must find them. Were you able to get the horses back of the lines?"

"I assume they are down the Tadcaster road with the carts and baggage, my lord, for I gave them to the first groom I met in my haste to find you again, but by the time I got back across the bridge the battle was already joined and I couldn't locate you in the bleeding snowstorm. I ended up fighting with Lord Reginald Grey's men."

"Bloody hell!" I muttered. "You might have ended up fighting for Lancaster had the turncoat mood seized him again. Come!"

We picked our way among the piles of dead and the milling victors. Some of them were already becoming drunk on the wine which the sutlers brought among them on sledges, and tipsy shouts and laughter mingled with piteous cries and pleadings for help from the wounded. I tried to shut from my mind the sights and sounds of that endless mad vista of carnage but I could not. Snow was still falling in light, small flakes that flew crazily in the air, but even the biting wind could not blow away the charnel slaughterhouse smell of blood. We trudged across the bridge to see a large caravan with great wooden wheels by the roadside, a portable chapel like the huge wagons used for mystery plays. On a platform folded out from the side of the wagon an altar had been laid. Several priests were chanting a *Te Deum* of thanks for the day's victory, for the benefit of several score kneeling knights and soldiers of the more religious persuasion. "I forgot, it's Palm Sunday today, isn't it?" I sighed. "I fear we have been remiss and neglected our devotions, Jack."

"We were otherwise engaged, my lord," said Jack with a shaky laugh, relief in his voice now that the fight was over.

"Engaged in slaughtering other Christian men, aye," I replied. "Are they broken at last, or will we have to push after them and fight them again?"

"I pray not, my lord," said Jack fervently. "I am sick unto death of this!"

"And I," I agreed. "Come, let's make for the baggage park and find our horses, then go and find the Brinton men.

But when we reached the carts and wagons we found the Brintons already there, and kneeling by an armour-clad figure. I ran to them and then cried out in horror, for it was old Sir John Brinton who lay there upon a cloak, his helmet off and his face white with agony. The broken-off shaft of an arrow had smashed through his very breastplate and now protruded from the old knight's body, rising and falling even as he laboured for breath. "Dear God, I cannot lose all my family!" wept Hal, distraught.

"William as well?" I gasped in shock.

"Aye, and Toby," moaned Hal in misery. "I found them all in a heap riddled with shafts." He was in an extremity of wild grief and anguish, one I shared as I wept unashamedly beside him. John Brinton was in my mind a rock, a perpetual presence since my earliest memory. Rocks do not die.

"We must find the surgeon!" I gasped through my tears.

"Nay," came the old man's voice, cracked and hoarse. "No leeches. What could a leech do? Bleed me? Bigod I bleed enough, I think!"

"Don't speak, old friend," I urged him. "Save your strength. We must find a surgeon, we cannot leave you to lie like this!"

"Nay, shuttle-wit, can you not see the hurt is mortal?" he gasped. "I can feel the steel in my very heart-roots."

"No, Father!" cried Hal.

"Soft, lad, did you think me iron to wear forever? Come, boy, dry your eyes. I have lived me a long life and a merry one, and what better end might I ask than falling at the shot of a good English bowman, I who have laid so many low with the grey goose shaft? Damn." chuckled the old man raspingly, "The whoreson must have been within spitting distance in the damned snow when he loosed, to pierce Milan plate!"

"Lie still!" I begged him, "You can yet be saved!" But I knew that I lied. The old baron turned his eye on me.

"How went the fight, John?" he asked weakly.

"Lancaster is broken and driven off the field," I told him. "It looks like they're done for this time."

"Then Edward shall be king. I have died well," he sighed contentedly. "Come now, lads, one of you pluck out the shaft and let me pass. I be done with old England!" Tearfully I gripped the stump of the arrow and with a single desperate tug I pulled it out, taking a bloody chunk of meat with it. A fountain of blood spurted forth, and he gave a single spasmodic shudder and died. Hal Brinton collapsed in tears over his father's bleeding corpse, and I stumbled away, my mind numb with sorrow for him who was my friend and teacher in the ways of the world, for strong silent Bill and wry little Toby who had filled my childhood with the music of his harp and his outrageous lies.

Thus did Sir John Brinton of Tavistock meet his end. He was a peerless knight and a brave and loyal friend, and to this day I have not ceased to mourn him.

I spent the night with the Whitewood men in our camp outside Tadcaster, sleepless and sad despite my aching weariness. Tom Simkins, the brawny reeve of the manor, had taken an arrow early on in the fight, but the shaft had been almost spent and mostly stopped by his jack, so the wound in his thigh was not mortal unless it festered. All through the night I could hear the sounds of roistering as the army celebrated King Edward's famous victory, but I could not in good heart join them, and when I rose in the morning I knew what I wished to do.

I went directly into the king's tent, a great pavilion of cloth of gold over which the snow rose banner floated in the icy breeze from the moors. Inside crowded dozens of knights, lords, clerks, and soldiers, milling about and drinking and all having business with the king. He sat at a huge table beside a glowing brazier, piles of documents before him and clerks and barons all around him, talking and gesticulating.

I saw that it would be a long wait, and so I drew myself a mug and sat down in a corner. I cooled my heels there for several hours waiting and the press to thin, but it didn't. Runners and messengers came and went, bringing news of our outriders and the fleeing Lancastrians. Clerks totted up the names of the slain and wounded, both ours and the enemy's, while a team of scribes under Sir John Tiptoft toted up all the booty from the field, for Edward had ordered that all of value be turned over to the depleted royal exchequer. But the hoped-for news, that of Margaret's death or capture, did not arrive.

"Damn, I hope we catch that evil bitch!" exclaimed Edward. "She's dragging crazy old Henry with her as well. If she escapes into Scotland it will all be to do over again!" The king finally noticed me and said, "Yes, Sir John? What have you to report?"

"Only that I have arranged with the deacon of York Minster to have Sir John Brinton's remains buried within the church, Your Grace, and I also want to ask your permission to withdraw my levy from the army and go home," I said to him, bending the knee.

"Brinton was a loss, a grave loss to myself and to England," said King Edward somberly. "I myself will pay for masses to be said for his soul. It is true the Reds are defeated and there will be no need for your force during the mopping up operations. Very well, Sir John, you and your men have my leave to depart. Was there anything else?"

"No, Your Grace, I thank you," I replied. "May I return to the lines and begin breaking camp?"

"Certainly, and take that joint and bottle with you, if you wish." I rose and bowed formally, and headed for the tent flap, the joint in one hand and the wine in the other, welcome since I had not broken my fast that day. I was almost out when the king called out, "Sir John!" I turned around and saw him staring at me in astonishment. "God's wounds! You really would, wouldn't you?" he said in sheer wonder.

"Eh?" I asked, perplexed. "I mean, I would Your Grace would take me with you?"

"Come back here and sit down, you gallant fool!" Mystified, I did so. Edward shook his head with a grin. "You really would march right out of camp and go home without claiming your reward for these two years of hell? "

"But I have not served you for gain, sire!" I protested.

"All the more reason why you should be rewarded. It is neither just nor is it wise for a monarch to allow loyal service to go unrecompensed. John, the battle was not minutes over yesterday when the magnates of the army were squabbling over their portion of the spoils, and if I had sent some of them out of here with a greasy joint and a bottle of sour wine they would have gone over to Lancaster in a heartbeat! I must satisfy the ravening pack, of course, but my loyal servants shall not be forgot, and you too shall have your share."

"My king, I have always fought for you from duty and not because I love war or see it as a way to wealth," I told him.

"That I know, and I respect you for it. Good soldiers are three for a penny, but good soldiers who genuinely cleave unto peace except at need are rare birds indeed. I wish I had more subjects like you who were less ready to take up arms. But duty is a double-edged sword, and cuts both ways. Just as you are bound to serve me, so I am bound to further you in the world. Now, needless to say, all the big landholdings of Lancaster have been snapped up by the great magnates or else by myself to give to my brothers, and most of the available cash must go into the exchequer, for Margaret has left the realm bankrupt and mired in debt. However, I think we can spare a few coins. Before we get down to what I have in mind for you, can you yourself think of anything I can do for you?"

"My king," I said in sudden inspiration, "There is one thing. Do you know of a certain knight of Lancaster, one Thomas Caxton?"

"He's the bloke who lorded it over your manor and burnt all your furniture, isn't he? To the best of my knowledge he's not been taken or slain yet, but when he does I'll send you his head to stick over your door."

"No, no, you mistake me, Your Grace!" I protested. "Sir Thomas treated my wife and his other women prisoners honourably and fairly, and I owe him another debt s well, for he helped save me after I killed Morriss at Raby four years gone. I would have him pardoned."

"Done," said the king. "I'll have the documents drawn up and given to you, and when he is take I shall send him to you. But that is not enough. I want you closer to my counsel and the affairs of the land, Sir John. and so I am repaying you in the same coin old Humphrey of Gloucester paid your father, and I am elevating you to the peerage. I shall be glad to have two Lord Redmonds in Parliament."

I gasped and rocked back in my seat, stunned by the honour. "Nor is that the end of my bounty," he continued. "I am granting you three wardships, the most lucrative being that of Sir Humphrey Stratton's lady, together with seisin of his former manor of Canfield, in Norfolk."

"Former manor?" I asked. "Is Stratton slain?"

"No, taken prisoner, but he is scheduled to have his head removed from his shoulders tomorrow. He's the son of Lord Peregrine Stratton, a damnable old fox up to his ears in Lancastrian intrigue. I have declared the entire family outlawed and their property forfeit to the crown. Canfield I am giving to you. It is a goodly holding, larger even than Whitewood. The woman you may dower with a few pounds and marry off to a merchant. You may do the same with Mistress Elizabeth Whitley, widow of a Lancastrian knight who fell at the second battle of St. Albans last month. Her husband was a landless lance in Margaret's guard, but he was something of a dabbler in commerce and owned two merchantmen and a dozen fishing boats out of Bristol. These are now yours. The third wardship," he continued, "Is that of a boy, young Edward Tyndall, son to Sir Peter Tyndall of your own county of Hereford. He is heir to Banham Hall a few miles distant from Whitewood. Sir Peter fell fighting for me yesterday, and I owe his son good care and lordship."

"I knew Peter Tyndall," I said, nodding. "He was a good and honest neighbour and a brave knight. I shall do right by his son."

"You'll have Banham's revenues until he comes of age in recompense."

"Your Grace, I am awed by your largesse," I said, shaking my head.

"Tut," he said deprecatingly, "These are the merest crumbs. I only wish I could give you more. Stop by tomorrow ere you march, and I shall give you Sir Thomas's pardon and the other necessary documents."

"I know not how to express my gratitude!" I exclaimed.

"Merely protecting myself. Where would I be if that devilish lady of yours found I'd sent you back to her as poor as you came? Even kings quail before that Melusine!"

"Gad, she'd rend me!" I exclaimed. We both laughed heartily and he poured out more wine.

At dawn the next morning we broke camp, and as the sun rose we appeared before the royal pavilion. A large space had been cleared around the tent during the night, and a three-poster gallows and a raised platform bearing a block had been erected. Pale nooses dangled from the crossbeams, and an axe leaned against the squat, ugly block. I looked away in disgust. "One last bout of butchery today, then it will hopefully be over for a while." I muttered.

A dolorous procession appeared, a train of carts laden with nearly two dozen rough-clad peasants of both sexes and all ages, escorted by billmen and led by a burly churl in a black hood, the executioner. "Looters," remarked Jack Fletcher in a neutral tone. "They were found robbing the dead on the battlefield. Sir John Tiptoft decided to make an example of them, although an example to whom I know not. Most like he just can't get enough of killing." A small crowd gathered to watch the grim festivities. The hangman, stolidly ignoring the weeping and muffled pleas from the condemned peasants, slipped the halters about the necks of the first cartload and then unceremoniously led the mule pulling it away, leaving them swinging like pendulums and jerking like fish hooked on a line. I tore my eyes away from the gruesome sight.

"I might have known this would be Tiptoft's doing," I growled.

"I hear he's been elevated to the earldom of Worcester now," said Jack.

"Aye, and may God have mercy on his vassals," I confirmed, slipping off my mount. "Come, Jack, let's get what we came here for and go."

But I paused at the tent flap. One of the condemned looters, a rather pretty girl of about sixteen, was having a bad time of it. She was so small and light that the noose would not properly constrict her soft neck and she was writhing and gurgling, her toes clawing wildly for the frozen earth a few feet below her. Grumbling, the hangman took a swig from a wine bottle, then grasped her heaving shoulders and pulled downwards to tighten the noose. I blundered into the tent, sickened. "Good morning to you, John!" boomed Edward jovially, looking up from the great table. The tent was as crowded as it had been the day before. The Earl of Warwick was present this morning, and he looked up and then strode up to me and gripped my hand.

"Congratulations on your elevation to the realm's peerage, my lord!" he cried. "I shall look forward to working closely with you when Parliament meets in the fall."

"Is it so, my good lord?" gasped Jack in surprise.

"Aye, lad," confirmed Warwick. "Your master is now a full baron of the realm, with yet another manor in seisin." Neville took up a large wallet and handed it to me. I glanced therein and found Tommy's pardon engrossed with the royal seal, my own patent, the title to Canfield, and all three wardship decrees.

"Sir Thomas is probably hotfoot for Scotland right now," Warwick told me, "But I have ordered if he be overtaken by any of ours that he is not to be harmed but granted his life, and sent to you in Hereford."

"I thank you, my lord earl," I said with a bow.

"And another slight token of the royal esteem!" called out Edward, tossing me a leather purse. I felt its weight and gasped in horror; it had to be gold.

"My lord, this is entirely too much!" I protested.

"So my chancellor of the exchequer said," laughed Edward. "He practically wept as he counted it out. Nonetheless, it is but a fraction of the debt I owe you, Lord John. Fare the well; the day is young and you must needs be off home." I bowed formally and backed out of the pavilion, awed and warmed by my sovereign's bounty. As soon as we were outside, Jack Fletcher shouted the news.

"Lads! Sir John has been made a lord by the king!" A loud cheer rang up from my troop and immediately I was surrounded by archers who embraced me and cuffed me in gladness. Tom Simkins shouted his approbation from the litter where he lay, his hip swathed in bandages.

"How's the leg, Tom?" I asked him.

"I feel as if I was kicked by a dray horse, my lord, but there's no rot. The surgeon washed it out with strong wine and cauterized it with a hot penny, which burnt like hellfire, but she'll mend, my lord. An inch or so to the left and I'd be spending the rest o' me days in a monastery." A roar of laughter greeted this sally. "But have no fear, I shall be as fit as ever!"

"Aye, and telling lies of your warlike prowess ere you walk again!: My valiant bowmen gave forth another hearty round of laughter, for we were going home at last, and the mood was lighthearted and merry.

"You're shooting a straight shaft there!" called someone. "A year from now Simkins will be leading the charge at Northampton, in five he'll be swinging sword at the prince's right

hand at Mortimer's Cross, and ten years from now he'll swear by the rood that the field of Towton was won by just him and King Edward!"

"King who?" asked Tom innocently. Amid more japes and hilarity I swung into the saddle.

"Come on, lads, let's be off!" I commanded. But suddenly all fell silent and turned to watch the nearby scaffold.

The hangings were over, the bodies drooping silently on the gallows, and now the first of the noble prisoners was led forth, a sandy-haired young man with fear-haunted eyes. His breathing was deep and hoarse, audible in the silence, and he twisted convulsively at the leather thongs which bound his hands behind his back. He mounted the scaffold shakily, and the executioner stumbled up to him, obviously blind drunk. The masked man knelt, muttered the customary plea for forgiveness, then arose, ripped the victim's linen collar open, and forced his head down on the block. After a few careless flourishes of the axe he brought it down upon the white, freckled neck.

A cry of derision arose from the onlookers, for the executioner had bungled horribly. Blood flowed from a shallow gash in the condemned youth's neck, and he cried out in pain and terror. The headsman swung again, this time missing the neck entirely, striking a shoulder blade and knocking his flopping target to the planks. Suddenly I grew enraged at it all, the men butchered in battle, young Francis green and the peasant girl strangled on the rope, John Brinton and Toby shot full of arrows with these great murderous longbows we English were so proud of, and now this poor boy being slaughtered like a hog by this drunken sot. "*God damn you!*" I roared out, "If you're going to kill the man, you knave, make a clean end of him!"

The executioner leaned unsteadily on his axe, glaring at me with bloodshot eyes of watery blue. "Well then, young sir," he hiccuped, "If you think you can do my job better than me wot's been lopping heads on Tower Green and tweaking gullets at Tyburn since before you was born, then come up here and have a go yourself, an' you be so masterful as to teach me my trade!"

"By God I will, then!" I raged. I slid from the saddle and leaped to the platform, snatching the axe from his hands. "Stand aside, oaf!" I commanded. I grabbed the boy and slammed his head back on the block; mercifully, he seemed to have fainted. Raising the axe high above my head I struck with great force and precision, and the condemned man's head leaped from his shoulders into the straw. Tossing down the bloody axe, I strode back down to my horse and mounted, then curtly ordered my men, "Let's go, lads!" All around me rose cheers for my deeds and jeers and taunts flung at the discomfited headsman. Without another word we marched out of the camp.

Out on the open road a grizzled old soldier on a piebald mare caught up with us and rode to my side. His mail and helmet were battered and his cloak patched and stained, but he had the lean and dangerous look of the professional killer, a type seen all too commonly

in the land of late. "I would thank you for that deed back there, sir knight," said the soldier. "Sir Humphrey wasn't a bad sort, although he was a mite squeamish when it came down to the sacking and he had no skill at all in the buckle. Yet he was brave enough for all his lack of skill. He deserved him a clean end."

"Who did you say he was?" I asked, a sudden horrible suspicion dawning in my mind.

"Sir Humphrey Stratton of Canfield, in Norfolk, my lord. My old commander's son, for I bore a bill for Lord Peregrine Stratton ere day before yesterday."

"And what will you do now that the fighting is over?" I inquired. "Have you a home or a trade?"

"I was a charcoal-burner ere the wars came, but my house was burnt wall and thatch by York men, saving your worship's pardon, and I find I like me the freebooting life better than ever I liked rising early of the morn to go and break my back all day cutting faggots and sweating over the charcoal pits. More wine and meat and pretty wenches for the taking instead of the begging of them. I suppose I'll try Ireland now. Always action there. Damned stiff parole my lord of Warwick laid on us. Can't fight for Lancaster again for a full five years. Still, better than what Sir Humphrey got. Damn, sir, I wouldn't have been a lord in this war for a thousand pound!" The veteran suddenly had an idea, and smiled craftily at me. "Now I've never heard that Yorkist beef and ale was any whit the less tasty than the Lancastrian type, my lord, and if you'd be looking for a stout billman....?"

"I thank you, no, my friend," I returned shortly. "I've seen enough of bills and arms, and I wish you Godspeed on your way to Ireland." *And out of England*, I added silently in my mind.

When the man had ridden onward I buried my head in my hands. "Sweet Jesu!" I moaned. "It is Stratton's manor I was granted, and his lady is now my chattel!"

"It was a merciful thing you did, my lord," Jack assured me. "Think not on it."

"I suppose that since I am to have his goods and his lands and his wife, it were only fitting that I should slay him with my own hand," I sighed. "Jack, when the woman comes to Whitewood, in God's name she must never know of this!"

"Aye," said Jack, "The wounds of this war are deep enough. No need to pour salt on them."

"God, Jack, I'm glad this horror is over!" I exclaimed.

"For now, lord," corrected my squire in a grim voice.

The End of the Game

Summer 1461

XVIII .

Spring came overnight to England while we were on our homeward march. When we left Yorkshire the cold was bitter and there was snow upon the ground, but by the time we reached Hereford the snow was gone, the sun warmed the land, and the birds sang in the blooming tree boughs. Our spirits were soaring, our march filled with laughter and merriment, and often we would stop at roadside inns and taverns where I regaled my lads with meat and drink from my own purse. It was spring, we were in England, and we were going home.

At last the countryside grew familiar, and our step grew light and swift as we drew closer to our goal. Past Market Drayton we marched, then across the deep river Teme, and about noon one day we entered the demesne of Whitewood manor. I halted my men at the boundary stone which marked my lands and rose in my stirrups to address them for the last time as my soldiers. "My good friends, you have served me well and served England better, and well do I love you for it. Our country has a chance now to heal a long bleeding wound because of the sacrifice and the suffering that you and thousands like you have undergone. Good and prosperous times will come to our land again, and you will all be able to tell your children and your grandchildren that you made it happen with the strength in your arms and the sharpness of your eye with the clothyard shaft. We have a new king now, a gallant knight who will make a glorious monarch, who will set right what was wrong and see all things properly ordered. Together we will all reap a fair harvest in the coming years. Today I know that you will want to spend at your own firesides, but tomorrow we all make merry together! Come to Tom's mill and whatever lamb or shoat I can find left on our lands will be there a-roasting, and every drop of ale or cider to be found will be found there! Again, from my deepest heart I thank you. Now be off home!" A thunderous cheer arose, and the men scattered, running for their cottages.

Tom Simkins, his wound already nearly healed, limped along beside Jack and me on our horses. "Be at the buttery tomorrow at cockcrow, Tom," I told him. "And between you and Wat pick out a few likely beasts from what flocks we have left and kill them. I'll tell Gervase to haul as much ale as we can manage down to the mill and help you prepare a goodly feast for all our folk. Tomorrow as well I want you to collect all the mauls and as many of the clothyards as were issued to each man from the manor arsenal. I made sure to balance everything we lost from the royal stores before we left Tadcaster."

"A shrewd accountant you are, Lord John!" laughed Tom.

"I have to be, with you as my miller," I chaffed him. "Else you'd rob me blind."

"Sooth, lord," chuckled Tom, "And what does the Scripture say about binding the mouth of the kine that tread the grain?" He turned off for his own cottage with a cheery wave, and Jack grinned.

"Methinks that wound of his is healed enough so that poor Martha will be sore down below tomorrow!" he joked lewdly.

"How about you, Jack?" I asked him. "Were you not at one stage dipping your wick at the shop of Master Bixby the candlemaker in Ludlow?"

"More than that, lord," replied Jack in a troubled voice. "I had asked Joan to marry me, and if we survived the big fight we were expecting to have at the castle in '59 I meant to speak to you about it. But we had to take to the greenwood, and when the Lancasters came that October morning a gang of Margaret's archers got hold of her. I didn't know until we occupied Ludlow last Christmas, and she refused to see me at first. I found that she has a child now. She kept speaking of taking holy orders, said she wasn't fit for my touch. I tried to tell her that it bootied not to me, that the little boy need never know I wasn't his father, but she wouldn't agree."

"You never told me all this before!"

"Why should I burden you with my problems, lord?" sighed Jack. "Well I knew that you had enough of your own."

"Nonsense! Not a few days gone a certain very high personage told me that lordship is a two-edged blade, and so it is. Now you get yourself gone to Ludlow and renew your suit to Mistress Bixby forthwith, do all you can to wean this maid from her hurt and make her want to live a full life again. I shall intercede for you with Master Bixby if he still lives, and between us we shall get you a wife. Now off with you!"

"But you will need..."

"I can disarm myself. I did it often enough when I was a squireless knight of Lancaster. Set spur, lad, only don't break Black Prince's wind getting there!" With hurried thanks Jack took off down the Ludlow track, apparently intent on ignoring my order to spare his horse.

I rode up to my front door alone. I had left Jeanetta, Wat, and Gervase when I had marched off in such haste to join Edward at Leominster, and I noticed that the grounds were kept and that there were sheep and lambs grazing in the paddocks and in the park. The house wore a pleasing aspect of peace and neatness. Jeanetta had heard from the servants of our return, and she burst out the front door and into my arms as I dismounted,

hugging my neck and kissing me fervently. "Oh, saints be praised, John! Is it over? Is it really over?"

"For now," I said, stroking her hair.

"How long is for now?" she demanded.

"For a few years, at least. Margaret has fled the kingdom, every Lancastrian lord is now dead or proscribed, their armies broken and dispersed. They'll be back, but with luck Edward will give the realm such good governance that when Margaret raises her standard next time not so many will rally to it, and the time after that fewer still. We have cause for hope."

"And for rejoicing. John, I have news."

"And I for you," I told her. "You first."

Her eyes were shining. "I am with child again, John. This one will be a son, he will live, I know it!" I crushed her to me. "Now what is your news?"

"Just this," I told her. "You're looking at a new-made baron. Plus I've now got a third manor in Norfolk as big as Whitewood and Brantley put together, my own little private navy, and a rather heavy purse in my saddle bag!"

She laughed and threw her arms around my neck again. "And long ago you scoffed because I picked you for a winner! Welcome home, John!"

Several days later young Ned Tyndall moved in with us. He was a spunky, tow-headed ten year old who was very solemn and bewildered at first in a strange household without his father and familiar servants around him, but he quickly grew out of his shyness and filled the hall with shouts and trampling and general hubbub as he led a band of playmates, the children of the peasants and servants, on boisterous and often destructive escapades.

I hired a tutor for him, an impecunious scholar just out of Cambridge, and Jack Fletcher and I both undertook his training in knightly arms. I turned him over to Tom Simkins for instruction in the great longbow of Agincourt and Towton, and Tom made him a small but powerful practice bow which delighted him no end. The first day it was his, he shot and wounded an old brood sow with it. I beat him and locked him in a shed for an afternoon; fortunately the beast had been past her prime and destined for slaughter soon at any rate. When I returned the bow to him I admonished him in its proper use, and then went to oversee a carpenter who was applying a new coat of varnish to a valuable oaken garderobe of some antiquity. The job done, we left the cupboard in the sun to dry a while. When I returned two hours later, it was holed and splintered where the boy Ned had been using it for a practice butt.

Nevertheless, the horrid little goblin made me hope for a son of my own,. I heartily approved of his association with the peasant children, for it is one of the many strengths of England's gentry that we have never been so divorced and set above our commons and burghers as the nobility of other lands. Most English knights can plow as straight a furrow and shoot as straight a shaft as their tenants, and so I consider Ned's confraternity with ploughboys and kitchen urchins wholesome, even when my neighbours complained of their stealing green apples and pelting poultry with stones.

Soon after the boy came the first of my Lancastrian widows arrived. Mistress Elizabeth Whitley was a plump, attractive matron whose manner was courteous but cool. She clearly regarded me as her gaoler and the despoiler of her husband's estates, for which I could not really fault her. When I perforce questioned her about her husband's business and mercantile dealings I discovered her to be a level headed and sensible woman who had able assisted the late Sir Arthur in his ventures. Apparently he had been one of those new breed of knights who scorned not to be seen in the counting house as well as the castle. Of course, noble merchants were nothing new, but until such recent times such outside interests were kept strictly in the background, as far as was possible. A "parfait gentil knyght" as Chaucer had coined the term was supposed to earn his sustenance from his lands, through service to his lord or from the ransom of noble captives taken in battle or tourney, not from vulgar barter. However, the prejudice against noble was one of many which had gone by the board in these anarchic times, nor was I particularly troubled by it. After all, even the king himself was alleged to have interests in the Burgundian wool trade.

The question was what to do with Mistress Whitley? In a frank and open discussion with her, with my lady wife present, I let Elizabeth know that I was a gentlemen and meant to deal with her fairly, nor would I force her to wed against her will. I offered to install her at Brantley as a sort of unofficial tenant to oversee the manor, with the understanding that if she chose to wed again I would look favourably on grant official tenant to oversee the manor, with the understanding that if she chose to wed again I would look favourably on granting seisin of the estate to her new husband. She readily assented to this arrangement, and left the next day for Gloucestershire with an escort from my household. "A pound to your penny she weds before the new year," I chuckled after we had seen her off. "With Brantley as a dowry she'll have every landless blade in the Marches riding to her door."

"I hope she doesn't choose some handsome, greedy adventurer who'll run the place into the ground," said Jeanetta.

"Oh, I doubt it," I said. "She's got a head on her shoulders."

"That's not all she's got. Tell me, John, there was another reason you sent her away, wasn't there?"

"Yes," I admitted. "She is not uncomely, is Mistress Whitley, and I wanted no stupid, gossipy tongues set to clacking by her proximity."

"Oh, John, do you think I'd pay any attention to any such nonsense?" laughed Jeanetta.

"Neither would I pay tittle-tattle any mind, my lady, but why not simply avoid the situation from the start?" I asked.

"Sure you weren't just trying to put temptation beyond reach?" she teased me.

"Oh, perhaps," I replied judiciously, trying to suppress a smile. "With your belly getting as big as a stone cannonball I suppose I shall have to begin looking elsewhere for my dalliance!"

"Go ahead," she said seriously.

"Eh?"

"I told you before, no woman expects her husband to be faithful forever. Fidelity is our cross to bear, although I'm flattered you've been true to me since we were wed. But if and when your eye starts roving, I'll take it in stride and cause no scenes provided you don't humiliate me in public. There is a right way and a wrong way for a man to go about these things, of course. Just let me know who, agreed? That way I won't have to suffer any unexpected surprises."

"No, Jen," I told her, enfolding her in my arms. "You know that's not the way I play the game.

"You should have been a priest after all," she laughed.

"Then I should have abjured Venus for Bacchus."

At first we heard nothing of the other Lancastrian widow granted me in mainpast, Mistress Stratton. Then I received a short note from the mother superior of a convent in Norfolk stating that the lady asked permission to remain there for three months in mourning for her husband before attending me, to which I readily agreed. I told Jeanetta what had happened the day after Towton, on that morning before the royal pavilion, and cautioned her against saying anything to the widow when she arrived which might give away my unfortunate secret. "She has been through enough, Jen," I said. "Some day when we have gotten to know one another better I may tell her and beg her forgiveness, if I think she can handle the knowledge, but for the nonce I don't want her to feel any more hatred for me than she must necessarily feel ."

"Of course," agreed Jeanetta. "You need not fear. I shall treat her as I would wish to be treated, as indeed I was treated when the situation was reversed and it was I who was a prisoner. John, have you any news of Tommy Caxton?"

"Had a letter from Hal Brinton at court this morning, in fact. By the by, he'll be detouring through here on his way back to Devon to visit us. Evidently Tommy had a rather

adventurous time of it, but he reached Scotland in safety. I assume he'll eventually return for the king's pardon. I imagine he's had a bellyful of Lancaster by now."

Life went on serenely. In May I went down to Bristol to examine my newly acquired fleet of ships. The two merchantmen, the *Cog John* and the *Dolphin* I entrusted to worthy masters whom I selected for their honesty and experience on the recommendation of Gerald Talbot. I put one on a regular hop between Bristol and Dublin and the other coast-hopping from the Isle of Skye down to Cornwall and back, picking up and discharging what goods and passengers they could find in every port. They carried cargoes of wine, tin, copper, cloth goods, lumber, and other items, and I was able to land a contract with the Master of Ordnance at Dublin Castle, whom I fortuitously met in Bristol, to ferry military stores to the garrison there, bales of yew bows, sheaves of arrows, etc. My fishing boats were in poor repair and I sold half of them and leased the other half to the Bristol fisher's guild at an annual rent of ten shillings each and barrel of salt herring at Lent.

Actually I longed to send my two merchantmen around to the Cinque Ports on the Channel and take advantage of the lucrative Flemish wool run, but prosperous Burgundy and the Hanseatic ports were temporarily unreachable. Lancastrians led by the renowned Admiral of France, Piers de Brezé, were making things hot for Yorkist shipping on the Channel and in the North Sea. The swashbuckling de Brezé was also the latest in a long list of Queen Margaret's high-born lovers, for the queen had escaped to Brittany, abandoning her half-witted husband King Henry somewhere in the northern heather, and already she was plotting her return. But I had hopes of sending my wool-laden ships to Zealand, Flushing and Rotterdam soon, for the Earl of Warwick, no mean sailor himself, was known to be raising a fleet and preparing to deal with de Brezé and his marauders.

In June a band of discharged mercenaries entered the district. They stole poultry and a sheep, trampled crops, cut out a hedge priest's tongue when he admonished them to mend their evil ways, and then jammed a farmer down into a rabbit hutch while they took turns raping his wife on top of it. The sheriff of Hereford, Sir Germyn Parseval, called an array, my own levy included. Once more the Whitewood men downed their tools and left their fields to take up their bows, to draw the mauls and clothyards from the armoury, and to draw on jack and sallet while Jack and I once more pulled on armour and hauberk. This time, though, there was almost a lighthearted air as we marched out, a festive atmosphere owing to the knowledge that this was no long campaign but a simple matter of running down a few bandits. "Cease this badinage and look well to your weapons!" I told them sternly. "A man can get just as dead in a petty scrape like this as in a full-blown battle if you're not careful. It would be sad indeed for we who came through Northampton and Mortimer's Cross and Towton almost unscathed to lose any of you brave lads in a squalid little brawl not two leagues from your own doorstep!" As it turned out we surprised the *écorcheurs* at their drunken sport, killed several of them, hanged all who were foreigners and took the rest into service among ourselves, for they were not bad men by nature, merely looking for employment. One of them serves me to this day.

One balmy August afternoon a lone rider entered the demesne of Whitewood and cantered toward the manor house. The peasants out in the fields looked up, recognized him with a start, but waved to him and called out cheerful greetings. Sir Thomas Caxton had been a good lord to them during that dark Lancastrian winter of '59-'60, nor had he visited retaliation upon the families of the men who had vanished into the night that June, taking their bows with them to join me and the Yorkist army in London. I greeted him warmly, and sent a servant to fetch Jeanetta. He had grown older in more ways than in years, and he now sported a dandyish pointed beard.

"You look like an Irish highwayman!" I laughed as I handed him an ale mug drawn with my own hand. He drank deeply of the frothing brew, letting out a sigh of pleasure.

"Good English ale!" he exclaimed with gusto. "I never drank

a mouthful of that sour Scots brew that didn't need to be run through the horse one more time. I see you've kept up my former command quite adequately."

"Thanks to you, old friend, I still have something to keep up. You will note, however, that we now use cut faggots in the fireplace."

"John, old son, I'm dreadfully sorry about your furniture, but that damnable harridan Margaret declared all the land around Ludlow a royal forest and forbade us to cut wood. Then in mid-winter we ran out and there was none to be had for sale, so we had to use, ah, field expedients."

"Better you had burned the fixtures," I said. "Another man of greater ill will might have tumbled the peasants' huts. And I would thank you for being so courteous and proper a master to my lady wife..."

"Master my arse!" injected Jeanetta, sweeping into the room and kissing Caxton on the cheek affectionately. "How are you, Tommy. It's good to see you alive and whole."

"That is something of an accomplishment itself in these times, yes. John, old son, you seem to be labouring under the unaccountable delusion that I was as master here. This Lilith of yours terrorized us all. I once had to lock her in the pantry to keep her from pelting my sergeant with crockery."

"That churl offered an impertinence to Mistress Arden!" said Jeanetta primly.

"He was doing his duty and he did it in a soldier's language when addressing a bawd, which she was. If he hadn't Mistress Arden would have jiggled her fanny once too often in front of the soldiers and gotten herself raped, and Margaret would have had all our heads. I might add, John, that while she now sides with her sex it was Jeanetta who kept all those women in line. We were more partners than anything else. By the way, how's little Cicely?"

"Cutting her third tooth and chewing her thumb to bits with the first two, and crawling after Ned Tyndall and his devilish little band," Jeanetta told him. "We've another due in October."

"So I see. Congratulations. John, my lad, it looks as if you've come out on top of it all. I'm deeply indebted to you. Without that pardon you cadged for me, right now I'd be selling my sword to some swinish German landgrave or some devilish poison-brewing Italian prince."

"I do not forget those who have befriended me. I'm just glad we didn't meet on the wrong side of a battlefield. "

"Were you at second St. Albans?" Tommy asked, swigging ale.

"No," I replied. "I was with Edward's levy almost all the time. That was just after we'd hammered Tudor at Mortimer's Cross, and we were rushing eastward trying to beat your lot into London."

"Second St. Albans was the closest I ever came to copping it. Got my foot caught in one of those bloody caltrops, but I thought I spied you in Warwick's lines."

"No, wasn't me. It might have been my brother William. He was there."

"Let's see, I was at Blore, Ludlow, Northampton, second St. Albans, and of course that bloody abattoir at Towton," said Tommy, counting off on his fingers.

"All of those for me as well save St. Albans, plus I was at Mortimer's cross plus the sea raid on Sandwich in '60. How came you to Northampton? I thought you would have been here watching over your fair charges?"

"Courier run at just the wrong time," grunted Tommy with a grimace.

"I'll fetch something to eat while you two old veterans swap war stories," said Jeanetta. "We'll have a proper banquet for you tonight, Tommy."

"Fatted calf and Turkish dancing girls, please," said Tommy. As soon as she had left the room he turned to me. "John, I need to talk to you, and there isn't much time."

"The last time I heard you say something like that was at Raby Castle," I laughed. "I hope this isn't a fiasco like that?"

"It's worse," he said grimly. "You should know damned well it's worse! Are you barking mad to do something like this, John?"

"What? What are you talking about?" I asked, puzzled.

"I'm not just here to receive my pardon and renew old acquaintance," he said. "I'm escorting the widow of Sir Humphrey Stratton, and when she arrives it means trouble, bad trouble. Are you trying to tell me that you honestly have no idea on earth what I am speaking of?" he demanded, studying me intently.

"Not in the least," I assured him. "What's the trouble?"

"John, Stratton's widow---she is Melisande Grey." The words struck me like a slap in the face. I recoiled, knocking over my mug, staring at him in stupefaction. "It doesn't surprise me that you didn't know," he went on with a sardonic smile. "No sane man knowingly unleashes such a cataclysm in his household.

I barely heard him, for one sudden thought overwhelmed me. "Sweet God in heaven!" I gasped. "I killed her husband!"

XIX.

"Eh?" asked Tommy. "I thought Edward had him executed after Towton?"

"He did, but..."

"Melisande doesn't know that, by the way. Evidently whoever first told her the news didn't have all the facts. She thinks he died in combat. But what's this you said about killing her husband?" Quickly, I described the events on the morning we had left the Towton field. Tommy's lips pursed in a grim whistle at the conclusion of my tale.

"John, old son, you certainly seem to have a penchant for widowing this lady," he said carefully. "'Tis twice you've done it now, and once before she was even wed!"

"Tommy, I swear to you by all the saints that I did not know it was Sandy Grey whose lands I was receiving at King Edward's hands, else I'd have refused the grant!" I cried in despair.

"Did the king himself know?" asked Tommy.

"I...I cannot say. Nor can I say how much he knows of what went on at Raby, even though his sire Duke Richard knew all, of course. He may have heard somewhere that I was once betrothed to Melisande Grey."

"Mayhap His Grace thought he was doing you a favour?" suggested Tommy. "Giving you another crack at her, so to speak?"

"No, I'm certain he would have said something at the time," I replied, shaking my head. "This looks to be nothing more or less than sheer, cursed bad luck. But what in the name of the Virgin am I to do now?"

"Haven't the foggiest, coz, but you'd best bestir yourself and think of something," returned Tommy grimly. "She'll be here in a few hours' time."

"I'm here right now, cheeky!" interrupted Jeanetta, re-entering the room. Behind her came Gervase, the butler, carrying a large trencher of cold joints and bread and cheese, and behind him a boy bore a bucket of ale. While the meal was laid before us she watched us closely, and when they had left she spoke again, "What's wrong, John? Who's coming?" she asked quietly. "Nothing's amiss," I said, quickly falling to my meat. "Tommy was just telling me that he's escorting Lady Stratton to us here."

"Aye," said Tommy. "Tiptoft laid it on me. Seemed to feel I should begin my Yorkist career by making myself useful. The roads still aren't over safe. But damned if I don't think Tiptoft coveted my head, king's pardon or no. I caught him eyeing my neck a few times with an unpleasant glint of speculation, methinks!"

"My lord of Worcester is a renowned collector of rare artefacts," I told him. "Jewels, rare coins, books, Roman statuary, sacred relics, and Lancastrian heads."

"I hope Mistress Stratton is somewhat recovered from her bereavement?" inquired Jeanetta.

"Well enough in health," returned Tommy carefully. "I was just telling John that I fear she bears a grudge and there may in consequence be, ah, difficulties."

"So did Mistress Whitley bear us a grudge, and with some reason," said Jeanetta. "But we dealt with her fairly enough, I think. John, what of Mistress Stratton? Have you thought of Banham?"

"It's not the same as with Brantley," I reminded her. "Banham is entailed to Ned and his heirs, and I have but its oversight and revenues while I keep him in wardship. Besides, it's rather too close, methinks, I, ah, need to supervise it personally, I would say..." I was having difficulty bantering, my mind being in such a whirl.

"Oh, I forgot," said Jeanetta. "You're right, of course, John. "

"John was telling me of some rather, ah, unfortunate circumstances with regard to the death of the lady's husband," said Tommy.

"Precisely," said Jeanetta. "The fortunes of war are ill ones and even though John knew not what he did, I don't think she will ever feel at ease if she finds out."

"Jen," I said in a trembling voice which I tried to keep steady, "*She must not find out!* Promise me and Tommy both that you will say nothing to her!"

"Of course not," she said in some surprise. "I told you before I would say nothing. I sympathize with the poor thing, and I'll do all I can to make her feel welcome." Tommy's expression was very strange, and he hid it hurriedly by falling to and stuffing his mouth with food, not trusting himself to speak.

We managed to get away after the repast, and rode out along the eastward road. My mind was in utter turmoil, for I had never thought to see Melisande again, and the sudden proximity of her whom I had striven to put out of my mind threw all my feelings out of joint. Four violent years had passed since I had fled into the night from Raby Castle, a hunted fugitive. I knew now that it was on that night I had ceased to be a boy and had become a man, and fortune since had favored me and brought me up in the world. I was a baron now, wealthy and landed and high in the king's favor. What would the sight of her do to me? Would it sweep away all those years of war and madness like a broom sweeping cobwebs from a chamber long disused? Could it?

Soon we saw a small mote of dust in the distance, which grew larger and became a party of riders. One was in full armour, several of them were mounted billmen with pikes at the rest, there were a number of carts, and two female figures riding sidesaddle on mules. "One of the Stratton household knights rides with her," said Tommy. "He's a personable enough young fellow, albeit he necessarily doesn't think too much of you, I fear."

"What is he doing here?" I asked.

"On his way to Bristol, to take passage for Dublin. He fought for Lancaster, of course, and right bravely I'm told, but took the king's pardon and accepted a post over there. Young jumped-up lance by the name of Robin Balstrode." I laughed, suddenly recalling the scene in the Sandwich tavern that summer's night after our landing from Calais. "I know Sir Robin. Has he told you the tale of his dubbing?"

"No," replied Tommy. "I assumed a battlefield accolade from Lord Peregrine."

"Next chance you get, ask him how he earned his spurs, and from whom," I chuckled. "I was there at the time. And here he comes now."

The armoured knight cantered towards us, his visor raised but his hand on his sword. Reaching our side, he saluted me stiffly. "Well met, Sir Robin!" I said cheerily. "Do you recall our last meeting? You were most keen to be hanged, but I see you have escaped our recent national troubles unscathed in spite of that."

"I recall your face among many, sir baron," returned the young man, flushing.

"And how fair your uncle and fair sister?" I inquired.

"My uncle now keeps a tavern in London, in Eastcheap at the sign of the Key. My sister is attendant on the lady Sir Thomas and I are delivering into your custody."

"I shall be glad to feast you in my hall tonight," I said heartily.

"Nay, my lord, I must decline. I have business in Dublin but I must tell you, sir," he went on in grim earnest, "That if you do ill by Sir Humphrey's lady or my sister I shall return and kill you!"

"There's no call for that, Robin!" snapped Tommy angrily.

"It is you who do ill to threaten me upon my own lands, Sir Robin," I returned quietly, leaning on my saddle pommel. "But you are young and you know me not, so I forgive you that hasty word." *Young?* I reflected bitterly. *I am perhaps two years his senior. Why then do I feel so old?* "As to Lady Melisande, you have my oath that I shall show her only graciousness and courtoisie, and the same goes for Kate. My name is Redmond, not Tiptoft or Courtenay or Clifford. I do not abuse women in my charge."

"You are right, messire," the boy stammered with his face flushing hotly. "I spoke wrongly. But every man who knows the Lady Melisande holds her in the highest esteem, as did the entire Stratton household. Now that I have taken the oath to York I must abide by the new king's decree and hold my former master and all his line traitors, but as for Lady Melisande I shall stand ready to aid and defend her forever!"

"And so shall I, Sir Robin," I assured him. "Will you not stay a few days, then?"

"Nay, I cannot," he said, relaxing for a bit. "I carry despatches to Dublin Castle, and I must not tarry."

"As you wish. When you reach Bristol seek out Captain Blackthorne of the *Cog John* and tell him that his six barrels of pitch are on the way. Thus he will know you come from me, and he will give you a free passage to Ireland."

"I thank you, my lord. But now comes my lady." The main party had drawn nigh while we had been speaking, and I spurred to meet them. The two women slid to the ground off their mules and curtsyed deeply; I could not see her face yet. I dismounted and approached.

I had been a boy when last I saw her, and now I was a man and she was a woman, slender and stately, her dark amber eyes mirrors of pain and fear and suspicion. Her hair shimmered like cornsilk even beneath the dust of travel, gleaming against the black mourning gown she wore. I wondered how I must appear to her. Older, certainly, and harder and stockier, my hair close-cropped in a short cut from constantly wearing a helmet, a well-trimmed reddish beard now on my face. She rose from her curtsy at my bidding, her face tense and miserable. It suddenly dawned on me that she was afraid of

me. "Hello, John," she said softly. "It seems you are to have your will of me despite everything."

Deeply it pierced, deeper than my dagger in Morris's gut that night in Raby's hall four years before, and I knew I was lost. Years of deliberate forgetting, of my wife's striving to win me, year of mending were now gone in a heartbeat and the wound in my soul was again fresh and gaping and burning, as it had been on the moonlit night when I had fled Raby with Morris's blood on my hands and Jeanetta's dress.

God pity me! I moaned silently to myself. *I love her still!*

We rode along towards the hall slowly, after Sir Robin had left us to continue his journey. He had kissed Lady Melisande's hand, embraced his sister on parting, and told them before us all, "Remember, if I am needed, send for me and I will come." I let this pass, wished him godspeed, and helped Melisande remount. We let the slow wooden-wheeled baggage carts set the pace, so I had time to speak to her. One thing had been puzzling me. Why had her powerful relatives of Ruthin not intervened and asked either the king or myself if she might be taken into their household? Why had they seemingly abandoned her thus? I put this question to Sandy as delicately as possible. "I think, my lord, that they find me---inconvenient," she replied carefully. "An embarrassment, considering their present allegiance. My father-in-law is a powerful lord in the queen's party and has proven himself steadfast even during our recent reverses."

"You speak of your reverses, lady," I noted. "Are you now Lancastrian in heart as well as in name? You were not so at---not when I knew you before."

"I have grown and changed since Raby, sir," she replied. "But I am your prisoner now, John, and it would be neither becoming nor wise for me to anger you. Do you insist I answer?"

"No, I don't insist. But you may speak your mind. I won't get angry."

"Very well, then. Yes, I now cleave unto Lancaster because it is the party of my dead husband, whom I loved dearly, and of his noble father Lord Peregrine, who was kind and gracious to me, and of all our friends in Norfolk who are now either dead or widowed or outlawed."

"As we ourselves were in Calais, not too long ago," I reminded her.

"It is an evil thing to happen to anyone," she said. "But none the less I believe that King Henry and Queen Margaret are my lawful sovereigns, and that is another reason I would rather not live among my relatives, for they betrayed the queen."

"Yes, although I think you will understand why I can't fault them for it. Your uncle's, ah, change of heart at a crucial moment won the battle of Northampton for us."

"Yes, I know," she said gravely. "I was in the town nearby, having followed the army to be near my husband. When the rout started Humphrey managed to find me in all the confusion. I mounted behind him and he laid his shield across my back, and as we galloped down the road towards Norfolk I felt several nearly spent arrows strike the shield. Your lot were right behind us. Fortunately we had a good horse who didn't stumble and had a strong wind. I have no doubt what would have happened to us had we been caught."

"Nor I," I replied, remembering the bloody pursuit in the muggy July heat at Northampton. Had I seen them as they fled? "It would seem we both had a rather adventuresome time of it," I concluded inanely.

"I do not consider the death of my husband and the ruin of my country an adventure, sir!" she flared bitterly. "My life has been little short of hellish since you used me and then betrayed me at Raby!"

"I didn't have much choice other than turn my coat, there being little future at court for someone who'd stabbed one of the queen's important vassals," I sighed.

"John, there is no need to lie any longer," she said stiffly, jerking her eyes away. "You Yorks have won. You rule the land and I am your bondswoman now. I have no illusions about what is awaiting me at the end of this road. I have no doubt you will squeeze the last tear from me like an apple in a press is squeezed for its last drop of juice, but I pray that you spare me the final insult of lying to me!"

"Lying about what, Melisande?" I asked wearily.

"The queen showed me what you wrote to the duke of York. Oh, I forgive you for being a spy. I cannot forgive you the murder of Sir Robert Morriss, but that was a crime so black it is not mine to forgive or condemn but God's, and I leave it to Him. But to deceive me as you did, to make me feel as I had begun to feel for you---I have never been so hurt and ravaged in my heart, as when I knew that you had lied to me all along!" With every word she ripped and rent my very soul. How could I make her understand?

"I don't suppose you would believe me if I told you that the letter you saw was a complete forgery and the duke's seal and safe conduct were sent to me by my brother at Ludlow as a mistaken gesture of kindness?"

She regarded me with a tired look of contempt. "And who, pray tell, committed this uncharitable and cunning act?"

"Jeanetta Talbot."

"I believe her name is Jeanetta Redmond now," said Melisande coolly, "And I expect no more mercy from her than from you. If she thus betrayed you, then you rewarded her

most strangely my lord, by marrying her. A grim husband indeed you must be if that's your idea of revenge!"

"It does sound rather illogical, doesn't it?" I mumbled inanely. "At the time I simply thought I was making the best of a bad business. I can see how it appears to you, though." I was caught like a rat in a trap of my own making. And Jeanetta's.

We rode through the park in silence and dismounted at the great double doors in front of the manor house. While we were unloading the carts Melisande spoke again. "John," she said hesitantly, "Is that really what happened?"

"In point of fact, yes," I replied wearily. "And I don't blame you for not believing it. Come inside now, and I shall show you your new home." A shudder passed through her body as she stared at the high stone tower from Norman days.

"Up there?" she asked, in a voice throaty with fear. "You're not going to chain me up, are you, John?"

"Good God, no!" I exploded. "Melisande, your legal status is somewhat odd---I suppose it might be called the feminine equivalent of a prisoner of war. It's complicated by the fact that the entire Stratton house has been outlawed and proscribed, including those who bear the name by marriage. In fact, I believe you may be legally required to revert to your maiden name of Melisande Grey. I don't know, I shall inquire when I go to London this November for Parliament. Under the law you are my ward and I have full authority over you, but while you are here I want you to understand that you are an honoured guest, and I hope you will so consider yourself."

She wavered and said at length, "Mayhap I have misjudged your intentions, John. If so, then I am glad, and I am sorry for my bitter words to you back there on the road."

I took her up to one of the guest chambers, a spacious one on the second floor, and the girl Kate silently unpacked her few things. "I must admit this is somewhat better than I expected," she said, smiling for the first time. "I may owe some gratitude to you and Edward of March yet."

"One thing I must tell you plain, madam," I said in a quiet but firm voice. "This is a Yorkist household, and within these walls reigns Edward the Fourth, king of England. You must call him by his proper dignity."

Melisande curtseyed gravely. "I understand, my lord, and I protest at this intrusion on my own allegiance, but having protested I shall do as you command."

"I should like for you to meet him. Mayhap we shall all go to London together and I shall present you to Edward. He is a gallant captain, a peerless knight, and a brilliant monarch." I descended into the hall, wondering how to break the news to Jeanetta. Tommy handed me an ale jack wordlessly. "Well, *mon gar?*" he asked "Looks like you're

betwixt Scylla and Charybdis. Melisande dislikes and mistrusts you, and when Jeanetta learns the identity of her guest I can foresee an upheaval which will make Towton look like a tavern brawl by comparison."

"I have hopes yet of winning Sandy's trust, if not her liking," I returned. "It's Jeanetta who's worrying me now."

"I can understand that. That's the sort of situation which drove our grandsires to go on crusade."

"I hear the Knights of Malta are looking for lances," I replied with a rueful smile.

"Fighting Turks would not be so unpleasant an alternative to fighting Mistress Jeanetta."

"Well," I sighed, "I suppose I must tell her sometime." I spied my wife's waiting woman passing by the open door and I went out to her. "Mary, find my lady wife and bid her attend me here."

"She's already gone upstairs to welcome Mistress Stratton," returned Mary.

I cursed heartily, with enough vigour to make the woman blush and turn away. "That tears it! Now there will be...!" Leaving the sentence unfinished, I looked up the stairs to see Jeanetta descending. One look at her face was enough. Tommy appeared from the hall, saw that look, drained his ale jack in a single gulp, tossed it into a corner, and without a word bolted out the front door. I met my wife's icy stare helplessly. "You have seen Melisande?"

"Yes, John, I have, briefly. What is she doing here?"

"That is Humphrey Stratton's widow," I told her.

"I see."

"No, madam, you do not see at all!" I insisted. "I had not the slightest idea who that poor Lancastrian dolt was married to when I accepted his estates. I swear it!"

"I don't believe you!" she snarled.

"It is the truth nonetheless. Mary!" I commanded the hovering maid, "Go and summon Mistress Stratton to us. We shall have this whole matter hammered straight right now, and you shall be present yourself, Jeanetta, to see that your fears are sleeveless!"

I took her by the arm and led her into the study. Her voice was deceptively calm; I could see she was on the verge of hysterics. "John, you know she cannot remain here!"

"You've nought to fear, my lady," I growled. "In the first place, I am no depraved villain who takes advantage of widows placed in his care. Secondly, you built a wall between me and Melisande long since, when you broke up our betrothal and made me a murderer at Raby, and a right fine mason you are, for there can never be anything between Melisande and me. Upon my word, you have well attended to that!"

"Yet she is my rival, John," cried Jeanetta passionately. "Well you know it, for it is she who owns your heart, not me! How many times have you spoken her name in your sleep, or in the heat of our loving? I see it every day in you and I have done for four years, and yet ever I said nothing and sought to win your heart for mine! I have kept your house, waited faithfully and loyally on you during the war, given my body to you for your pleasure and the breeding of your children, and now in spite of it all you do this to me? Tolerance runs thin in the Talbot blood, John, *and I will not abide it!*"

"Madam, you shall abide it!" I shouted. Melisande Stratton entered, her face strained, for she had heard us arguing before she came in. She curtsied to both of us, greeting us civilly.

"Melisande," I told her, "It seems I must decide upon your future with expedition."

"I am placed by...the king at your disposal, my lord," she replied.

"And dispose of you he shall!" snapped Jeanetta.

"Be quiet, madam!" I commanded my angry wife. But Melisande flushed and spoke up.

"Lady Jeanetta," she said with dignity, "I have long known that you hate me, but never have I understood what my offense was that has merited your enmity."

"You have done nothing..." I hastily interposed.

"I have no doubt that she shall soon enough furnish me with cause for displeasure," flared Jeanetta.

"What cause?" demanded Melisande heatedly.

"Committing adultery with my husband under my own roof!" raved Jeanetta.

"That's enough!" I yelled. "No more...!"

"You cannot accuse me of it!" cried Melisande, tears of rage welling up in her eyes. "You do ill to judge me by your own foul measure, wicked woman! You who betrayed John at Raby worse than any adulteress, revealing his secret Yorkist allegiance to the queen and putting his very life at risk rather than see him wedded to me! Look ye, lady serpent, the fabric of my heart was not woven on so false and warped a loom as thine! Even had I

then known that John was a Yorkist spy, I would have kept his secret because there was a time when I loved him, and I would not have betrayed the one I loved!"

During this tirade Jeanetta grew as white as a corpse, and I stepped between them because I feared that my wife was about to attack Melisande. *"That's enough!"* I roared, finally subduing them. "Not another word out of either of you!" I panted with the exertion of my lungs and leaned against the wall between them, shaking my head. "You see why you cannot stay here, Sandy. For whatever reason, you and my wife cannot get along. To be frank, I am at a loss as to what to do with you. Your late husband's manor in Norfolk has been ceded to me, but if you wish I could make with you the same arrangement that I made with another Lancastrian lady and send you to oversee the holding."

"Oh no, John, please don't send me back to Canfield!" she cried.

"Were you so unhappy there, then?" I asked.

"No," she said, shaking her head sadly.

"No, the reverse," she said, shaking her head sadly. "It was the happiest time of my life there, before Humphrey went off to the army after Queen Margaret called her subjects to her standard at Coventry. He was able to spend some time at home that winter, but Lord Peregrine required him constantly at his side. Then you people landed in Kent, and he went off to Northampton. I followed him there, as I told you, and we barely escaped. He took me back to Canfield and left me there, binding me with my promise not to follow him again because it was too dangerous and promising that he would come home as soon as he could. But I never again saw him after that day..." She bowed her head and seemed on the verge of weeping.

"I am deeply sorry," I said gently. "I would that I could bring him back to you."

But I had momentarily forgotten Jeanetta's presence and the terrible knowledge she bore. Her laugh was as cold and as merciless as a sword's edge.

"Strange words indeed from the man who struck off Humphrey Stratton's head with his own hands!" she hissed.

"What?" gasped Melisande, looking up and staring at me. I in my turn stared at Jeanetta, gripped with horror, but my tongue clove to my mouth, so dry had it suddenly become. My lady's laughter was light and gloating.

"Tell me, little Melisande, how much do you know of the manner in which your sweet lord met his end?"

"He...he fell on the field of Towton," stammered Melisande.

"Wrong! He died on the block by the command of our new King Edward, and you see before you the man who wielded the headsman's axe!"

XX.

After Melisande had fled sobbing from the room I turned on Jeanetta, and I was not gentle in my rage. With a mindless bellow I seized a plaited cowhide hunting quirt from a hook on the wall, and knocking her over an upholstered settle to the floor I lashed her ferociously, slicing her gown to ribbons with the whip. She seized the tapestry against the wall and clung to it, stuffing the cloth into her mouth in an attempt to stifle her own shrieks, but as the blood bubbled from the whipcuts on her back she struggled to her knees and began to scream for mercy. *"No more, my lord, please no more!"*

"Bitch! She-devil!" I raged. "I'll flog you until your ribs show!" She rolled on the floor howling as my arm rose and fell, slicing her flesh through the tattered gown. The tumult brought a gaggle of staring, white-faced servants to the door, gaping at me as I lashed my pregnant wife within an inch of her life. Finally Jack Fletcher leaped forward from among them and seized me by the arm, wrestling me to a halt. *"Forebear, my lord, in mercy's name forbear!"* he cried. "You'll kill her, and the child!"

Never before in my life had I known such murderous rage, not even when I killed Robert Morriss at Raby, but his words cut through the feverish fog which wrapped my brain in bloody passion, and I knew that he was right. I threw the whip into a corner, where it stained the stone floor with blood, and I stalked out of the study, my people fleeing in sudden fear before me. I saw Mary, my wife's tirewoman, pressed against the wall staring at me in terror. "Attend to your mistress!" I snapped at her. She rushed to obey.

I went to the cellar, filled a basket with bottles of red wine and hauled it out to the duckpond in the garden to calm down. After a time Tommy and Jack joined me there, sitting down on the grass and drinking with me, not saying with me, not saying a word. I desperately wanted to get drunk, anything to keep me from having to think right now, but the power of my despair overcame the potency of drink. Or at least so it appeared to me, for my senses were woefully clear and my thoughts grim. For once I outstripped Tommy in imbibing, finishing two bottles to his one, which I tossed into the pond, morosely watching them floating among the ducks, who regarded them with disinterest. "Thank you for stopping it, Jack," I said finally. "I must have been out of my mind, beating her like that when she is with child."

"Father Peter and Mary are caring for her hurts," he told me. "She will mend. You had cause, my lord. We know what happened. Jeanetta is my sister, remember. I know her. I have been wondering when she would relapse into her true nature."

"What of Melisande?" I asked.

"She shut herself up in one of the upper chambers," said Tommy.

"God, how she must hate me now!"

"Let me go and try to speak with her," offered Tommy, rising. "We always got along fairly well. At least mayhap she will unleash her grief on me instead of bottling it all up inside." He left and went into the great manor house. The shadows lengthened and the sun was beginning to set as he returned. "I spoke with her," he said, settling himself on the grass and uncorking another bottle. "Or rather I spoke *at* her. I told her what had happened as you told it to me. I swore to her in all sincerity that you knew not who you were killing, and that you interrupted the headsman at his bungled work out of compassion for a gallant enemy, in order to give him a quick and soldierly death. I admit it sounded idiotic when I told the tale to her. Oh, you and I know how it happened, we can understand it. We have seen the reality of war. But it's hard to tell a widowed wife that someone killed her husband out of kindness. Besides, she heard Jeanetta screaming as you flogged her, and that did make it a bit difficult to convince her of your kindly nature." He took a long swig on the bottle.

"What did she say then?" I asked.

"She sat stiff and straight on a settle, and when I had finished she looked at me with eyes that cut me to the heart and made me want to go crawling out of the room on my belly, and she said to me, 'Sir knight, you have done your duty for the life that John Redmond gave to you. Now leave me to mourn the life he has taken from me.'"

"Saints in heaven!" I moaned. "What in God's name am I going to do now?"

"The solution is obvious," said Tommy. "Get her out of here! Are you certain Reginald Grey won't take her in?"

"I would tend to doubt it," I replied morosely. "I can see why he wouldn't like any reminders of his Lancastrian past lying about, especially as Melisande's marriage was made especially to strengthen those ties and bind him to Lancaster. Sandy's presence in his household might lead to unseemly speculation as to his loyalties. After all her father-in-law is a prominent Lancastrian exile and actively championing Margaret and Henry in their intrigues."

"I see," said Tommy with a nod. "It might look as if Lord Reginald were trying to keep a foot in both camps, so to speak. But that's his problem. If somehow you could persuade him to remember his blood duty, it would free you of this impossible situation. It's worth a try."

"I shall write to him tomorrow and send a messenger posthaste to London," I agreed. "But what can I do with Melisande in the meantime? It's asking for trouble even having those two in the same house!"

"My lord," spoke up Jack, "What of Rose Cottage? It's been empty since my mother died Whitsun last. I had planned to live there after my own marriage to Joan Bixby, with your permission, but we're not to be wed until Michaelmas, and it would keep Lady Melisande out of Jeanetta's way. At least they'd not be under the same roof."

"A sound idea," I agreed. "Jack, would you be so kind as to see that Melisande's things are moved into the cottage tonight? Then take her there. Speak with that maid of hers, the redheaded girl, Kate. She will probably be able to persuade her mistress to move."

As dusk fell I rose and went inside, unsteadily climbing the stairs to the master bedchamber. Jeanetta was there, clad only in her shift, moving stiffly but on her feet. When I entered and she Mary started and stared at me nervously. "Fear not, good dame," I told the maid. "I have left my lash downstairs. Now leave us." When we were alone I sat down on a stool and Jeanetta perched on the side of the bed, her expression unreadable, waiting for me to speak. "Does it still hurt?" I asked.

"Like the very devil. Father Peter put a salve on my back that will heal most of the open lacerations. I'll keep a few scars, but I'll mend. Could I possibly persuade you to use a flail or a piece of saddle girth next time? They bruise but do not break the skin."

"Indeed? That's useful information to know. Has someone written a treatise on wife beating?"

"No, Mary's husband used to beat her all the time before he was hanged, and she was giving me an earful of practical advice while tending to my back, how to roll with the blows and so on. You were so wroth I feared for my life."

"And the life of the child," I said. "Jen, I am sorry. I shouldn't have done that. But I will tell you this now, that if you do anything else to harm Melisande in any way, or if you ever do anything like that to me again, it's a full year in the tower. Chained to the wall in irons. Don't push me, Jeanetta."

"Then you'd best chain me up right now," she said evenly. "That woman is my enemy. I never thought to have to fight you for her again for you, but this time it will be a l'outrance."

"You have lost your wits!" I shouted angrily. "Don't you realize how much she loathes me now? What possible competition can you fear from her?"

"It is not her feelings which matter to me, John, but yours," she said. "I will not have another woman in your heart so near to tempt you. I had rather you flogged me twice a day than keep her here under my own roof!"

"Well, you needn't worry about that," I told her. "She is going to Rose Cottage tomorrow."

"So you can visit her in secret?" returned Jeanetta heatedly. "That's even worse! Now I'll go mad every time you're out of my sight!"

"Then what would you have, madam?" I pleaded despairingly. "Tell me what will satisfy you, and if it can be done without injustice to Melisande it shall be so!"

She kept sullen silent for a while, not looking at me. Finally she said, "I want you, John, all of you."

"Not a few weeks back you were telling me it was all right if I bedded other wenches."

"That's different and you know it. She is different, and you know it. I want you to stop loving her and love me instead."

I sighed, and began pulling off my boots. "You know I can't do that, Jeanetta. Love is not something that one sheaths or unsheaths at will like a sword. Of course, you wouldn't know about such things." Jeanetta paled and bit her lip, turning away from me.

"Must you savage my heart as well as my body, John?" she whispered in a dismal voice of despair.

"Oh, Jen, I'm sorry, that was an inexcusable thing for me to say," I said, taking her hands in mine. "Jen, Jen, must you make this so much harder for me? For all of us?"

"What do you want me to do, John? Be friends with her? Stop hating her? I can't do that, even as you cannot stop loving her."

"All I want now is to put paid to this rotten thing that has been festering in our lives for four years. Jeanetta, you are my wife and I thought my friend as well, as we pledged to one another that night we were wed. We had a good life here before today, a bright future in a new reign and a new time. Let it be so again!"

"And what about her?" demanded Jeanetta.

"Yes, I love Melisande," I said, looking into her eyes. "And because I love her, I want her to be secure and whole and happy. You must live with that. I am going to give her peace and contentment, somehow, I don't know how at the moment. You have my oath that I will never do anything to dishonour myself where she is concerned, or to dishonour her. Will that not content you?"

She looked away from me, her eyes veiled. "Perforce it must for now, I suppose. Come to bed, my lord husband, and I hope your right arm is as stiff and sore as a saddle boil tomorrow!"

My life became charged with tension, and the atmosphere of my house grew heavy with foreboding. The next morning I had Jack transfer Melisande and her tirewoman, Kate Balstrode, to the cottage. I did not attempt to confront her personally, and I avoided seeing her while Jack Fletcher rode to London shortly thereafter, bearing my letter to Lord Reginald Grey. I instructed him to wait upon a reply from the baron and brook no delay, and I gave him a second letter for the Earl of Warwick praying his good lordship in the matter and asking him to obtain from Lord Grey clarification of his intent. This letter was to be presented to Warwick if it looked like Grey was trying to put me off.

As it turned out, it was not necessary for Jack to employ this second letter, for he was back in eight days. He bore a polite, evasive missive in which Lord Grey told me that while he regretted the domestic discord his niece was causing, he could not at this time see his way clear to relieving me of my burden due to Lady Melisande's "unfortunate connections among the enemies of the realm", as he put it. "Connections which you yourself fostered when you were a Lancastrian, knave!" I shouted, throwing the letter into the fire.

"I gather Lord Grey's reply is not encouraging," said Tommy, lounging with a full goblet in his hand. "What now?"

"I don't know," I confessed. "How is Melisande, Tommy? You've seen something of her these past few days."

"Withdrawn, suspicious, and quietly terrified of you," he said bluntly. "I hate to say it, John, but any chance you may ever have had to reconcile yourself with the lady is now gone. I have had some little speech with her since I brought her out here, and I am convinced that she has never gotten over that night at Raby when you killed Robert Morriss in front of her eyes. Not really. Now there's this thing with her husband at Towton. She is convinced that she is in the hands of a blood-drinking savage like so many of this realm's nobles have become. We've steeped ourselves in blood for so long that we've come to revel in gore and death, and God only knows how many sweet and gentle spirits like Sandy's have been crushed and brutalized."

"You speak true," I said grimly. "But I would with all my heart I might do her a good turn, for once. Surely there is *something* I can do to soothe her pain."

"I suggest," said Tommy slowly, "That you find a suitable husband for her who will take her out of her present life and into a new one." This gibed exactly with my own thinking and it led into something I had been contemplating in the back of my mind for some time. "I think I may have found one," I said. "If I can interest him in the proposition."

"Who?" asked Tommy, startled.

"You."

"So," Tommy sighed after a short silence. "Am I that obvious?"

"Any man that knows her must come to love her, lad. She can never be mine and I've never been so foolish as to think that," I told him.

"My father has been hinting that it's time an eligible bachelor like me stopped being eligible and settled down to the task of replenishing the realm's supply of Caxtons," Tommy admitted. "I can't resist the call of family duty forever, and God knows what kind of harpy he's going to fit me up with if I don't take the matter in hand myself. And I admit I am not untouched by sentiment for the lady. She's been tossed upon some stormy waters."

"I'm afraid all she's dowered with is her Grey name, although her uncle..."

"That will be good enough," asserted Tommy. "We're even more newly ennobled than your clan, Johnny lad, and our manor in Stafford wasn't even granted enfeoff. My father bought it in a vulgar hard cash transaction. We're well off enough, property and commercial interests in London. My father is bailiff of the hundred, and my uncle William is piling up a goodly fortune at the court of Burgundy with some German contraption that makes books faster than a whole monastery of scribes. But being allied to a noble house like that of Grey will be a greater recompense than any dowry."

"I think she'll accept you, if only to get out of here," I said. "After all, you're a Lancastrian and you fought in the same army as her husband."

"Was a Lancastrian," corrected Tommy. "The next time that insane bitch Margaret sets foot in England I'm riding forth with the Snow Rose in my hat."

"Until the world changes again and Lancaster rises?" I asked.

Tommy scowled and stared into his goblet glumly. "I don't know," he admitted finally. "You know, I really dislike war and intrigue. They interfere with my drinking. I think considering the way of England these days, we all ought to be allowed one turning of the coat before anyone starts keeping score, eh? Seriously, if I discern that York gives England good governance I'll stick with the Whites. The English people being what they are, peace and order and prosperity will eventually win out. Come, drink up. Good wine was meant to lie in the belly, not in the cup."

That afternoon Tommy arrayed himself in the best garments he could find, some of which he borrowed of me, and we rode out to Rose Cottage, so called for the high trellises of rosebushes in the garden, both red and white petaled. Jeanetta had carried a sheaf of the white ones on her wedding day, and we had all worn them in our caps when we marched off to Ludlow two years before. I learned later with some irritation that Tommy had taken a large sheaf of the red ones to the Lancastrians at Northampton, and

the ladies of Margaret's court had worn them on their bodices as they waited anxiously in the town for news of their men in the battle. When we arrived I left him outside to await my summons after I had spoken with Melisande, and I entered the cottage. The girl Kate looked up and started when she saw me, then dropped a curtsey. "I would see your mistress," I told her.

"She is in the garden," said the girl, looking at me strangely. I strode towards the back door, but she grasped my arm and I turned to face her. I recalled her strained but proud face on the night she and her brother had tried to assassinate the prince, and I reflected that she was a most beautiful young woman. Therefore her question startled me, almost as if she had read my mind. "Tell me, my lord, do you think me comely?" she asked. "Most men do."

"Eh?" I stammered. "Well, certainly they should." It was true enough. She had a pale oval face framed beneath flaming red tresses, the reddest I had ever seen other than in Scots or Irish, and a light powdering of freckles adding allure without muddying her features.

"Would you like to bed me?" she asked me point-blank.

"Madam, the last time I saw a man try to bed you, two of your male relatives were waiting for him in concealment with drawn daggers!" I returned with some amusement. "May I ask the reason for so bold a proposition? Surely I'm not all that handsome?"

"My lord," she said, taking my hands and lowering her eyes, "I know not what manner of man you are to do the things that you have done or to persecute my mistress so, but I beg you to let me take her place now! I don't know what you are planning, but whatever it is, do it to me instead of to her! I will willingly submit to anything in order to spare her more anguish!" She looked up at me, her eyes begging for favour. I shook my head slowly in wonderment, and taking her by the shoulders I sat her down upon a bench by the wall

"A noble offer, mistress," I said gently. "I rejoice to see Melisande so well served in you. I know that you will take no oath of mine for surety, for you think me a base murderer and a traitor to boot, but you have my word of honour that I do not seek your lady's harm or disparagement. I have done her much ill in the past, through my own reckless passion and through plain cursed bad luck, and I long for naught so much as to mend it."

She studied me for a moment, and then spoke in a solemn voice, "I don't know what to think, my lord. Your face and your eyes are honest, and yet when last I was in your house we could hear the screams of your lady wife as you whipped her. I am a lowly maid of no parts or birth, and I am sure I mean nothing to you, but if you are false to your oath and you hurt Melisande I swear I will kill you."

"Your brother made the same threat. It seems to be a habit in your family," I commented dryly. "You two are really most keen to be hanged, aren't you?"

"I am eager to see Sandy's hurts healed and see her happy again, like she was with poor dead Lord Humphrey," said Kate.

"Well, I hope that can be brought about," I said.

I strode towards the door to seek out Melisande, when the girl called out, "Lord John!" I turned to face her. "You are indeed most handsome," she said with an embarrassed smile.

"Don't let my wife hear you say that," I said with a grin, "She is jealous enough of your mistress as things stand, without a second fair Lancastrian captive to fret upon."

I found Sandy in a simple smock and apron, on her knees, digging in a flower bed with a trowel. She leaped to her feet when she saw me, dropping me a stiff curtsy and waiting for me to speak, her eyes downcast, her face a mask. I told her without embellishment of Tommy Caxton's suit, and waited for her reply. "Sir Thomas is fair and well spoken," she replied gravely. "I thank you for arranging so pleasant a match. Tell me, my lord, will you allow us to get as far as the altar this time before you kill him? Does Tommy die by the dagger or by the axe? Or do you tire of such crudities and aspire to something more exotic, poison perhaps, or the Italian garrote?"

"Actually I was planning on having Tommy flayed alive and pulled apart by wild horses," I could not resist saying. She gasped and jumped back from me, her face a mask of shocked terror. *Sweet Jesu, she believes me!* I moaned to myself. Aloud I cried out, "Lady, you wrong me! How many times must I beg your forgiveness for one act which was unintentional on my part and for another to which I was unendurably provoked?"

"There can never be any justification for murder, John," she cried. "As for your murdering my husband unintentionally, you lie, may your soul burn in hell!" I flinched before her sudden outburst, and she burst into weeping, collapsing onto a stone bench in the garden and hiding her face in her apron.

"Is there anything at all that I can do to make up for it all?" I asked her after a while, bleak and helpless.

"You can let me join my husband," she said, wiping the tears from her eyes. "I mean it, John. I would die by your hand even as Humphrey and Robert Morriss did. I would kill myself but holy church teaches that it is a sin. The greatest mercy you could give me right now would be to cease tormenting me and lying to me and turn on me with your sword. It is the lying that hurts most, John. You do it to torture me, for you know how much I want to believe in you. Then just when I begin to see some little ray of light in the darkness which is your soul, you bear your savage fangs and you tear at me like a wild dog, again and again."

"I am cursed," I muttered.

"Your curse is your own black heart, sir. John, why do you hate me so?"

"Hate you?" I cried. "Sandy, how can you say that? You know that more than any on earth I love-."

"No!" she shrieked. "Speak not that word! Don't you dare soil that most precious of all words by letting it fall from your lying lips! You hate me, not with passion hot and angry like a real man, but cold and cruel like a snake, a monster!"

I could only stare at her in uncomprehending confusion. "That night at Raby's hall, when all your schemes were shattered-I think it was then you began to hate me," she went on in a dull voice. "Before that I was just a pawn in your game, an object to be won, but from that moment on hate for me filled your heart. But why could you not have turned your dagger against *me*? I would have died forgiving you, as our Saviour has commanded us to forgive, but instead you murdered that gallant young knight and you left me with the knowledge that he had died for my sake. You fiend! Then my poor Humphrey. He was another pawn in this stupid overgrown children's game of Lancaster and York! He did not have to die! No thrones or belted earldoms hung upon his life or death. But you conspired to have him condemned by your oh so knightly King Edward, and then as a final ghoulisn gesture you swung the axe yourself!"

"No!" I shouted wildly.

"*Don't lie to me!*" she howled, closing her eyes and clenching her fists, stamping her feet. "I beg you, please, please, no more lies! Beat me, ravish me, humiliate me, kill me, I will welcome the end, but please, oh please, don't lie to me any more!" She fell to her knees before me in a heap, sobbing uncontrollably. I gaped. It was all so monstrously false, I knew not where to begin to refute it, and then suddenly I realized that I never could. I knelt by her side.

"Melisande," I said softly, raising her chin and looking into her anguished eyes, "It is plainly the will of God, or whatever power rules this vale of pain and tragedy, that you and I are to go ever hard with one another. I pray, I hope, and I live for the day, perhaps before our deaths, perhaps afterwards, when somehow, through some inconceivable miracle of grace, hatred and fear between us can end and we can be together. That day is not now, nor is it anywhere near. But I would see you happy, and therefore I ask you to consider favourably the suit of Sir Thomas Caxton for your hand in marriage. I ask you to accept this new life from me, in a very partial payment for the wrongs I have done you. I admit those wrongs freely, although never shall I cease trying to persuade you that I meant them not and that all of this has just been some kind of diabolical accident of fortune, which is the only way I can explain it to myself. But one thing I must tell you. By all that is sacred in this world, Melisande, I have loved you from the first moment I saw you and every hour of every day since then. I shall love you until the day I die." I leaned over and kissed her on the cheek, and she stared at me in wonder. "I will send Tommy to you now."

I rose and at the cottage door I turned to look back at her. "You are a saint," I said.

"And you are my own personal devil from the depths of hell, sent to torture me beyond the limits of my heart and soul," she whispered. She looked up at me. "If I marry Sir Thomas, will you promise to stay away, that I might never set eyes on you again?"

"If that is your will," I replied bleakly.

"Then I will marry him." I stumbled blindly back through the house to the front door, where I saw Tommy and Kate Balstrode speaking in low tones. I made a vague gesture to Tommy, and he entered the cottage. I leaned against the wall for a time, my mind blank, my soul churning.

I do not know why Kate did what she did then, nor did I ever afterward ask her. She came up to me, and took my hand. "Down by the stream where I wash laundry there is a soft and mossy bank, my lord," she said in a steady voice. "Come with me to that place now. Please."

XXI.

That night I told Jeanetta of Melisande's coming marriage to Tommy Caxton. "So now you need no longer harbour this insane jealousy," I concluded. "She will be wed and away from here."

"Tommy's house lies on the road to London, does it not?" inquired Jeanetta skeptically, sitting by the *pres-dieux* and holding a mirror while she combed her hair.

"Sweet Jesus, I just can't win, can I?" I groaned.

"No," confirmed Jeanetta calmly. "Not where Melisande Grey is concerned." I frowned, wondering if the ploy I had planned would help or hurt. I lay on the bed with my boots off, staring up at the embroidered canopy, and then decided I'd best proceed with it. For one thing, I was certain that my adultery with Kate Balstrode had not passed unnoticed, for the forests of a manor have eyes and ears, and Jeanetta would hear of it sooner or later. Then again, perhaps her mad jealousy could be deflected away from Melisande.

"I know this is not an opportune moment," I began slowly, "But I am afraid I must distress you still further, my lady."

"Your meaning, sir?" demanded Jeanetta, ceasing to comb her tresses.

"You will recall the, ah, agreement we made back before all this started that if I ever, er, lapsed from my marital vows I should do you the courtesy of telling you first before you heard it from gossip?"

Jeanetta laid down her comb and stared at me. "If it's her I shall go mad," she said flatly.

"No, no, dammit all, woman, don't you believe a word I tell you?" I said, exasperated. "The fact is, though, I don't think you'll be too happy with my---choice. I didn't intend for it to happen, and to tell the truth I still don't know how it happened, and I swear to you, Jen, this is the first time I've ever done it." I had no need to play the part of the penitent husband, for I genuinely was penitent. The fact was that I had enjoyed my encounter with Kate Balstrode more than I had expected, and I had a prickly conscience over it. But Jeanetta cut off my stuttered explanations. "*Who?*" she cried in exasperation.

"Melisande's servant girl, Kate," I finally confessed.

"Eh?" I could see she was genuinely surprised. "How did that come about, if you don't mind my asking?"

"I went out to see Melisande and discuss her marriage to Tommy, then he went into the house to speak with her and I was left alone outside in the yard with Kate, and..." I managed to look acutely embarrassed, but Jeanetta suddenly broke into merry laughter.

"Do you mean to tell me that while your best friend was inside proposing marriage to the great love of your life, you consoled yourself by swiving the maid?" she demanded.

"Well, yes, actually," I mumbled, flushing and looking away. Put that way, it did sound rather ridiculous.

"Well-a-day," giggled Jeanetta. "It appears as if even you, Sir Galahad, are not immune to occasional lapses from the knightly ideal."

"Jen, I really am truly sorry...." But she just hugged me and laughed all the more, and for the first time since Sandy's arrival she seemed relaxed and amused. Apparently I had read the womanly mind aright for once, I reflected as she lay sleeping later on, her head on my shoulder.

In the next few days Jeanetta seemed fully to recover from her anger and jealousy, never mentioning Melisande or rating me as she had been doing. It was with a calm heart then that I made plans to travel with Tommy to Staffordshire and then on to Canfield in Norfolk to look over my new holding, appoint my new reeve (the old one had died in some obscure skirmish during the war) and go over the accounts. Tommy was to return for Melisande a week before Michaelmas and escort her to Staffordshire they would be wed.

We rode out on a warm day, the last day of August, and by early afternoon we had reached Market Drayton, near the old Blore Heath battlefield, where Tommy and Jack and I had all been first blooded. We supposed at an inn there, and when the time came for the reckoning I was extremely chagrined to discover that I had forgotten my purse. "I'll pay," said Tommy. "I'm sure this good host has heard the 'forgot my money' song often enough." He tossed the landlord a gold crown.

"'Tis Scottish, sir knight," said the innkeeper, eyeing it suspiciously.

"Yes, but look at the arms. That's good gold coin from King James' reign, not Mary of Guelders' junk." The innkeeper nevertheless took the precaution of weighing the coin on a small scale before accepting it. "King Jamie Red-face was killed by a bursting cannon during the war, while the Scots were besieging Roxburgh castle," commented Tommy. "They say the first thing his Queen Regent did was to gather up the pieces of the gun and cast them into ducats."

"I can't have you paying all the way," I told him. "We'll have to go back."

"Why not wait here for the night and let me make a quick gallop back for your purse?" suggested Jack. "I can be back here by tomorrow morning with it."

"No," I demurred. "I've seen how you like to race Black Prince. You're going to break his wind one of these days, and destriers are too expensive to be turned into plow horses."

"Besides," said Tommy, "A lone man carrying a heavy purse is easy prey for those bold fellows who make their living off the public highways. No, we'd best all go back. We need only lose a day."

We kept a steady pace, and we regained the boundaries of Whitewood by nightfall. I paused to urinate against the boundary stone, and on remounting I noticed the last scarlet glow of the sun's final rays, silhouetting the treetops. "Market Drayton to Whitewood between noon and sunset," I remarked to Tommy. "Not bad time. It took Salisbury's army three days to march from Blore to Ludlow after the battle, much the same distance in the other direction."

Tommy frowned. "John, the last I heard the sun is always wont to rise in the east and set in the west. Yonder glow is in the north."

I stared up at the flickering red rays, startled, and realisation hit me like a hammer blow. "Melisande's cottage is on fire!"

We spurred out horses up the track towards the burning house, as the church bell began to ring a tocsin from the dell. Peasants who heard the alarm rushed out of their own cots and followed on foot. Tom Simkins bolted from his doorway and paced our galloping horses. When we burst into the clearing the cottage was an inferno, nor were there any signs of life in the yard or the garden where the rosebushes withered blackly in the heat. It was

clear that the house would collapse in a few moments. "Sandy!" I cried out, leaping from my horse and approaching the door, shielding my eyes from the searing heat. The flames singed my hair and beard as I kicked open the door and staggered into the furnace of hell itself. I sensed rather than saw a small huddled form on the charred, smoking floor and I gathered my love into my arms and staggered out the door with her, my lungs sizzling in my chest, handing her to Tommy Caxton even as I collapsed myself. I blacked out and learned later that Tom Simkins had dragged me away from the blazing cottage just as it collapsed into a roaring pyre, sending a column of flame up a hundred feet in the air.

I awoke from my swoon moments later, my seared lungs aching, and staggered to my feet like a drunken man. A small group of men stood around a woman's form lying on the grass at the edge of the track where the yard began. I pushed them aside and saw her.

She lay on the sward, her eyes closed as if she were but sleeping, and on her face at last there was peace. The bodice of her gown was fresh with blood, and I saw in the silk a small rent which I tore open. Just beneath her breastbone blood still seeped from a vertical slit in her pale skin, and I knew that a dagger had pierced her lungs and heart, and that death had been instantaneous. It was a carefully placed assassin's thrust, a delicate version of the blow with which I had slain Robert Morriss at Raby. I stared, the awful knowledge creeping into my numbed brain. My love had been murdered.

The kindest mercy I could ever ask of God is that He vouchsafes unto me the gift of forgetfulness of that night I spent in the grass by Melisande's body, watching Rose Cottage burn down into a pile of charred timbers and ashes. The house had been sturdily built of oaken boards and beams, and it took a long time to burn itself out. I sat there and stared into the flames, not wondering, just hurting. The flames of Rose Cottage wreathed themselves around my soul and burned and burned like the infernal flames of hell, for it was surely thence that they came.

When the fire had burned low, I rose and covered Melisande's body with my cloak, and at last I stretched down and lay by her side, for the first and last time. I did not sleep; I simply stared into the sky at the cold, mocking stars she could not see and would never see again. The others kept their distance respectfully, doubtless thinking me mad to lie down upon the dewy grass beside a corpse, but nonetheless leaving me to share my grief with the earth and the stars and my poor dead love.

Towards morning a mist rose from the ground, and I rose as well and brushed myself off, and strode up to the others who sat huddled on the ground, their heads upon their knees in weariness and grief. "Come," I said to them, Tommy and Jack and Tom Simkins. "We must discover who has done this." My voice was dead as was my heart. I was glad to be dead in this way, for my brain was beginning to crawl with a noxious thought, a hideous thought which Tommy spoke aloud.

"You know who has done this," he said flatly. "We all know."

"My wife?"

"Who else on the face of the earth would harm her?"

"If it is so, then she shall suffer for it," I promised them. "But Tommy, she's given me good years and three children, and I must at least have proof before I condemn her."

"I would not ask otherwise of you, John," said Tommy, rising stiffly to his feet. "The first thing we should do is find the servant girl. She may be dead as well in yonder ruins, so we must search them. Methinks they are cool enough to touch, now." He looked over to where Melisande's fair corpse lay, covered decently with my cloak, and went and knelt by her side to give his last farewell to her who would have been his wife. I saw him lift the garment and bend down to give her a last tender kiss, then he covered her face again and walked back to where we poked among the blackened timbers of the cottage.

"Here is a great stroke," he said softly, rubbing a wetness from his eyes. "I find I cared for her more than I suspected."

We grimly proceeded with our search for the maid Kate, but before long we halted, as Father Peter the manor priest came puffing down the track post-haste, stopping with a cry as he spied Melisande's body, then dropping to his knees to mumble Paternosters over her. He brought news: Kate Balstrode was alive and had sought sanctuary in the church. "Has she said anything?" I demanded of the priest.

"Only that she is guiltless of her mistress's death," said Father Peter. We mounted, and Father Peter and Tom walked along before us leading the way, the fat cleric wheezing and muttering his offices, his face pale in place of its usual ruddiness. This was the most important thing to happen in his parish since he had occupied the pulpit. We reached the churchyard and entered the stone church, dimly lit inside from a single taper, and from the early light of dawn seeping in through the narrow slit windows. A crowd of tenants, men and women, stood outside. They had come for morning mass, but now they stood together in huddles talking and whispering in hushed tone while the sexton forbade them entry into the building.

In the dim light of the somber interior I saw Kate Balstrode kneeling by the altar. She heard us come in and rose to face us, one hand upon the altar grasping the cloth as prescribed in the ancient formula. We approached her slowly. "My lord, I claim right of sanctuary!" she cried in a trembling voice.

"Soft, Kate," I said in a soothing voice. "I will not try to seize you. I am going to approach you, but only to talk. You need not fear." I clambered over the altar rail and sat down beside her on the stone step. She sat as well, her eyes black with horror. "There is blood upon your dress, Kate," I observed grimly. "Is it Lady Melisande's blood?"

"Yes," she whispered. "I cradled her in my arms for a moment as she lay dead."

"Did you see her slayer?" I asked.

"Yes," she whispered, closing her eyes and nodding.

"Well?"

"You will say I lie," she moaned. "You will beat me!"

"Was it my wife, Jeanetta?" I demanded.

"Yes. I swear to you upon my hope of salvation, I speak the truth. It was she."

"Tell me what you saw," I commanded sternly.

"I had gone to the mill to buy a hen from Dame Simkins. When I returned I had the hen in a basket, which I set outside the door. I entered the cottage to see Lady Melisande lying on the floor and Lady Jeanetta in the act of firing the roof thatch with a brand from the hearth. She saw me as I ran to Melisande and wept over her. She cursed me for a whore and thrust the burning brand in my face and tried to blind me, but I ran. I fled into the forest, and at first light I came here. It is but temporary sanctuary. I will be accused."

It was true. I could sense in my heart that she spoke the truth, and I was chilled by the horror of it. What to do now? Jeanetta was a murderess and must be punished, but the girl's story was unlikely to stand up. She read my thoughts. "You needn't fear, your beautiful noble lady is safe," she said bitterly. "I am an innkeeper's daughter and she is a high and mighty baroness. It won't take long for my accusing voice to be silenced forever, my lord."

"You and she shall both have justice," I promised.

"And who will be my judge? Who is the king's justiciar at Shrewsbury now?"

"The newly belted earl of Shrewsbury. Gerald Talbot. My lady's father," I agreed with a sigh. "He knows his daughter, and he will know the truth, but I doubt if he would condemn her to death, no matter what she did."

"So he will condemn me instead," she wept.

"I think not," I told her. "He will not send his own daughter to the gallows, but I know him and I don't think he is so unjust as to send an innocent girl in her place. You may have more hope than you think, Kate, but by claiming sanctuary here instead of placing yourself on trial by the law you seem to be confessing guilt. The prospect of death didn't frighten you once, years ago when you sought justice for your father. Will you not take that risk again now, in order to get justice for yourself and your murdered lady? Will you not come with me now and confront the murderess, accuse her to her face? We may find evidence which supports your version of events."

"You will accuse your own wife?" she asked incredulously.

"I will see justice done."

XXII.

When we reached Whitewood I sent a rider to the high sheriff of Hereford, Sir Germyn Parseval, and I sent servants to find my wife and bid her attend me in the hall. She was not in her chamber, and I entered it with Tommy and Jack Fletcher. Ashes smouldered in the grate, an unusual thing for this time of year. Tommy knelt down to study them. "What burned?" I asked tersely.

"Can't tell," he said. "Funny smell, though." He picked up the ashes and rubbed them between his fingers. "Tallow," he pronounced. "A very hot fire, tallow. Consumes just about anything."

"Such as a bloodstained dress?" asked Jack, white-faced.

"Mayhap," said Tommy. "John, let us search her things. Would you know if any of her dresses are missing?"

"Ordinarily, yes, but these let-out smocks she wears while great with child all look alike to me." We searched the chambers but could find nothing incriminating. When we returned to the hall we were debating what to do when Jeanetta entered, her face a mask which tightened perceptibly when she saw Kate Balstrode standing with us, pale and nervous. She knew that we had found nothing to confirm her story, and she was trembling with fear.

"Where have you been, madam?" I asked my wife in an icy voice.

"I was taking a walk, my lord," she said evenly.

"And disposing of the dagger with which you murdered Melisande Grey?" I shouted. We all stared at her, but she stood there calm and proud and unperturbed.

"What an absurd idea!" she disclaimed airily. "If I understand the tenants and the servants aright you have the murderess here, that red-headed vixen. See, she still has her poor mistress's blood on her gown!"

"No, my lady!" cried Kate in terror, falling to her knees, "You have taken poor Melisande's life, but I beg you, do not take mine!"

"You accuse me, you wretched little tart?" laughed Jeanetta, her lip curling. "Here is double iniquity. My husband has already confessed to me how you lured him into infidelity to his sacred marriage vows, and it is obvious that you murdered your mistress to free yourself of servitude and now you seek to remove me from the scene with your lies so that you might become John's paramour. An arrangement he would never consent to, of course," she added with delicate irony, "Since he is a notoriously honourable man." I gasped in horror, for unwittingly I had given her the perfect cover for her crime and placed poor Kate in grave jeopardy by giving her a motive to kill Melisande.

"Perhaps you would care to explain why you burned a dress?" demanded Tommy, taking a wild shot in the dark.

"What dress?" said Jeanetta mockingly. "I lit a fire in the grate because I feared a chill, and I must take care of myself in my condition."

"She's got it pegged!" moaned Tommy. "You'll never get a true bill on her, John. All the more so because King Edward is certain to insist on scrupulous due process, just to show how much things have changed in England since Margaret ruled." I raged inwardly at the irony of it all, of having fought for two years to re-establish the rule of law only to have it shelter the slayer of the one I loved most in the world.

Father Peter entered with Sir Germyn Parseval, and I took the sheriff aside and spoke with him earnestly for some time, along with Tommy Caxton. When we approached the two women again, Sir Germyn took Kate's arm, but his eyes were gentle and sympathetic. "Katherine Balstrode, I must perforce seize your person and hold you for arraignment on a charge of petty treason, to wit the murder of a gentlewoman by a servant. But having conferred with Lord John here and having had the particulars of this matter made known to me, " he went on, pointedly avoiding looking at Jeanetta, "I will therefore petition the king's justiciar, my lord earl of Shrewsbury, that you be tried not by King's Bench but by ordeal."

Kate gasped and stared at us in horror. The ordeal for women was to grasp a red-hot plowshare with both hands and walk ten paces, then say "God save the king!" three times. If an accused girl or woman did this she was judged innocent of her crime, but if she dropped the plowshare or fumbled the words she was dragged to the gallows and hanged immediately. "I am betrayed!" she cried miserably. "You promised me justice, Lord John!"

"Nay, nay, calm yourself," I told her. "Kate, do you know why ordeal has fallen into disuse in these times? Because so corrupt and uncertain did the procedure become that when accused persons with friends in high places picked up the hot iron or plunged their hands into the boiling oil, the iron and the oil were but lukewarm, by some strange happenstance. And you shall have friends in high places, Kate, that I swear to you. I shall petition the king himself to intervene in your favour if need be. You must be arrested and tried because we have no proof to convict the real killer, but I promise you upon my honour that I shall never allow you to suffer for this crime which you never committed.

And," I concluded, staring hard at Jeanetta, "As my wife has said, I am a notoriously honorable man." Parseval led her away, and we were left alone with the murderess.

"Madam," I aid coldly, "You are certain to escape the law's justice, but it is my intention to ensure that you never escape the calumny of the realm's nobility. Tommy, before you leave I will give you letters in my own hand for transmission to divers lords in the Midlands shires. Jack shall ride to Shrewsbury tomorrow bearing a full account of this horror to her father, and when Parliament convenes in November I shall speak personally of it to the king."

"Revile me as you will," said Jeanetta icily, "I shall never fear to look any lord or lady in this land in the eye."

"No doubt," muttered Father Peter. "And that is what is so terrible. Lady, have you no sense at all of your sin?"

She smiled at him mockingly. "Of course, Father. Will you hear my confession?" All of us stood appalled at this blasphemy. Father Peter abruptly crossed himself and fled from the hall as from a thing accursed. Jack Fletcher stared at her.

"By all that is holy, Jenny, what have you become?" he whispered. "Do you know how I worshipped you when we were growing up together in this house, how proud I was to share even a bastard's portion of blood with you?" Abruptly he spat full in her face and then staggered towards the door like a drunken man.

"Will you allow a peasant to do that to your wife?" shouted Jeanetta in fury.

"That peasant is your brother, and had God been juster with us all he would have been born on the right side of the blanket and you would have been born down with the drabs where you belong," I growled. "My only regret is that he did that before I could." I grabbed her by one arm into my study and slammed and latched the door.

"Are you going to whip me again?" she asked. "John, the baby..."

"*Silence!*" I shouted, slapping her face. She reeled back and stared at me and I at her, as if I were seeing her for the first time. "Are you a demon, Jeanetta?" I asked softly, in wonder. "Are you something sent from hell itself to make me suffer for some sin I cannot imagine?"

"You still care for her! You still love her!" she cried out.

"Of course I do! Whatever made you think that I had changed?" I demanded. Then it hit me, and even before I heard her reply I understood what I had done.

"You...you told me about that servant girl," she stammered. "I thought that meant you no longer loved her, and I could kill her without making you hate me..." Her hands were

trembling and her voice was cracked. She grasped my hands tightly and searched my face. "You do hate me now, don't you?" she whispered feverishly. "Oh, God, no, I've killed her and now you hate me and I can't bring her back..."

"It is I," I muttered, collapsing onto a settle. "I killed Melisande with my own stupidity." I was going mad. I knew it. I could feel my sanity slipping. The whole thing was beginning to catch up to me. Melisande dead...dead?...*no, no, not dead...never dead...*I wanted to scream and shout and cackle with laughter, draw my sword and slice and smash and splatter blood and rend flesh. My sword....I drew it slowly from the sheath, gazed lovingly at the lithe length of purest Toledo steel, weighted and balanced for the dealing of death. I advanced upon her and her faced blanched as white as snow in terror. "You are post-haste for hell, bitch," I told her, shoving her to her knees and gathering her hair into my hands, forcing her head forward to expose her neck. She crossed herself and said quietly,

"The child I carry is innocent, my lord. I beg you for his life, not mine." Sanity returned to me in a rush, and I cast the blade from me in horror, appalled at what I had seen in myself just as much as what Jeanetta had done.

"I won't kill you now," I told her. "Not while my mind is in flames like this. I will kill you later, but when I do it will be a calm and considered thing, and it won't be until after the child is born. You have my word."

"Now I know how she felt just before she died," whispered Jeanetta. "How thrilling that I made her feel like that." I shook my head; no depravity of hers could shock me any more. "What are you going to do, John?"

"After the baby is born I will give you a chance to leave. I owe you that much. The baby will stay here. Go to your father or whoever will have you, go become a whore on the streets of London, do what you want. If you stay after the child's birth I know I will kill you."

"No," she said steadily. "I won't leave you. You are my husband and this is my home. If it means death, then I will die, and there is no man on earth who has more right to take my life or at whose hands I would rather meet my end. I'm yours, John, to keep or to kill."

"I'm not going to change my mind, Jen. If you are within my reach after our last child is born, you will die."

"If that is your will, then I accept it," she said.

"Until then I am taking you to the tower room. You will have a comfortable bed and plenty of food and drink, for the child's sake, but I am going to chain you to the wall like an animal, which is what you are, a dangerous beast unfit to be among people. After the child is born and taken out of the room I will wall you up inside and let you die slowly. I

will make sure that a number of rats are entombed with you, and I will stand below the tower and listen for the sounds you make when those rats become hungry."

"As you wish," she said steadily.

"Are you mad, woman?" I demanded, staring at her.

"Don't you understand yet, John?" she said, her eyes brimming with tears that coursed down her face.

"Dear God," I whispered, shaken to the depths of my soul.

"You made me cry again," she sniffled. "John, you have some time between now and the birth of the child. During that time, please think long and deeply, and if there is anything at all I can do, by living or by dying, which will gain back for me the smallest particle of your heart, tell me, and it will be done. I will accept whatever it is that you decide, John, so long as you know you really want it."

"I know what I want, Jen," I told her. "I want you to confess to your crime. I want you to remove all suspicion from that girl in there whom you falsely accused. I want to stand in a crowd at Ludlow and watch you die bobbing and gasping and choking at the end of a rope. Are you willing to give me that?"

"Will you love me again if I do?" she whispered.

"No. But I will respect and honor your courage, and I will always be thankful you relieved me of the sin of murder." I looked at her. "It's the best I can do, Jen."

She nodded. "Then it shall be done. Send the sheriff and his clerk to me after a while, and I will tell them everything."

She ascended to the tower room calmly, without trembling or faltering. Before I closed and barred the door I could not resist asking her one question. "Madam, will you tell me one thing? Before you slew Melisande Grey, what were her last words on this earth?"

Jeanetta raised her head and looked at me strangely. "That, sir, you shall never know," she said with finality.

In the dark October twilight I sat upon the stone steps of Whitewood, toying with a half-full goblet of wine and staring off into the distance through the misty park. With me were a group of friends, Tommy Caxton, Kate, and her brother Sir Robin as well. Robin now held the manor of Canfield from me. The midwife appeared at my side. "Well?" I demanded of her.

"A son, Lord John," she said nervously. "A fine healthy little lad. But my lord, your wife..." She ran down, unable to continue.

"Dead?" I asked.

"Aye, lord. There was no real reason for it. She wasn't bleeding all that much, nothing burst inside that I could tell."

"I half expected it. I don't think she wanted to survive the childbed merely to perish on the scaffold in a few weeks' time."

"I don't know about that, my lord," said the midwife timorously.

"Eh?"

"Before she died left you this." She handed me a parchment note. I opened it and read:

My husband:

I don't think I'm going to make it. Pray God our child does. I am sorry to cheat the county out of a fine spectacle. I was rather looking forward to it myself. The gallows would be far more dramatic an exit than bleeding to death on this straw. I would have taken my leave of the world young and strong, with my head up and my eyes open in the sun, not staring at these stone walls around me. I've spent my time up here planning an impressive exit. First, I was going to cut my hair and braid the hangman a noose from it. A poetic touch, that ought to have been good for a ballad or two. Then I was going to make a lovely low-cut mourning gown of black velvet to show off my figure while I did the dance. The world would have remembered me.

Now you can marry that red-headed slut. Keep her out of the tower, though. I'm going to haunt this chamber, and I'll go for her throat if she ever comes up here.

My sweet friend, this whole life of ours was always my choice and my doing, not yours. Let me pay the reckoning for it. Try to forgive me, or if you can't, at least try not to hate me too harshly. If our son lives I charge you with my dying wish: do not make him or Cecily suffer for my sake. I am guilty, they are innocent, and so are you. Don't punish them and don't punish yourself. My soul is yours forever, my love for you shall live through all time, and in whatever flesh and name and land where in ages to come you walk, I shall be there. Farewell. - Jen.

"Vixen!" I chuckled softly. "Thank you, good dame. You shall be rewarded." After she had gone the others left me as well. Kate entered the hall last, and turned and looked into my eyes for a moment. Nothing was said, for it would not have been meet, but we both knew that Whitewood would not long lack a lady of the manor nor my children a mother.

Oh, Jen, I would not have had it thus! I thought bitterly. *Would to God I could turn back time to those days at Raby when we knew not what was to come!* "Farewell, my sweet friend!" I whispered dismally.

Then suddenly I stood up and listened intently. Had I heard something, a small sound far away? It came again, a voice I knew well. "*Farewell, sweet friend!*" Then there was nothing but the dreary rustling of the wind through the eaves. I called her name once, then again, but I could not say why I called, for I knew that she was well away and gone, far beyond the reach and sound of my voice.

= = =

Copyright (C) 1999 - [Harold A. Covington](#)