

For fans of
Philippa
Gregory

Mistress^{to}
the Crown

ISOLDE
MARTYN

Isolde Martyn

Mistress to the Crown

Аннотация

A Royal Mistress Elizabeth Lambard was to become known as the notorious whore, 'Jane Shore' — lover of King Edward IV. The day Lord Hastings came into her husband's shop, Elizabeth saw a vital opportunity to separate herself from her dull, impotent husband, William Shore. The handsome stranger might be her only chance to partake in the dance of desire and annul her marriage. She did not, however, foresee her introduction to the King of England, nor her future at his side...and in his bed. From this unlikely alliance, Elizabeth is granted severance from Shore, and flourishes due to the Yorkist King's admiration. But her new position comes at a terrible price — her family shun her, the people of London label her a harlot and the White Queen's family are powerful enemies. So long as King Edward and Hastings stay close, Elizabeth is safe. But her beloved Ned falls ill and Richard III's supporters gather. Can Elizabeth's beauty keep her out of trouble? Or will it lead her to the hangman's noose? 'Rich and vivid... Passion, drama, glamour and wit turn this story of a woman who challenges her world into an unforgettable experience.' —ANNA CAMPBELL International bestselling historical romance author

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REVIEW QUOTES FOR MISTRESS TO THE CROWN

‘Isolde Martyn’s *Mistress to the Crown* beautifully spins the real history of a fascinating woman into a compelling novel of passion, suspense, and, amazingly, a happy ending for one of England’s most famous royal mistresses. Marvellous!

— *Mary Jo Putney, author of No Longer a Gentleman*

‘Rich and vivid as a gorgeous medieval tapestry, Isolde Martyn’s *Mistress to the Crown* enchants from first page to last. Passion, drama, glamour and wit turn this story of a woman who challenges her world into an unforgettable experience.’

— *Anna Campbell, international best-selling historical romance author*

‘What joy to find a novel that blends sound research with a love story that, on its own, would attract a wealth of romance readers. Isolde Martyn links her skill as an award-winning novelist with her depth of historical knowledge to reveal the life and loves of Elizabeth Lambard (Mistress Shore), and presents her as one of the strongest, most accomplished, lovely and lovable women of the fifteenth century. It’s fact and fiction at its best, a must-have for your bookshelves.’

— *Julia Redlich, former fiction editor of Woman’s Day; secretary of the New South Wales branch of the Richard III Society*

‘A richly textured historical tale of a fascinating woman with a surprisingly modern determination to live life on her own terms.’

— *Anne Gracie, international best-selling Regency Romance author*

Mistress to the Crown

Isolde Martyn



www.millsandboon.co.uk

About the Author

ISOLDE MARTYN is originally from England and has an Honours degree in History, with a specialisation in the Wars of the Roses.

She ended up in Australia after meeting a rather nice geologist at a bus stop. Since then she has worked as a university tutor, an archivist and for six years as a researcher in historical geography at Macquarie University. She spent a year researching sedition in early colonial Australia and then became heavily involved in the Bicentenary History project and researched all the towns in Australia for the Bicentenary volume *Events and Places*.

Her more recent career was as a senior book editor with a major international publisher before taking up writing full time.

Isolde enjoys using turbulent historical events as the backdrop of her books. Her debut novel was the first book by an Australian writer to win the prestigious RITA award in the USA and her first two novels have won the 'Romantic Book of the Year Award' in Australia.

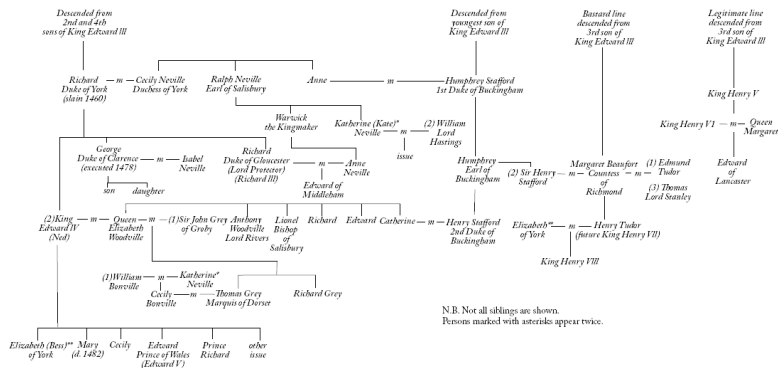
She is a former chair of the Richard III Society and Vice-Chair of the Plantagenet Society of Australia, which she co-founded with five other enthusiasts twelve years ago.

MISTRESS TO THE CROWN is her fifth novel.

For my cousins, Rita and Yvonne, and for Simone, who was once my youngest reader and who

overcame illness with such courage

The Plantagenets and Related Families in the Late Fifteenth Century



N.B. Not all siblings are shown.
Persons marked with asterisks appear twice.

Characters appearing in this novel

Nearly all these persons are historical. Where the given name of a person is unknown and it has been necessary to create one, these are marked with one asterisk. Fictional characters are marked with two asterisks.

THE CITIZENS

ELIZABETH LAMBARD

known to history as 'Jane' Shore;
married to William Shore

WILLIAM SHORE

Elizabeth's husband, a mercer,
originally from Derby

JOHN LAMBARD

Elizabeth's father, a London mercer
and alderman for Farringdon; Sheriff
of London in 1460-61

ANNE

Elizabeth's mother, daughter of
merchant grocer, Robert Marshall

ROBERT }
JACK }
WILL }

Elizabeth's brothers

JOHN AGARD

Shore's brother-in-law from Foston,
Derbyshire

MARGERY* SHAA }
ALYS* RAWSON }

Elizabeth's friends, daughters of
London merchants

HUGH PADDESLEY }
SHELLEY }
COLET }
RALPH JOSSELYN THE YOUNGER }

guildsmen and friends of William Shore

EDMUND SHAA

Margery's father, a merchant
goldsmith; later knighted; Lord Mayor
of London in 1483

JULIANA SHAA	Edmund's wife and Margery's mother
WILLIAM CATESBY	lawyer and councillor to various noblemen
ISABEL LUBBE** HIKKE** ROGER* YOUNG	servants to Elizabeth

THE COURT

WILLIAM, LORD HASTINGS	Lord Chamberlain, Lord Lieutenant of Calais and Master of the Royal Mint; King Edward IV's close friend
KING EDWARD IV ('NED')	Yorkist King of England
QUEEN ELIZABETH WOODVILLE	Edward's queen, daughter of the Duchess of Bedford and formerly wed to Sir John Grey
THOMAS GREY ('TOM') MARQUIS OF DORSET	the Queen's eldest son by her first marriage, betrothed to Lord Hastings' stepdaughter, Cecily
SIR RICHARD GREY	the Queen's son by her first marriage
PRINCESS ELIZABETH ('BESS') PRINCESS MARY	King Edward's elder daughters
EDWARD, PRINCE OF WALES	King Edward's eldest son and heir (the future King Edward V), domiciled in Ludlow
PRINCE RICHARD ('DICKON')	youngest son of King Edward
GEORGE, DUKE OF CLARENCE RICHARD, DUKE OF GLOUCESTER	King Edward's younger brothers, both married to daughters of Warwick the Kingmaker
HARRY, DUKE OF BUCKINGHAM	last lawful heir of the House of Lancaster and cousin to King Edward and his brothers

THOMAS LYNOM	Crown Solicitor to King Richard III
ANTHONY WOODVILLE, LORD RIVERS	the Queen's eldest brother, tutor to the Prince of Wales at Ludlow
SIR EDWARD BRAMPTON	Portuguese friend of King Edward
SIR EDWARD WOODVILLE SIR RICHARD WOODVILLE LIONEL WOODVILLE, BISHOP OF SALISBURY	the Queen's younger brothers
BRYAN MYDDELTON	
CECILY NEVILLE, DUCHESS OF YORK	
JOHN MORTON, BISHOP OF ELY JAMES GOLDWELL, BISHOP OF NORWICH	

OTHERS MENTIONED

RICHARD, DUKE OF YORK	King Edward's father, slain at Wakefield 1460
KING HENRY VI	former King of England, died in the Tower of London in 1471
QUEEN MARGARET	imprisoned Lancastrian Queen of England, wife to Henry VI; daughter of René of Anjou
WARWICK THE KINGMAKER	King Edward's cousin, died at Battle of Barnet 1471
KATHERINE ('KATE') NEVILLE	wife to Lord Hastings and sister to Warwick
LADY CECILY BONVILLE	stepdaughter to Lord Hastings; betrothed to Thomas Grey, Marquis of Dorset
KING LOUIS XI	King of France

DR WESTBURY	Provost of the College of Our Lady at Eton
ROBERT STILLINGTON, BISHOP OF BATH AND WELLS THOMAS BURDETT DR STACEY BLAKE	} supporters of George, Duke of Clarence
MARGARET BURDETT MARION STACEY	wives of accused men
MARGARET ('Meg') DOWAGER DUCHESS OF BURGUNDY	King Edward's youngest sister
GERARD CANIZIANI	Medici banker resident in London
PETER BEAUPRE	Clerk of the Green Cloth
THOMAS KEMPE, BISHOP OF LONDON	
JOHN MATHEW	mercier; Sheriff of London 1483
THOMAS MYLLINGTON, BISHOP OF HEREFORD JOHN WOODMAN, BISHOP OF ROSS WILLIAM WESTECARRE, BISHOP OF SIDON	} Judges at the Court of Arches
THOMAS, LORD STANLEY	Steward of the King's Household; married to Margaret Beaufort; stepfather to Henry Tudor
LADY MARGARET	wife to Lord Stanley and mother of Henry Tudor
HENRY TUDOR	exile in Brittany; claimant to English crown

Maiden

Soper's Lane, the City of London, 1463

At fourteen, we make mistakes. I had been a fool to come to this old man's chamber on my own, but I was desperate for legal advice on how to annul my marriage. He had told me he was a former proctor, a church lawyer – exactly what I needed – and he had seemed as friendly as a kindly grandfather when I spoke to him after Mass on Sunday. But now he was tonguing his cheek as he eyed my body, and dancing his fingers slowly on the table between us. Behind him, in the corner, I could see his half-made bed.

I would not scream, I decided, slowly rising to my feet. Shrieking for help would mean my name would be all over the city by suppertime. No, I had to deal with this on my own.

'Thank you, sir, I shall pass your counsel on to my friend, but now I have to go.' My voice emerged creakily. I had meant to sound brisk.

He smiled, nastily now, no longer bothering to mask his purpose. Both of us had been lying. In truth, I was 'the friend' who desired advice, and his legal counsel was not 'free'; it came with a fee that was still to be exacted.

'If you are desperate, Mistress Shore,' he declared, rising heavily to his feet, 'you'll be willing to please me.'

Yes, I was desperate for an annulment, but I had rather be hanged than 'please' this revolting old goat. My maidenhead was

intact and I intended to keep it that way.

‘I made no such bargain,’ I said, fisting my hands within the folds of my skirts, cursing I had not brought a bodkin to defend myself.

‘We won’t go all the way because that would spoil the evidence,’ he wheezed, fumbling at the ties beneath his tunic. ‘Some fondling will do. *For now.*’

‘Oh, just fondling,’ I said with a pretend smile of relief. ‘I thought you meant—’

I rushed to the door but the latch tongue stuck. He grabbed my left forearm, dragging me back.

This was the moment, or never. I swung my right fist with all the fury I possessed into his face. I heard something crunch. He went staggering back and crashed against the table, the bright blood spurting from his nostrils. That and the toppling inkpots would spoil his clothes, or so I hoped as I ran down the stairs.

It was realising the enormity of my folly that rearranged the contents of my stomach once I reached the street. I did manage to hide my face as I retched, and the moment I could stand upright, I ran past the tenements up to Cheapside, and with a gasp of relief, plunged into the chaos of carts, pigs and people. My mind was still in panic. What if the old man threatened to blab to my husband or to my wealthy father?

My slow progress through the crowd calmed my shakiness. I felt concealed. Outsiders might be afraid of London cutpurses, but this wonderful, raucous hub of noise was my neighbourhood,

safer to me than any quieter lane. I pushed further along to where a tight press of people was clogging the thoroughfare and wriggled in amongst them. In their midst, a hosier's apprentice was standing on a barrow. I had heard his silver-tongued babble before. He was good.

'The best price in Cheapside,' the lad was yelling, waving a pair of frothy scarlet garters. 'Just imagine your wife's legs in these, sir.' Laughter rumbled around me. His gaze scanned our faces. 'And what about the jays and robin redbreasts among you sparrows?' he challenged, flourishing a pair of men's hose – one leg pea green, the other violet, and then his cheeky stare sauntered back to my face and slid lower.

Lordy! Squinting downwards at the gap in my cloak, I realised what the proctor had glimpsed as well – a woman's breasts straining against an outgrown gown. And it was not just on the outside that my body was changing. I knew that. Dear God, that was why I needed the urgent annulment. I was an apple almost ripe for plucking, and my husband, Shore, was watching – waiting – like a hungry orchard thief.

I gave the apprentice a hands-off glare, tugged my cloak tightly across my front and, aware that the proctor's neighbours might still raise the alarm, I determined to stay where I was with every sense alert.

No hue-and-cry was coming from the direction of Soper's Lane and I said a silent prayer of thanks for that. Maybe the foul old fellow was as fearful for his reputation as I was for mine.

That welcome thought made my shoulders relax. And, apart from learning that men of all ages were not to be trusted, I had at least gleaned one piece of useful advice. The proctor had told me that ‘my friend’ needed to have her case heard by the Court of Arches, the Archbishop of Canterbury’s especial court for hearing divorce petitions. St Mary-le-Bow, the church, which housed the court on weekdays, was just a few moments’ walk back along Cheapside. Perhaps the Almighty was watching over me, after all. If I went to St Mary’s straight away ...

‘Pretty mistress? Hey? Anybody home?’ Lapis-blue garters pranced before my eyes. The glib-tongued apprentice had singled me out again. ‘Pet, you’re not listening,’ he declared with feigned dismay, reaching out to tweak my nose. ‘Come, give your husband a surp—’

‘Exactly my thoughts!’ I exclaimed fervently and elbowed my way out.

One of St Anthony’s wretched sows blundered along in front of me, as though she had some similar mission. At least she cleared my path.

St Mary-le-Bow lay almost a stone’s throw from the alley off Bow Lane where I now lived. Richard Lambard, my grandfather, was buried beneath the church’s nave so that was why my family sometimes worshipped there to pray for his soul. My brothers used to tease me that the steeple was haunted, and if you stood in the churchyard for long enough, you were sure to see a chunk of masonry fall from the roof, and that was Grandfather’s ghost

making mischief.

To my relief, the doors of St Mary's stood open. I crossed myself and prayed to Our Lady the Virgin to give me strength. After all, Our Lady's marriage had been arranged, too, and I doubt she had cared for St Joseph at first, especially when he was so angry about the Angel Gabriel.

I could, would, do this now – go in, swear on the Gospels that I had been wed against my will and that the marriage had not been consummated. They might insist upon a midwife to examine me, but my body's evidence would prove I was no liar. Of course, I'd need to move back to my parents' house and I could not be sure Father would take me in; but first things first. With a deep breath I grabbed up my skirts. Freedom was just steps away.

But I was wrong. A pikestaff dropped obliquely across my path. I had not noticed the sergeant on duty.

'I have business inside, sir,' I announced, imitating my mother's tone when she addressed the household. 'It's a matter of urgency.'

The soldier jerked a thumb at a parchment nailed on the door. 'Plaintiff or defendant, mistress? What time is your hearing?'

'I ... ah ... er ...'

He propped the pikestaff against the wall and shook his head at me. 'The rule is you cannot go in unless you are on today's list.'

'But I need a marriage annulment, sir. By the end of this week. Today, if possible.'

'Bless me, young woman,' he clucked. 'Have you been sleeping

in some toadstool ring? Don't you know it takes months, sometimes years, to get a hearing?"

Months? Years? My first monthly flow might be only days away.

'They'll understand the matter is urgent,' I assured him, wondering if I could duck beneath his arm, but he was no fool.

'Listen, first you find a proctor to write your petition, then it has to go all the way to Rome, and the Pope himself must be told of it. His Holiness may say you have a case to be heard or he may not.'

'But I do. Oh, please, let me through.'

'How old are you?'

'Almost fifteen, sir.'

'Fourteen then. Well, pardon me for asking, but does this husband of yours cuff you around when he's had a bellyful of ale?' He peered down, inspecting my face for bruises. 'Is he unkind to you?'

'No, sir.' This was becoming embarrassing. Next he would ask whether Shore had lain with me. Instead he said, 'Does your father know you've come here?' And that angered me.

'No, sir, this is my business. I am quite capable of handling it.'

'I can see that.' I could tell he was trying not to laugh. 'So, who is to pay the legal fees?' He cocked his head towards the door. 'None of the carrion crows in there will take your part unless you pay 'em. They can't live on air, you know. It's business, see.'

How naïve of me. I thought it a matter of justice.

Dismayed, I stared down into the churchyard, biting back my tears, looking so forlorn, I daresay, that the soldier creaked down upon his haunches and took my gloved hands. ‘Give your marriage time,’ he advised, with a kindly tug on the end of my blonde plait that must have been showing beneath my coif. ‘Lovely girl like you can twirl your husband round your little finger if you play it right. Now you go home and make him his supper, eh?’

Someone cleared his throat impatiently behind me. Three churchmen were waiting to pass. My self-appointed counsel snapped up to standing, his chin turning a dull red beneath his stubble. ‘Go home an’ forget all about this, eh?’ he muttered after he had waved them through.

Forget? The rest of my life is staked out unless I cut the ropes.

How easily Life can flick us. Like an idle boy’s fingernail against a tiny fly. We are so fragile, our destinies changed so easily by a quarrel, a smile, a death – or marriage.

I was twelve years old – that’s two years ago – when I was wed to William Shore. He was twenty-six and already a freeman of the Mercers’ Guild when he became my suitor. My father considered him an honest man with good prospects.

Once I reached thirteen, I was sent to live with him. I found him kindly, but whenever he stepped inside the door at the end of the day he seemed to bring a weariness that settled like a dust upon my chatter. He still does. I have no idea how to engage him save to inquire dutifully about his business, and most times he

will not speak of it. Nor does he wish me to play music or read to him, save from the scriptures.

He is dull, dull, dull. I don't mean like a numbskull, but dull like an old coin dug up by the city wall. Maybe some other bride might have brushed the earth away and shined him up, but I do not have that urge, and the thought of him taking my maidenhead makes me shudder. Shore likes the way he is; it is me he desires to mint to his liking, but I'm not a yes-sir-please-you-sir girl.

He chose me for my looks and because I was a Lambard, and he did everything wrong. He and his brother-in-law from Derbyshire, John Agard, *inspected* me before I even met them. I don't mean they stared at me across the pews or during a sermon in St Paul's Yard. No, really *inspected*. I awoke one January morning to find my night robe up around my thighs and the sheet drawn back. It is quite commonplace for parents to permit prospective husbands to view a daughter naked, but how demeaning.

The bargaining was done swiftly after that. Both Shore and my father were in haste to shake hands on the contract. Shore saw himself acquiring a useful patron, because, besides being a wealthy merchant and influential in the Mercers' Guild, my father, John Lambard, is Alderman for Farringdon, which contains St Paul's Cathedral and the rich abbeys of the Franciscan and Dominican Friars. What's more, Father was also Sheriff of London that year, second only to the Lord Mayor. Anne, my mother, is the daughter of Robert Marshall, a reputable

merchant of the Grocers' Guild.

What Shore did not know when he offered for me was that Father had loaned a huge sum to the Duke of York for the war against Queen Margaret, and when the news reached us that her grace had just nailed the duke's head up on a gatehouse at York, and her army was marching south to enter London, my father was in terror of his life. If the Queen found out which aldermen had lent money to the duke's cause, it was good odds she would execute them for high treason – hanging, drawing and quartering – or, at the least, exact huge fines.

Father was in haste to provide for us children before all his possessions were seized. He arranged apprenticeships for my two older brothers, Robert and Jack. My younger brother, Will, was promised to the church. I was the only daughter and Father feared if he did not find me a husband straight away, he never would.

Do not think I did not protest. I wanted to be apprenticed like my brothers. I wanted to be the first woman to sit on the Council of Aldermen, to have my name in the Great Chronicle of London, maybe become the first woman Lord Mayor, but no one would listen and the rod across my shoulders was a painful argument.

Well, my father has not had his innards ripped out on Tower Hill. The Duke of York's son, handsome Edward, has seized the throne, driven Queen Margaret into exile and locked up old, mad King Henry in the Tower of London. (He has even outraged everyone by marrying a steward's daughter.) Father's business

is prospering, although he is disappointed not to have received a knighthood, but he carries on his life as a highly renowned alderman, while I am stuck in this loveless marriage.

I believe there is a way to unlock the chains of wedlock, even for a woman. I won't give up. I won't. I won't.

Lover

I Bow Lane, London, 1475

How easily Life can flick us. Like an idle boy's fingernail against a tiny fly. We are so fragile, our destinies changed so easily by a marriage, a death, a quarrel or a smile. I have been waiting a long time for Life to edge his finger close again.

You see, I am twenty-five now and still tied to William Shore despite all my efforts to break free. At times I have considered murder and adultery, but I have resisted both, despite immense temptation to do the former and insufficient enticement to enjoy the latter.

My mind aches for challenge. When my father was sheriff of London, our family house was ever full of esteemed and knowledgeable men, and their talk at table was of kings and dukes, of battles and parliaments, of laws and verdicts, trade and strategy. I learned what went on at the Council of Aldermen, the quarrels between the guilds, the jostling for advancement, the give and take between the city fathers and the King. I miss that rich discourse. When Shore bids fellow liverymen to dine with us, such matters are only for the men; we wives are banished to the parlour. I mean no disrespect, but much of the women's talk is about their children. And I am childless. Oh, you might look at me and notice no discontent. I am like some tree with ring upon ring of thick armour around my heart, waiting for the woodcutter.

But there is a rainbow promise in the sky. Shore has become impotent, and at last he has agreed that we should no longer share a bed. I also have a little money of my own coming in because he has grudgingly allowed me to set up a workshop of silkwomen, and I am going to save up until I can find an honest lawyer to present my case to his Holiness in Rome. Yes, there is hope.

That was my thinking as I climbed onto a set of steps behind the counter in Shore's shop. So thankful to be alone, I was looking forward to making a display of the jewelled girdles that my silkwomen had finished the day before. Outside, a fierce April shower was cleansing the street so there would be no customers until the sun showed her countenance again, and I could take my time.

Behind the counter, I draped four falls of fabric from the uppermost shelf. The ruby velvet and the blue-black brocade, wefted with silver thread, were borrowed from my family's shop in Silver Street. The other two were Brunette and Russet, the humdrum fabrics that my husband sold.

I had already arranged the most expensive girdle around the brocade in semblance of a noblewoman's waist. It was so beautiful – a sliver of silver samite stitched with tiny seed pearls and completed with a trio of teardrop pearls set at either end. By contrast, the belt that I took up next was a plain, silk cord, but its shining blue would enhance the brown cloth behind it like the flash of azure on a mallard's wings.

I was concentrating so diligently with the pinning that the

sudden sound of someone's cough nearly toppled me. On the other side of the counter stood a man in expensive apparel and he looked to be enjoying a view of my ankles. Can ankles blush?

'I beg your pardon, sir,' I exclaimed with a gasp of surprise. 'I did not hear the bell.'

'I did not ring it.' His voice was utterly beautiful. What's more, he had a smile to make my toes curl. Not lascivious, but as though we shared a jest and the rest of the world could go and be hanged.

I descended as gracefully as I could and smoothed my tawny skirts, trying to glance up at him with modesty when I so longed to stare. I knew Shore supplied several noblemen with livery cloth for their households, but such men never came to the shop.

A brooch of pearls and peridot lit the black velvet of this stranger's cap and he wore a fine murrey riding cloak loosely cordled at his throat. Raindrops showered to the floor as he shrugged the cloak off and laid it across the end of the counter against the wall. I was intrigued to notice that the velvet of his slate-blue cote was flattened across each shoulder. This was a man who usually wore a heavy collar of great office.

I curtsied low. 'How may I help you, my lord?'

He did not correct my address of him. That smile again. 'Sir Edward Brampton has recommended your silken belts,' he murmured, looking up at the samite and pearls. 'I desire to buy one for my stepdaughter. She is almost sixteen and soon to be married.'

Well, I wished her happiness in her marriage, but more than

that, I wished myself in her shoes, able to feast in this man's company.

'May I show you some that may be more appealing to her youth, my lord?' I fetched out half a dozen belts and laid them in a row for his consideration.

He did not inquire the prices like most would. Instead, he seemed genuinely interested in the craft and beauty. Drawing off his gloves, he set them at the end of the counter beside his cloak. I was curious to observe his hands.

Look behind the outward show, my father always advises every new apprentice. Observe a man's fingernails when he takes off his gloves to feel the quality of the cloth you are selling. See if his nails be clean beneath and filed smooth. A rogue may dress like a lord but his hands will show the truth.

This man's nails were clean, buffed crescents, and his hands would have thrilled a sculptor for they were robust yet slender, unblemished by the sun. A flat diamond adorned his third finger. It was one of the largest gemstones I had ever glimpsed.

Together we peered over the merchandise, our foreheads almost touching. I could smell the imber-gres and chypre essence this man was wearing and, oh, it stirred my senses, and I prayed that no other customers would venture in.

'You do not sell expensive cloth, mistress,' he observed, glancing round at the bales leaning against the walls. 'Who supplies the jewels, then, for these belts?'

'The goldsmith, Alderman Edmund Shaa. He has also given

my silkwomen a workroom so they may be together.’ Then lest my business relationship be misconstrued, I added swiftly, ‘He is the father of a good friend of mine, my lord, and this is a new venture on my part. I am praying it will succeed.’

‘I am sure it will,’ he replied courteously. ‘I am well acquainted with Master Shaa. He must think very highly of you.’

I blushed, honestly delighted by his remark. I so longed to ask him who he was but courtesy bridled my tongue.

By now we had reduced his choice to three. He was taking his time in reaching a decision.

‘Forgive my impertinence, mistress,’ he said, observing the tiny wisps of blonde hair that had escaped from my cap. ‘Your hair and colouring are similar to my stepdaughter’s and she often wears that same blue there.’ He half-crossed himself, his third finger drawing a line from his heart. I glanced down at the bright blue modesty inset within my collar, and grew hot within my gown. He took up one of the belts and held it out to me. ‘If you please, it would help me if you could hold each of these in turn.’

So I obeyed, lifting each pretty girdle to gleam against the square of bluebell velvet that crossed my cleavage.

Thinking much about this encounter later, I realised it gave him plentiful opportunity to stare at my bosom, and yet at the time it did not strike me as sinful. If he was interested in more than the ornate belts, he was subtle.

‘That one!’ he declared finally. It was expensive – honey silk shot with gold, lined with taffeta and embroidered with tiny

scallop shells, each with a pearl nestling in its heart. A row of little tinkling shells weighted the ends, promising that it would hang gracefully. A lively girl would find it delightfully frivolous.

‘A good choice. I think your stepdaughter will be very pleased,’ I answered honestly as I fetched out a shiny drawstring bag to match his purchase. He watched me wind the belt into a coil and nestle it safe in a little nest of rabbit fur before I slid it inside. ‘Actually, my lord, Lambard’s shop in Silver Street has some Toulouse silk shipped in only this week that may please your stepdaughter if her marriage chest is not yet full. A bright blue embroidered with white *milles fleurs*. Toulouse dyes are fast and the quality is excellent.’

‘Lambard’s, you say?’ There was flicker of amusement.

‘Yes, my lord.’ I did not tell him John Lambard was my father. ‘And if you do visit, pray say you came from here.’

‘Thank you.’ He looked genuinely grateful, but then he teased me. ‘Now before you recommend some other delightful ways of emptying my purse, we must negotiate for this.’

Curse it, I’d forgotten to bargain. ‘Oh,’ I exclaimed, touching my left-hand fingertips to my lips in innocent confusion. The girdle had only been finished last night and I had not put a price on it. Yes, that sounds as though I was poor at selling, but in truth this man had me dazed, so delicious was his company. As if he sensed my dilemma, my handsome customer came to my rescue.

‘I see you stock murrey broadcloth here. My steward can visit tomorrow to bargain with your master.’ His words caught me on

the raw.

‘There is no master.’ I flared swiftly with a lift of chin and then thought myself an utter fool for behaving so. ‘Your pardon, my lord, my husband owns this shop but the girdles are my enterprise. You may have the belt for six shillings.’

He took the coins from his leather pouch. ‘And you are Mistress ...?’

‘Shore, my lord.’

‘Then I give you good morrow, Mistress Shore.’

I knew my duty and hastened to open the door for him. Outside, huddled beneath the lintel, were two men in livery. They arranged their lord’s cloak about him and stepped back. His groom straight away led up a fine chestnut stallion, but my noble customer was in no hurry. He stared out into the rain pensively and then turned his head to me.

‘I think perhaps I should discuss the livery cloth myself, Mistress Shore. What time may I come to speak with your husband?’

‘My lord,’ I gasped. ‘I pray you tell me which hour is convenient to you and he will oblige.’

‘Shall we say one o’clock tomorrow, then?’

‘So please you.’ I curtsied, my hand in deference across my heart. ‘And pray you, my lord, may I tell my husband your name?’

‘Hastings.’

My jaw slackened. The King’s Chamberlain, Lord Lieutenant of Calais and Master of the Royal Mint! I could not answer for

shock, but I managed to make a deeper obeisance. After he had stepped forth, I closed the door, gave a squeal of delight, grabbed up my skirts and, humming, spun around our showing room as though I had found the crock of gold at the foot of the rainbow.

Tomorrow shall be my dancing day;

I would my true love did so chance

To see the legend of my play,

To call my true love to my dance.

‘Ahem.’

Jesu save me! He stood within the shop again. What was worse, he had glimpsed me prancing like a merry five-year-old. My face must have looked mighty sheepish because he burst out laughing.

‘I-I like d-dancing,’ I explained, smoothing my skirts.

‘And does Master Shore *dance* with you?’

I shook my head.

He looked downwards, smoothing the fingers of his right hand glove to make a better fit; even that was done with a languid grace. ‘Pardon my curiosity, but is it that Master Shore will not or cannot *dance*?’ He raised his gaze slowly. There was nothing improper in his expression and yet ...

‘My husband cannot, my lord.’

‘That’s a pity. But I forget my purpose. I have other business to transact after noon tomorrow so tell your husband I shall come at ten o’ the clock. It was pleasant talking to you, Mistress Shore.’

O Heaven! I should not sleep that night. Lord Hastings’

presence lingered with me like a fragrance upon my wrist. Every phrase he had spoken I lifted gently from my memory and examined over and over again with a collector's care.

I was humming to myself when Shore returned to the shop an hour later. Even he could sense that something had changed. I must have looked more alive.

'I have good news for you,' I said triumphantly. 'You missed an important customer, no less than the King's Chamberlain.'

'Lord *Hastings*?' Shore nearly had an apoplexy on the spot. Disappointment to have missed the noble lord shone from every pore.

'Ah trust Howe treated him well?' His Derbyshire dialect was always stronger when he was upset.

'No, I served him,' I replied proudly. 'He purchased a lady's belt and he is returning to see you at ten tomorrow to bargain over the broadcl—'

'*You*?' He cut in with such disgust that I recoiled. 'By the Saints! You fool of a woman, why did you not summon Howe?'

Howe was our oldest apprentice but I was just as capable.

'Because he was gone to Blackfriars to negotiate the dagswain order, remember? What was I supposed to do, sirrah? Close the door in Lord Hastings's face?'

'No need for that kind of tongue,' Shore admonished. 'It's just that ah've a large order from Lord Rivers' steward an' if word gets around that ah'm dealing with Lord Hastings as well, they may cancel it. Happened to one of the Drapers' Guild.'

‘I wish you had told me,’ I said wearily. Not that it would have made any difference.

‘Lord Rivers, the Queen’s brother, and Lord Hastings have fallen out over who should be governing Calais, see, and if you look to be dealing wi’ one of them, the other will ha’ none of you.’

‘That’s ludicrous,’ I declared. ‘King Edward must find it hard to deal with their quarrels.’

‘Very likely. That’s probably one of the reasons the King sent Lord Rivers to ha’ charge of the Prince of Wales at Ludlow. Anyroad, like ah said, you should have sent for me straightway.’

‘But you won’t turn down Lord Hastings’ business, surely?’

‘Tha’s summat for tomorrow.’ Shore was looking at me strangely. ‘Why didn’t you send to find me, Elizabeth?’

‘I did not know rightly where you were, sir,’ I answered, although I was certain he had been trying to raise himself with a gap-toothed seamstress, who lived two streets away. ‘But I’ll obey in future. Next time her grace the Queen knocks and you are out, I’ll hide beneath the counter and pretend we are closed.’

‘Aye,’ he grunted. ‘Do that.’

During supper that evening, he said not a word until we had finished eating. ‘Lord Hastings is a great lord, wife. You should ha’ said ah would attend him at t’Palace.’

‘But he offered to come back tomorrow. Anyway, being such a “great lord”, I daresay he may take his leisure where it pleases him, and it pleases him to return tomorrow morning. Are you decided? Shall you accept his business?’

He set his alejack down and made a face. 'Depends whether he makes an offer. Ah hope you asked a good price for the girdle?'

'I think so. It was for his stepdaughter.'

'Aye, that would be the Bonville girl. Worth a fortune, she is.'

'Well, he took much trouble in choosing it for her and he was pleasant and not high-saddled at all. You should have seen the clothes he was wearing.' I shook my head, still marvelling. 'I advised him go to Father's and see the new delivery.'

His face creased in disapproval. 'Jesu! You presumed to direct a great lord like him?'

'But he didn't mind at all.'

Shore's eyes narrowed. 'Mayhap it was not just the girdles that interested him.'

This conversation was travelling onto hazardous ground. Shore had not agreed easily to me employing some silkwomen and making a little money of my own.

My hands fisted in my lap. 'What are you saying?'

He snorted and clambered from the trestle. 'Have you not noticed that when you are in t'shop, we have more men come to buy?'

Foolish logic! How could I notice the difference when I was not there?

'I do not like your implication, sir,' I said, swivelling round to face him. 'Nor do you make any sense. Just tell me how would men know whether I am in the shop or not before they come in?'

He was looking down at me as if my dress was immodest.

‘Because ah’ve seen them staring though the doorway as they pass, or else they traipse in, feign interest in summat and then leave if you are not around. God’s truth, when you are there, they dawdle like sniffin’ dogs. Ah’ve observed it’s only the men, not the women.’

‘And ah observe that you have a great imagination,’ I muttered, gathering up the platters for our maidservant to remove.

He grabbed my shoulder and growled, ‘Are you calling me a liar, wife? Why do you think ah’ve always been reluctant all these years to have you in the showing room?’

I shook his hand away as I stood up. I knew very well but I said, ‘Well, I always thought it was in case people believed you too poor to employ sufficient apprentices. If I am good for business because my manners please people, sir, then you should be content. I am not like my friend, Alys Rawson, using my looks to turn men into fawning lapdogs.’

He looked so peevish that I could not resist tormenting him further.

‘Oh Heavens, Shore, you surely do not fear I shall cuckold you? What would Lord Hastings want with a lowly creature like me?’ There is such a thing as a husbandly grunt and Shore’s was perfected. ‘Anyway,’ I added, pouring some more ale into his cup, ‘let us not quarrel but celebrate our good fortune. If you can be cunning and sell to both lords, you shall have much profit.’

But Shore’s jealousy was pricked. Next morning, the sly knave sent out an invitation to his friends’ wives to come at a quarter to

ten and take refreshment so that when Lord Hastings arrived, I should be making petty talk upstairs and unable to come down. Oh, how his distrust made me seethe.

No bargain was made with Lord Hastings that morning, but I noticed later that he had left his gloves behind, not on the open counter by the measuring rule, but tucked at the end between a shallow basket of remnants and the wall.

What should I do? Send an apprentice to Westminster or my lord's house? Tell Shore? Take the gloves myself? Was this forgetfulness deliberate? Ha, vain fantasy on my part to suppose such a thing. This great lord would no doubt send some menial to retrieve the gloves, yet I stood there holding them and dared to dream.

II

I met Lord Hastings again within a few days. He summoned my father to bring samples of silks and gauzes to Beaumont's Inn, his London house. The request read: *Since the fabrics are to be purchased for my lord's stepdaughter and Mistress Shore resembles her, would Master Lambard please ask his daughter to accompany him!* So Lord Hastings had discovered the family connection. I felt very flattered. Of course, Shore would have made trouble had he known, but he had gone to Suffolk to collect cargo that had arrived from a manufactory he part-owned across the water in Bergen-ap-Zoom.

I had visited the houses of wealthy merchants, but I had never stepped inside a noble lord's dwelling, and Beaumont's Inn, with its two gables and three storeys, looked to be extremely modest. It lay at the south-east end of Thames Street, close to Paul's wharf and neighbour to Baynard's Castle, where King Edward's mother, the Duchess of York, lived. Only a strip of garden and a laneway separated the two properties.

Father and I were shown up into a hall with long windows that looked westwards towards the River Fleet. Two immense tapestries adorned the facing wall. I do not know a great deal about the stitching but the dyes I do know. Indigo, woad and madder predominated and I would have wagered these hangings had been made in Anjou and come to England as part of Queen

Margaret's dowry when she married King Henry. In fact, the golden salt upon the high table might have been hers as well for it was shaped as a swan, one of her badges.

The man who had been privileged to receive this spoil was in conversation with two men from the Tailors' Guild and all three were leaning over drawings set out on the high table. When the steward announced us, Lord Hastings dismissed them and stepped down to greet us.

Ah, I am a mercer's daughter to my fingertips! There is such beauty in a well-dressed man. Lord Hastings had excellent taste. He clearly understood colour, and his long robe of Saxon blue velvet was tailored skilfully across his shoulders. Falls of gilt brocade hung from his padded sleeves just above the elbows and his indoor shoes were finely tapered and made of dark blue leather embroidered with his maunche in white and violet thread.

'Ah, I see you have brought my gloves, Mistress Shore.' My senses picked up a descant to that plainsong remark. 'Bring the samples to the windows, Master Lambard, if you please.'

As he stood with his steward flicking through our squares of cloth, the sunlight showed me a lord who was far older than I had first thought. His forehead was lapped by fine, plentiful hair of a lustrous fairness, a pale scar angled up from his left eyebrow and a frown mark slashed his brow above his nose. Otherwise, the lines in his face hinted at a kind and generous disposition.

'Your daughter is of my stepdaughter's complexion,' he said, looking round at Father. 'It would please me if she could remove

her headdress.'

'Of course, my lord,' agreed Father, his mind utterly on selling.

What choice had I? I took off the velvet and buckram cone that sat upon my coiled plaits and let the steward take it into his care.

'Since she is not yet wed, my stepdaughter, Lady Cecily, wears her hair loose. If you would oblige me, Mistress Shore?'

I did not take my gaze from Lord Hastings' face as I reached up and removed the pins, one by one, and let my blonde plait fall. There was something deliciously sinful in him asking this of me. A married woman's hair is for her husband or her lover.

'Unbraided!' commanded Lord Hastings, his gaze touching my hair and coming to linger on my lips. In obedience, I brought my plait forward over my right shoulder and slowly loosened the braid and with a toss of my head sent the strands swirling across my shoulders like an unfurled cloak.

'You have beautiful hair, Mistress Shore.' So had he. I could have clawed through his and drawn his face to mine. I had never experienced the power of kisses, but this lord would know the craft of lips, the delicate thrusting, the *petite mesure parfaite*.

My father, fussing which brocade to proffer first, had missed the dance of stares, but he knew what to advise. The choosing was swift and decisive, and leaving my father to bargain with Hyrst, his steward, Lord Hastings led me up to the dais.

'Tell me what you think of these.'

‘Are they for a tapestry, my lord?’ I asked, picking up the nearest paper – a charcoal sketch of a helmed man wearing a mask, breastplate, leather skirt, greaves and sandals.

‘No, it’s an entertainment for the court. *The Siege of Troy*. Lord Rivers’ notion. Unfortunately I doubt I’ll have time to put it on this year. Here’s the Lady Helen.’

The drawing showed a creature in a long, yellow wig and voluminous white gown. Metal cones armoured her massive breasts and steel tassets protected her broad thighs. She looked like a fishwife playing Joan of Arc.

‘Why are you smiling, Mistress Shore?’

‘Your pardon, my lord, but unless your desire to is to make people laugh, I cannot imagine anyone stealing this lady from her husband. Why, Prince Paris would need a derrick to get her on board his ship. Oh, but I suppose she is to be played by a man.’

He took the cartoon from me. ‘Do you believe any of this tale is true?’

‘That a princess could leave her husband for a handsome Trojan? I am sure that has been happening since time began. However, I do not suppose the war lasted ten years. That is probably the storyteller’s exaggeration. Or if it did, I expect the Greeks went home at Christmas and Easter.’

‘They were heathens, Mistress Shore.’

I shrugged. ‘Ah, well, perhaps they had orgies to attend.’

I was flattered by his company. There must be weighty matters on this great man’s mind and yet he was making every effort to

be pleasant.

‘My lord, is it true we shall be soon be at war with the French?’

‘Yes, Mistress Shore.’

‘That is not good news for the city. Is it to punish the King of France?’

King Louis had funded a mighty rebellion a few years earlier. He had brokered an alliance between King Edward’s cousin, Warwick, the King’s younger brother, George, and the exiled former queen, Margaret of Anjou. The result was an invasion that drove King Edward and Lord Hastings out of England for the winter, but they returned in the spring and after two bloody battles at Barnet and Tewkesbury, King Edward slid back onto the cushions on his throne at Westminster and clapped on his crown again.

‘To punish the King of France?’ replied Lord Hastings, humouring me. ‘Yes, Mistress Shore, it could be seen that way but there are better reasons. You do not approve of the King’s enterprise?’

‘I know that King Louis has invaded Brittany and would like to conquer Burgundy, my lord. I understand also that England has treaty obligations with Burgundy, but I wish the realm might have continual peace so our trade may prosper. War means higher taxes and good men risking their lives. Hasn’t there been enough killing in the quarrel between the Houses of York and Lancaster? No, I do not uphold a war with France.’

He seemed amused by my outspokenness. ‘I shall inform his

grace the King of your opinion, little mistress.'

'I pray you do not, my lord,' I said genially, for I knew he was teasing me, but inside I was bristling for I dislike being belittled. 'As for taxes, a man may milk a cow, for sure, but there comes a time if there is insufficient grass when—'

His gasp of laughter interrupted me. 'Mistress Shore! And there was I believing you only get milk if you pump a cow's tail, but now you tell me it's a matter of grass.'

For an instant I thought to clamp my lips closed and wallow in mortification but instead the she-devil in me brazenly retorted, 'My lord, you may believe what you will. Perhaps in Leicestershire there are a lot of cows with aching tails!'

Hastings drew a breath at my audacity, for he was from those parts, then laughed heartily, slamming his hand upon the table. It was fortunate that his steward's polite cough ended the conversation for although you can push the boat out far when you are younger and female, it is best not to get into unfamiliar waters.

Lord Hastings' hand between my shoulder blades was extremely agreeable as he escorted me back to Father. 'Your daughter has a sharp wit, Master Lambard.'

'Oh, please do not tell him that, my lord, or he will start noticing.'

Father pushed an armful of samples at me with a glare to hold my tongue.

As we walked back to Silver Street, he said, 'That man will

seek to have you, Elizabeth.'

When I made no answer, he added, 'You'll not encourage him. I'll not have any daughter of mine causing a scandal. The Guild won't like it.'

'I do not think you have any right to preach to me, sir.' I watched his handsome profile redden.

'Damn it, I suppose you'll never forget I made a fool of myself.'

We walked on in silence, both of us remembering how he had stupidly leased a house in Wood Street for his mistress and then when he had finished with her, she had moved out taking everything that could be lifted, unscrewed or levered off. Because the dwelling was rented from the Goldsmiths' Guild and Father did not have the coin in hand to pay for the woman's thievery, his reputation would have been ruined. Fortunately Alderman Shaa forewarned me and provided a list of all that was owed. It took all my savings to pay my father's debts.

'I helped you then with what little money I had, Father,' I exclaimed, hastening to keep up with his angry stride. 'But now all your cargoes have been safely delivered, you might consider helping me.'

He halted. 'To grease some slimy lawyer's palm, Elizabeth, so he'll write to His Holiness in Rome on your behalf? Jesu! If divorce was easy, princes would change their wives like they change their cotes. Besides, you and Shore have managed all these years.'

'Managed!' I echoed indignantly, tempted to toss Father's

precious samples in the nearest sewer. 'Shore's been impotent since he had that quarrel with the cooper's cart, and before that was not much better.'

I knew what I was missing. I had discovered how to pleasure myself.

'I concede that Shore is not of the right temperament for you, Elizabeth,' Father was saying, 'but as I've told you many times before, he's no sluggard and the Mercer's Guild thinks highly of him. Why, I'll wager he could become an alderman like me in a few years' time. Just be patient.'

'Patient for what? I did not want this marriage when I was twelve and now I am twenty-five and childless, I am even more resolved to end it.'

Several passers-by were eyeing us now and Father rapidly dredged up his pat-on-the-head-and-she-will-calm expression that he used with Mama when she was angry.

'Sweetheart,' he cajoled, putting his free arm about my shoulder to urge me forward, 'taking a husband to law is not how a decent woman behaves. Marriage is for life. It is God's will.'

'God, sir, was never *married*.' I shoved his merchandise back into his arms and fisting my skirts marched on alone.

'You try my patience, Elizabeth,' he grumbled, hastening after me. 'Even if you had the money for a petition to Rome, his Holiness in Rome would never listen to a woman.'

'I'll make somebody listen,' I vowed.

And maybe it would be Lord Hastings.

III

‘What’s going on, Margery?’ I whispered to Alderman Shaa’s daughter on Sunday, a week later after we had heard the sermon at St Paul’s Cross. I could see that her parents and mine were heading off together to their favourite tavern for ale and pies, but Margery was blocking my way, insisting that Shore and I remain with her in the stands at St Paul’s Yard beside the cathedral. She had more flesh to keep her warm; I was feeling chilled and ravenous.

I had always trusted Margery. We had become friends at the Cripplegate School for merchants’ daughters and neither of us had found marriage easy. But there was something else that bound me to her family. Not just their help in strangling the scandal that would have dishonoured my father, but Master Shaa’s kindness in persuading Shore to let me have my little enterprise with the silkwomen.

‘Wait-and-see!’ My friend tapped the side of her nose. ‘A surprise.’

‘Oh lord, we haven’t got to watch another pair of priests being flailed around the yard, have we?’ I sat down again with great reluctance. The hour’s sermon on Divine Love, delivered by a Franciscan with a blocked nose, had been tedious. ‘Won’t your children be missing you?’ I muttered.

‘Lizbeth! Be patient!’

The last thing I wanted was to watch some poor wretch doing penance for their sins. God's mercy! I was the last person to desire to cast the first stone. Part of me was bursting to tell Margery about my encounters with Lord Hastings, but her tolerance of others' foibles had narrowed since her marriage to the goldsmith Hugh Paddesley, a man I did not care for. Sometimes she sounded more like Paddesley than he did.

'Ah, here we go,' she exclaimed, nudging me with her elbow.

A ragtag mob of people, who had not heard the sermon, was thickening the crowd. Alarm bells sounded in my head. Adultery! It had to be adultery! I cast a sharp look at my friend. Had she suspected I was dreaming of taking a lover? No, that was lighting a bonfire with green wood for I read no rebuke in her eyes, and Shore and Paddesley were discussing cockfighting with their friend Shelley. Nothing was untoward.

'I promise you, Lizbeth!' she exclaimed. 'You'll be glad you stayed.'

There was only one penitent in the open cart, a woman in a white shift with her long dark hair unbound about her shoulders. Not a common strumpet by the way she held herself. Well nourished, too, neither scrawny nor obese. The crowd whooped as the sheriff's soldiers pulled her roughly down onto the cobbles and untied her wrists. A priest handed her a lit taper, and then with two soldiers ahead of her and two behind her with their halberd blades prodding her forwards, she began her journey of contrition around St Paul's Yard.

I had seen these walks of penitence before, but today the crowd's jeers made me shudder as though someone had walked across my grave. The human cockroaches from the back lanes had brought buckets slopping with excrement. Soon the woman's shift would resemble a filthy rag.

At first she tried to keep her dignity, but as the pelting grew, she started to flinch, her body jerking this way and that like a thief on a hangman's rope. As she approached our stand, I could see she was about ten years older than I. Her forehead and left cheek were bleeding, and spittle and dung splattered her hair and skin. The thin, putrid shift showed her nipples and she was shivering as though she had the marsh disease.

Shore and Margery's husband leaned over to spit at her.

'Come on! *Hiss!*' Margery sprang to her feet and, like the other merchant's wives, shook her fist and jeered. I stood up with the rest but I could not abuse the poor creature. This was no prostitute snared to give the crowd its monthly dose of titillation. She could have been an erring wife or a courtesan; just a woman who had fallen into temptation.

'Vile,' I muttered, wincing as I watched the woman whimper and fling up her hands as the stoning began again.

Flushed and pleased, Margery subsided on the bench and put her mouth to my ear. 'That was your father's greedy whore. She was caught last week fleecing a merchant from the Grocers' Guild. Didn't you hear all the hubbub? The guild has expelled him.'

‘Sweet Christ!’ Now I understood why her parents had hurried mine away. Or had my father done the hurrying?

I searched the faces around me. Did our husbands know?

‘Too tame,’ Paddesley was complaining, with a sneer of nostril. ‘They could have whipped the whore around the yard.’

‘Aye, better sport,’ agreed Shore, which made me want to stick a dagger in him.

‘For my part, I cannot see what charm she held for the poor dotard,’ Master Shelley was saying. ‘Breasts like a beggar’s purse. Whereas that cherrylips a month ago.’ He whistled. His eyes skewed covertly in my direction. ‘Legs to her armpits, but this hag ...’

‘Ah, but ...’ Paddesley whispered something behind his hand. The other two laughed.

Margery, excluded, reddened. ‘You might give me thanks,’ she muttered, taking out her annoyance on me. ‘I thought you’d be pleased.’

‘Pleased! I found it offensive.’

‘Twaddle, Lizbeth! Women like her make it harder for the rest of us.’

‘Make what harder, Mistress Paddesley,’ quipped Shelley, elbowing her husband.

‘Yes, what are you trying to say, pet?’ Paddesley asked, trying to exchange a grin with me.

Margery was already in a nose-up huff. ‘No matter. Can we go now?’

‘Yes, Margery, what did you mean?’ I whispered as we descended the stairs ahead of the others.

She had to be coaxed. ‘Just that respectable wives like us are not supposed to play the games in bed that she does. If we do, we’re accused of being wanton.’

‘So it’s a sin to enjoy a husband’s lovemaking? How very absurd, but then I wouldn’t know, would I?’ How bitter I must have sounded.

‘Well, I think the whore deserved her punishment, Lizbeth. She’s the worse sort, tempting husbands to be unfaithful.’

‘What, you think she’s worse than a common strumpet?’

‘Winchester geese do it to stay alive. And it’s a business transaction for men who have too much—’ She gestured. ‘You know.’

‘Ah, “the fiery men who become ill if they do not have regular intercourse with a woman”,’ I said, quoting a treatise on the issue.

‘Exactly,’ agreed Margery. ‘Whereas that bitch’s sort does it because they enjoy it.’

‘So it’s her pleasure you take issue with?’

‘Well, yes.’

It was a point of view I had once shared. The sisterhood of respectability. Guild wives were supposed to uphold God’s commandments to the letter. But poor Margery was feeding the incubus of Envy. If she could not enjoy the sport of the bedchamber, she did not want anyone else to either.

I, too, had never enjoyed a man’s lovemaking. Suffered, yes.

Shore had first used me when I was fourteen years old. His recent impotence was a blessing. Alas, now I was five and twenty! More than half my life gone already. But none of the London guildsmen had measured to my taste. No man except ... And into my mind at that moment crept a scheme so outrageously sinful that I halted on the cobbles with a gasp.

‘Lizbeth, what’s wrong? Are you ill?’

‘Possibly.’ I laughed. Crazy might be the word.

Yes, wild, fevered, CRAZED! Deliciously mad with a spire-high, illuminated ‘C’.

IV

I took matters – and courage – into my own hands and trounced off to Beaumont's Inn.

'You'll 'ave to wait in line,' the porter growled at me.

Wait? There I was, anxious to give, my heart beating frantically, and ahead of me were forty people, and more arriving.

'Be patient, dearie,' said the woman behind me as she heard me sigh. 'It's always like this on petition days.'

But then I saw his lordship's steward come out and linger as though counting us. I left the line and hastened towards him but he vanished inside and the two guards protecting the entrance to the hall slammed their halberds across my path.

'Take your turn, mistress,' chortled one of them, 'unless you'd like to take your turn wi' me.'

I bit my lip. 'Very tempting, sirrah, but it's not that business I had in mind. I'm a mercer come to see Master Hyrst about an order.'

'Why was yous standing wi' the petitioners, then?' demanded the other guard.

'I thought ... well, no matter. A silver penny for whichever of you can take me to Master Hyrst.'

Coin and a woman's smile are better than battering rams to open doors. Eventually a servant beckoned me through. Master

Hyrst stood waiting in the passageway.

‘Good day to you, sir,’ I said with a curtsy. ‘I should like to see my lord.’

‘Oh, would you! Well, you can whistle for that, mistress.’ But then as fortune would have it, Lord Hastings himself came by. The yearning creature inside my body gave a wriggle of delight at seeing him.

‘Mistress Shore, whatever are you doing here?’ He took my hand as I made obeisance and drew me to my feet.

‘I ...’ How could I state my real purpose with his steward standing there like a busybody? I had to think swiftly. ‘My gracious lord, I came to ask if you could recommend an honest lawyer. It is a very personal matter.’

Hyrst gave a whoosh of impatience.

‘Fetch the next one in!’ ordered his master and turned his attention back to me.

‘Your pardon,’ I said, looking up at Lord Hastings in utter humility. ‘I truly had no understanding how many people were ...’ I half-turned to the door with a lift of hands. ‘Forgive me, I’ll leave at once.’ But his curiosity was whetted.

‘Wait,’ he called out with concern.

Perhaps this was not meant to be, I thought, judging myself such a fool to even believe that he ...

‘Why should you need a lawyer, Mistress Shore?’ he asked, pursuing me.

I halted. Could hesitation be honest yet contrived?

‘It’s a very private matter. I ... I’ve tried several proctors too and not one was worthy.’

He glanced towards the next petitioner being escorted in and drew a deep breath. ‘Is there an action in process against you?’

‘No, my lord, I wish to bring one against my husband.’

This was a man who could defend himself in battle. He recovered instantly. ‘Hyrst, ask Peter to write a letter of recommendation to William Catesby. If you wait here, Mistress Shore, it will be brought to you.’

‘My lord, I cannot thank you enough.’

‘What else are friends for? Good morrow to you, then.’

Friends? The doors of my life were at last letting in the frightening, sweet breath of the wild woods. The King’s Chamberlain had called me friend.

Master Catesby was my age, the son of a knight and the nephew of Sir John Catesby, who was Justice of the Court of Common Pleas. Sleek auburn hair, the hue of weasel fur, pranced about his shoulders. He was one of those men who lean back nonchalantly when they talk to you.

I had no intention of sleeping with him. Nor he with me, and how assiduous he was in explaining that his clients were dukes rather than housewives and that he dealt in demesnes and not divorce. However, he did not show me to the door before the hour bell had finished striking.

Since Lord Hastings already had an ‘interest’ (Catesby underscored that word rather prematurely), yes, he would

recommend a proctor to help me, but there was no precedent for bringing a charge of impotence against a husband. It was clear he thought I had a walnut for a brain.

‘To be frank, Mistress Shore, as far as obtaining a divorce after ten years of marriage you have not got a leg to stand on, but money can open any door, even His Holiness’s in Rome. Money and powerful friends. You have beauteous legs, I’m sure. Do not stand on them, spread them!’

To be truthful, he couched that advice with more circumambulation, but that was the sum of the matter. And the initial cost?

I offered him what I could afford, but to my relief he pushed the purse back at me.

‘I do this as a favour to Lord Hastings. Which reminds me, Mistress Shore.’ He waved my lord’s letter. ‘He’s asked me to give you a message. He desires you to wait upon him tomorrow at a quarter to ten. And, be warned, there is always a price to pay.’ I presumed he meant Lord Hastings expected reimbursement of a horizontal nature, but I was wrong.

‘Divorce is an ugly process, Mistress Shore. Once you are recognised as an oath-breaker and outside the protection of your husband, your credit and reputation will be at stake.’

I rose to my feet. ‘You clearly still think me rash and headstrong, Master Catesby, but women should be free to make their own decisions. If I had a mark for every girl compelled into wedlock, I should be passing rich.’

The lawyer's smile was as smooth as polished alabaster as he came to see me out. 'I'll not argue that one. But on the practical side, what else can girls of respectable family do save marry?'

'Take up the law, perhaps, Master Catesby?'

'Heaven forbid, Mistress Shore,' he laughed, and unlatched the door. 'Farewell and good fortune! I'd sin my way to matrimonial freedom if I were you.'

Can any prince or ploughman put an estimate on freedom? Freedom to walk alone or with friends? Freedom to choose with whom you share a bed? Freedom to laugh?

Freedom at last to love?

Mornings were not difficult for me to extricate myself from our house; I regularly visited my silkwomen, shopped in Cheapside or, much to Shore's annoyance, took provisions to feed the street children in our neighbourhood

That hour, as I set foot in Beaumont's Inn, my courage was wound tighter than a tailor's yarn. Except ... Except if Lord Hastings granted me an audience in his private chamber, could I *thank* him enough?

Hyrst showed me into the hall and loftily bade me wait there. I did not sit down for I wanted to keep my rose gown free of creases. I'd barbered the nap to make it look new.

Two men servants came past bearing fresh bed linen. They eyed me speculatively as they made their way to the door behind the high table. I did not like their interest. It made me feel cheap.

Hyrst returned less haughty. 'Mistress Shore, my lord requests

that you join him in the garden. This way, if you please.'

My sight of Lord Hastings could have adorned the margin of *The Garden of Earthly Delights*: a noble lord reading beneath a lathed arbor of vines and *rosa alba*, with a mazer and a flagon at his knee and a page in attendance.

'Mistress Shore.' He set aside his book and stood to take my hand, then bestowed me upon the nearby cushioned bench and sat down again upon his cross-legged chair, beckoning his page to pour me a beaker of perry. The welcome in his face showed I was anticipated and not a pother.

He was clothed simply. A loose-sleeved slate blue mantle, edged with coney, reached to his knees. His shirt was belted and its tails just covered his codpiece. Above the neck of his honey-hued stomacher, the cordals of his shirt were undone and I could see the tendrils of blond hair that must span his chest. To hell with his age! The lusty creature inside me was wide awake. I no longer needed to ratchet up my determination, but I was as nervous as a fieldmouse in short grass.

'Was Master Catesby able to help you?'

'Thank you, my lord, he has given me the name of a worthy cleric at the Court of Arches. I am very grateful.' I was prepared to show him how much.

'Hell, be done with thanks. Can't blame you for being wary of lawyers. Escrow you soon as look at you.' He removed the mazer lid and took a mouthful, grinning at me across the rim. 'Pretty headdress.'

I smiled, sipped and looked around. Wild strawberries and periwinkles lapped the flagstones where we sat and a chequer-board of well-scythed turves and beds of seedlings was spread before us. 'This ... this is a very fine garden, my lord.'

'Not of my making, sorry to say. All rented.'

'Have you lived here for very long?' Oh, this was not easy.

'Only since I returned with the King from Burgundy. Before the rebellion, I had rooms at the palace. Still have. This is an extravagance, really. I spend more time at Westminster or Eltham than I do here.' He leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. 'What was yesterday really about, Elizabeth?'

Elizabeth – my given name – the way he said it was a caress.

'Are you sure you want to know, my lord?'

He leaned back languidly. His eyes, narrowed against the sunlight, searched my face. 'Maybe I can assist you.'

I looked down at my lap. 'I believe you can, my lord, but not in any way you can imagine.'

'Oh, I can imagine.' The garland of words was strung out evenly. I glanced up, took breath, trying to ascertain his meaning. Ambiguity might be a delight for diplomats and barons, but for the likes of me? Was this just courtly teasing? If I swept away all artifice and asked him outright, what then?

His blue gaze gleamed as though he guessed my dilemma and swept on past me. A she-blackbird, a creature of carnality so the bestiaries say, was waiting hopefully for a crumb. Like me.

Do it! cried the other creature inside of me, her fists

hammering against my ribs.

The hour bells made his mouth tighten. I was but a swift meeting in today's agendum.

Do it!

'If it would please you, my lord, I should be willing to lie with you.' I drew a ragged breath and plunged in even further. 'Indeed, I should count it as an honour.'

His eyebrows arched like chevrons. 'My dear, I've been solicited by the rich and the ragged but ...' I was studied anew as though he had picked up a magnifying glass to inspect every lesion in my soul. 'Devil take it,' he muttered, frowning, 'you are in earnest.'

I cursed at having cheapened myself in his estimation. This precious friendship would be over now. Desire, spoken, could not be scraped away like errata on vellum.

'Does Shore's cockerel not crow enough for you, Elizabeth?' I must have shaken as though the very air was bruising, because the cynical lines in his expression softened. 'Hell! Forgive me, that was stable talk.'

Well, I deserved stable talk if I was begging to be treated like a milkmaid, and I could speak it, too.

'Shore's cockerel sits on the perch all day and all night, my lord, and so it has been for most of the marriage. We are ill-matched.' I shook my head in sadness, and then clasped my hands to my lips in contrition. 'I ask your pardon, my lord. It was presumptuous, pathetic of me to have asked you.'

A gentle finger lifted my chin. Compassionate eyes searched my face. ‘You, the most beautiful woman in London? Oh, Elizabeth.’

His voice held the kindness of a friend once again, but my self-worth was as fragile as a jenny wren’s egg. I did not believe his flattery, of course, but if only he knew the depth, the desperation, of my longing to be held in his arms, valued not judged, and loved, loved for the fledgling lonely girl within me and not my shell. The hope in my eyes must have appalled him. It was probably my imagination but there was certainly a quickening of interest in his.

‘But you could take a lover so easily,’ he said, sitting back and shaking his head in wry amazement as he looked at me. ‘Damn it, any merchant in England worth his salt would fall before you on his knees and beg.’

‘I don’t know about that, my lord. They certainly hang around my doorway like flies in search of fresh meat. See, I, too, disdain ragged manners and gutter purposes.’

It was too painful to tell him that, after one of my husband’s married friends had tried to assault me, Shore had blamed me and then monstrously suggested I lie with the man. ‘What in fucking hell does it matter if he tups you?’ Shore had said. ‘He’s a worthy fellow. At least that way you might provide me with an heir. You like playing with his children well enough.’

I looked across at Lord Hastings with a wry smile, trying to re clothe my vulnerability.

‘Then I must count myself most favoured,’ he was saying, ‘however ...’ He stood up and paced to the edge of the arbor. I watched in dismay as he thrust his hands on his waist and cast his gaze upwards, letting out his breath with a sigh of amused wonder before he swung round to face me. ‘And you consider me as manna from Heaven?’

I bowed my head in respect. ‘I know you would be kind with my ignorance and gentle in teaching me.’

‘Teaching!’ He dragged his fingers across his jaw. ‘Oh, sweetheart, was ever man so tempted?’

‘Then you agree?’ Excitement eddied through me. Would this divine man initiate me into Paradise? Oh, when, when? This moment even? Except his fingers were plucking at his golden troth ring. O Jesu, no!

‘Do not take this wrongly.’ A refusal? Please God, make him say yes. ‘This is not a simple matter, Mistress Elizabeth.’ He leaned a raised elbow against the weathered lathes. ‘I was just thinking – remembering a Christian woman I once knew who fell in love with a Jew, loved him so much that she converted to his religion and became more devout than he.

‘Now, from what you have told me and from what I have observed, it seems you have behaved with propriety all these years and suddenly you want to change your coat. Dangerous waters, Elizabeth. If you throw your values overboard, what chart shall you steer by?’ His expression was telling me of an even deeper concern.

‘I thank you for the warning, my lord,’ I murmured with my head bowed like a daughter and then I looked up with a wicked grin. ‘So your concern is I shall become an apostle of the creed of lust, and end up raddled with the crabs?’ And before he could answer, I added soberly, ‘Or are you afeared I shall fall in love with you?’

Relief swept into his face. ‘By the Saints, you never hide your meaning, do you?’

I smiled, my heart aching. ‘You have been a light in the darkness of my world, my lord. Surely friends can be honest with each other?’

He nodded, not guessing me a liar. ‘Then, to be honest and speak plainly, I have a wife and family I love dearly. Kate and I do not spend much time together. I have my court duties. She has the children. Since her brother Warwick’s death, she rarely steps foot in Westminster for reasons I am sure you can understand. Yes, I admit I am not faithful to her in body.’ He grimaced in self-judgment. ‘But where my heart is not engaged, making love does not seem like such a betrayal.’

‘Then make love to me.’ I tried not to sound like a desperate beggar.

‘I’m grown fond of you, Elizabeth. You’ve been a temptation since I first saw you. Ah, a plague on it!’

I watched him drive his bejewelled fingers through his fine, fair hair. *Must I go down on my knees?*

‘I am not assured this is the path for you.’

‘Path, my lord?’ I retorted, looking at him through my lashes. ‘Blind alley, rather! I’m stitched in a cered cloth shroud on my way to the grave if I don’t struggle out while I have the life force still in me.’

‘The path to Hell, sweetheart,’ he repeated firmly.

I rose and held my hands out to him. ‘Then lead me down it.’

We stared at each other not like friends or lovers but like two knights agreed to a tournament. I was waiting for an invisible marshal to give us leave to gallop at each other, but Hastings stepped back, laughing, hands raised

‘Christ save me! Not now, you hungry puss, we’ve insufficient time.’

‘Ohhh,’ I protested. ‘How long do you need? Shore only took a heave and a groan when he managed it at all. Do you want me to undress, is that the reason?’

He smiled, reached out to draw my face towards him, and kissed my brow. ‘My poor innocent Elizabeth. Tomorrow, then. Tomorrow at two.’ A finger under my chin to make me listen. ‘Put on a veil so no one will recognise you and come to Gerrard’s Hall in Basing Lane. Ask for the chamber for Master Ashby.’ I must have looked shocked for he added, ‘See, I sound heartless and you are offended.’ He turned away, dragging his fingers down his face as if he was disgusted with himself.

‘No,’ I lied, picking up his book. ‘But should I not come here? I could creep through the postern like a thief before curfew.’

‘No, Gerrard’s will preserve your reputation and my privacy.

And now, I'm afraid, I must ask you to leave.' Oh, he was all instructions and purpose now, other business tugging at his thoughts, but how could I resent that?

My fingers stroked the leather cover.

'My lord?'

'Yes?'

'The others? Are they always married women?'

He nodded, glad, I daresay, not to look into my face as he took the book from me and pressed the clasp closed. 'Elizabeth, if you change your mind – and you well might – send word here. Tell your servant to say, "Master Shore seeks an audience".'

'And if you change yours, my lord?'

He drew a deep breath. Clearly, the prospect of lying with me still bothered him, but as he kissed my hand, he smiled down at me.

'I promise you I won't.'

V

Basing Lane was off Bread Street, near St Mildred's, two streets south of West Cheap. I decided to go there now on my way home, inspect the battlefield, so to speak.

The respectability of the gates at Gerrard's Hall was daunting. The house was not one of those timber and daub hostelries like those along Knightrider Street, but a turreted building discreetly tucked away behind a high wall and a beautifully carved archway of Caen stone. I had always assumed it was a nobleman's dwelling.

The porter's room was inside the gate. What if he did not let me in straight away? What if an acquaintance recognised me as I stood a-knocking? I should just have to keep my veil from blowing about and try not to look furtive.

And how long would be required? Shore always expected me to have a supper ready for him at four o'clock. If lying had to be done, it must be done well – in both senses. I laughed aloud. Lord Hastings was right. I still had too much respectability strapped to my spine. Well, a murrain on that! Tomorrow could not come soon enough.

I do not know how I managed to stay calm through the repast with Shore next day. He brought one of his friends up to dine with us. Ralph Josselyn the younger, who decided to show me his latest samples for striped bed hangings. I was not pleased;

Ralph's eagerness for showing me things in the past had not been confined to drapery and I was in no mood for the 'I'll give you a good price' and nudge of foot beneath the table. His presence prolonged the meal and then Shore wanted to discuss cobblers. How can you sanely suggest who can repair your husband's shoes when your soul is ripe for the Devil's taking?

As soon as they had gone back down to the shop, I hastened upstairs and abandoned my house gown. Because it was one of those rare early summer's days when you can wrap the warm air in your arms, I took off my chemise and drew on a petticoat of soft fine cotton. I was going to wear my best damask because it was a butterfly blue that made me feel at my best. It had tight fitting sleeves with embroidered cuffs. For modesty, I'd loosely stitched a triangle of silvery silk into the 'v' of the collar to cover the lower part of my cleavage. I pulled on my best headdress and hoped the wires would not bend under the extra dark lawn veil I needed to hide my face. It seemed to hold up. Finally I tried on my light, tawny cloak, which tied snugly at the throat. There! I held up my small hand mirror and a mysterious veiled creature stared back at me. Most excellent!

If I was Salome, the lascivious dancer of King Herod's Court, how would I lift my veil and remove my cloak? I practised taking my outer garments off. Then I looked into the mirror again and bit my lips to make them red. Should I have plucked my eyebrows and drawn high arches like noble women did? No, that was not for me. Friends would remark upon it. So would Shore.

Betrayal versus fulfilment. Treason versus seduction. My hands were a-tremble with wicked excitement as I trickled perfume between my breasts. Two hours! Must I wait two hours? Two hours to change my mind. And would I?

Suffice to say that when I stepped into Basing Lane for my sinful meeting, my misgivings were clamouring like a flock of starlings and the what-ifs were back in abundance. But mercifully the saint of the timid and adulterous took a hand. Not only were the gates of the inn already open but a large party of horsemen was leaving.

I slipped through without being noticed and sped across the cobbles to the front steps only to be loudly ‘ahemmed’ by a massive serving man.

The flying phallus badge in his green hat unnerved me. Was this some kind of expensive stewhouse? His tabard bore the curious picture of a giant holding a pine tree and his hose was pied – Lincoln green and tansy, the colours of a mocking demon. I controlled the urge to cross myself.

‘State your business, madame!’

‘Yes, yes, of course,’ I exclaimed, trying to be matter of fact, but it was hard with this fellow eyeing me with a mixture of officious sentinel and speculating pander. ‘Please give me direction to Master Ashby’s room.’

‘Ah.’ His massive shoulders seemed to heave a sigh of relief. ‘That’s all right then. Come this way, my lady. Can’t be too careful, see. Our customers value their privacy when they stay

with us. We like them to know that they won't have their belongings pilfered or pick up bedbugs or something more 'orrible. Know what I mean? No rubbing shoulders with the vulgar, eh?' Another checking stare. 'Not been here before then, madame?'

'No.'

'Ah, this place is full of surprises.'

He led me along a flagstone passageway and we emerged in the centre of a round great hall. Centuries earlier it would have been spacious and seated many, but a more recent owner had built an upstairs gallery with chambers leading off. Surrounding us were several rooms divided by oaken panelling. However, it was the trunk of a massive fir tree that the fellow wanted me to admire.

It was indeed amazing. Cathedral dimensions! Two priests holding hands could have hugged its girth. Generations of visitors had gouged their initials, and gazing up through my veil, I made out plenty of scurrilous Latin doggerels about women that made me blush. The sauciness increased with altitude, and perhaps the ladder bolted onto the tree was entirely for that purpose. Good luck to the scribblers! It would have taken a whole firkin of wine to get me on the first rung let alone the fortieth.

'Different, eh, madame?'

'I suppose the tree holds up the roof?'

'Aye, it does. Let me tell you, this hall belonged to one of the tallest creatures that ever walked God's earth, Gerrard the Giant,

and that there tree was the staff he used in battle. A wonder, eh?"

"Gerrard the Giant?" It would have been rude to show disbelief. I would have put my money on a monastery refectory.

One of the doors behind me opened and yet another serving man of huge stature emerged with a cloth in hand. My escort chuckled at my astonishment.

"Aye, no one small is ever employed here. Take a look through!"

I was expecting something sordid like a daybed flung about with cushions and furs, not the silver goblets set out on the glossy buffed table. A carved chair fine enough for any nobleman stood at the end of the board between two great candleholders, and the cushioned benches would have seated a half dozen. White and red dragon heads with fiery tongues and lashing tails were painted on the walls.

"These lower rooms are for guests who wish to dine privily with friends, et cetera. A lot of deals are done here, I can tell you. The Welsh like this room, because of the dragons, but we also have the unicorn, dolphin, peacock and lion chambers. The Scots always favour the unicorns. Now this way, if you please."

And what did mercers choose? Did my father ever come here? Lord, I hoped not. I could have sworn it was he who first told me this was an earl's dwelling.

"Do I need to go back into Basing Lane when I leave, sirrah?" I asked as I followed the huge fellow up the spiral stairwell adjoining the hall.

He grinned. 'Like that, is it? There's a postern into an alley that will take you out to Bread Street or there's a stone staircase in the far wall that will deliver you further down Basing Lane. Yonder's the chamber for Master Ashby. Third door along.'

I paid him a groat and ignored the lascivious gleam in his eyes as he bowed and wished me a pleasurable stay.

Left alone by the rail, I stood beguiled by the peace that surrounded me. Come the evening, the servants would light the four candelabra that hung around the tree and I imagined this gallery would look beautiful and mysterious with the flicker of candles dancing across the cavernous ceiling. But not for me. Not yet. And I was glad. There was something calming and reassuring about the light tumbling lazily through the grisailed glass of the high upper windows, a sleepy serenity about this place that was as false as its purpose. The murmur of men's conversation reached me from one of the dining chambers below my feet, and through the open door of another came the sound of platters being cleared as quietly as possible.

Beyond the thick stone walls I heard the deep bell of St Paul's and the tinnier chime of St Mildred's striking the hour. This very moment I had the chance to flee, but my yearning other self held me fast like a determined sister. I walked along the gallery to the door of the bedchamber. No lover answered my knock. Biting my lip, I tried the latch and let myself into my future.

The chamber designated for 'Master Ashby' was the most spacious bedroom I had ever seen. Meadowsweet rushes were

freshly strewn across the floor. Upon one wall hung a stained cloth of a huntsman and his hound, the wooden ceiling was spangled with a delicate profusion of white butterflies and crimson flowers, and scented candles flickered in the two tall wooden candelabra on either side of the bed.

Ah, the bed! The bed was vast, large enough to accommodate at least five. With a jolt, I recognised the striped satin bed hangings of lilady and primrose, and then I laughed. Oh, by the Saints, I was about to sacrifice the virtue of my entire life within inches of Ralph the Younger's curtaining!

‘What is the jest?’

I squealed in shock as Lord Hastings stepped laughing from a recess that had escaped my notice. The warmth of his smile made me feel beautiful and welcome.

‘It is these,’ I laughed, giving the tethered drapery a playful tug before I curtsied.

‘Devil take it,’ he groaned, ‘you are not going to tell me their price?’

‘No, but I’ll have you know the man who imports this made me a very generous offer today,’ I boasted wickedly, setting back my veil. ‘A tester and coverlet of best brocade – providing I lay with him beneath it.’

‘This to him.’ He raised an insulting finger. His mouth was a narrow slit of determination as he studied me, and his blue gaze was deep enough to drown in. There was restraint in the way he stood, as though he fought against invisible chains to reach out

and embrace me. ‘Still certain, Elizabeth?’

I swallowed, realising that he had already discarded his day clothes. A blue robe, loosely tied about the waist, was all that screened his naked body.

‘Satisfactory?’ he teased, mistaking my stare. ‘Bought from your father and stitched by the house of Claver.’

My silkwomen’s rivals! Never mind. I let my gaze climb from his bare calves up to the gold haze of hair across his chest. ‘I was thinking of what lay beneath, my lord.’

‘Well, so am I.’ He was eyeing my neckline, the only patch of skin showing beneath the cords of my cloak. ‘Am I to climb the ramparts or ...?’ He gestured to the curtained recess. ‘There’s a wrap behind there.’

I imagined other women using it. ‘Ramparts, please.’ I half-turned to the window, like a good housewife. ‘Shall I snuff the candles?’

‘No.’ Male and a dash indignant. Surprise must have flashed across my face before realisation enlightened him. ‘Lord love us, Elizabeth, have you only done the deed in darkness?’

‘Yes,’ I hung my head and swallowed. Would this be a disaster? I was so miserably tutored, and a man like this, so experienced, so worldly.

‘I can blindfold you. It might be the right thing.’ And amusing too, his tone hinted.

‘As it pleases you.’ Uncertainty was beginning to undermine me and with it a tiresome trembling as though my body was as

nervous as my mind.

‘Well, first let’s unpeel you. No, let me!’ He stepped behind me and his body touched mine as he unfastened the cords of my cloak from around my neck. It was sensuous having him so close, so intimate. With husbandly dexterity, he eased off the cap, wire and veiling that covered my hair and gave a whistle of admiration.

‘By the Lord, you certainly have an angel’s beauty.’ His breath was sweet upon my cheek and neck. He kissed me behind the ear.

‘Hmmm.’ I purred, letting my head fall back slightly. ‘I rather like that. Can you do it some more, please?’

‘My poor starved kitten.’ He kissed me on the other side and then in the little hollow between my neck and shoulders. Already his fingers were round my waist, unfastening the knot of my silken belt. My gown was eased up and tossed across the end of the bed. His adroit fingers tested the ties of my underskirt and then rose instead to sprawl across my breasts. His thumbs caressed my nipples, sending waves of delicious feeling to between my thighs. I sighed with delight as his right hand slid down over my belly into the shield of tiny curls.

‘Have you never done this by yourself, sweetheart?’

‘I have, my lord,’ I admitted.

Hastings laughed and turned me to face him. He was utterly naked, but before I could see him properly, he kissed me. I had never been kissed in such a way in my entire life. The fire and wildness in it melted me to my very soul. I wound my arms about his neck. He slid his hands down my back and held me hard

against him. I could feel his prick hard against my lower belly, and when we paused to draw breath, I put my hand down to feel him. Compared to Shore, he was huge.

‘I thought you said you were a new apprentice, sweetheart.’

‘Book learning,’ I lied.

‘Which library?’ he teased. Our foreheads were touching. He was loosening my hair and combing his fingers through it so it shawled my back. Oh, if only marriage had been like this.

Then with a laugh he bent swiftly, and suddenly I was lifted in his arms like a rescued maiden and laid upon the coverlet of the bed. With a knee upon the bed, he sprang up beside me, turned me over and loosened the back laces of my chemise. Then with my breasts free, he began to tease the tips of my nipples with his tongue. I was able at last to bury my fingers in his hair, free to delight and gasp with pleasure, free to arch my body at the beautiful sensations thrilling through my entire being.

Then he swept his hand down to the badge of hair and eased his fingers into me, touching me where my body burned for his coming. He gave a satisfied growl.

‘I am on fire,’ I gasped. Was the Devil inside me, driving me so?

He laughed softly and, to my dismay, slid from the bed.

‘No, no,’ I protested. ‘You are not leaving me?’

He touched a finger to my lips and walked across to take something from the small table. Was he doing this to torment me? My body was crying out for him to enter.

‘We need to be careful, sweetheart. I’m going to push this inside you.’

Whatever it was – a tiny sponge I discovered later – it smelled of vinegar. I was not pleased – this was a strumpet’s device.

‘No, you need not concern yourself,’ I protested, writhing away from him. If I had not wanted him so much, I might have fled. ‘I cannot conceive, my lord!’

‘Maybe you can. Behave, and let me put this in.’ He kissed me on the mouth to silence my argument and his fingers parted my cleft and forced the sponge well into me. His greater strength, the sternness of his voice in demanding my obedience, enhanced my appetite for him even further, and within seconds of him entering me, my body convulsed about him and I shuddered with an ecstasy that was not holy and yet divine.

So divine that we did it again.

And again.

No wonder Holy Church called this a sin. With Lord Hastings the act was not faith, it was a visitation. The songs of the troubadours were true. Lust by consent with skill. Perhaps my lover was right, I might become addicted to this pleasure.

‘By the Saints!’ he exclaimed, collapsing beside me after our third coupling with a satisfied groan. ‘Not bad for an old lad. That was ...’ But I never heard. I drifted into sleep in his arms, blissful and at peace, and I think he slept too.

A rude knocking roused us. Neither of us had thought to bar the door. I struggled to pull the coverlet across me, afraid

it was Shore, but the stranger who barged in was too tall for my husband, thank God. For an instant I thought he was one of the serving men, but this man's broad hat and riding cloak proclaimed 'outsider'.

'Ha! Master Ashby!' He disappeared into the alcove as though he knew it well and the next instant, Lord Hastings' clothes fell across us. Surely even a trusted servant would not behave so. This had to be some friend from the court.

'The pretty fellows from Brittany,' the stranger said cryptically. It was the closest he came to an apology.

'Excellent!' Hastings exclaimed gleefully, and grabbed for his shirt.

'Caught me unawares too!' the interloper replied. I could not see much of the man's face beneath the deep brimmed hat but he was staring at me. I was like a helpless moth caught in a candle flame.

'I must go, sweetheart,' Hastings laughed, turning to kiss me. He seemed quite unaware of my predicament. I dared not move since my scant covering was precarious already. 'Fare you well.' He stroked a playful finger along my lips. 'The tariff is paid, by the way, so take your time in leaving.'

'Well, don't take yours,' admonished the stranger with extraordinary rudeness, pelting Lord Hastings' hose at him. 'Where's your other boot.' He disappeared again behind the curtain. 'Not in here,' he called out.

I instantly scrambled to hide myself within the sheets.

‘Hey, sweetheart, help me with my points!’ Hastings made it a plea not a command. I cursed inwardly but how could I refuse after his generosity to me? Then I espied his discarded robe upon the rushes and swiftly scurried from the bed and drew it on. The silken belt was missing but at least its folds bestowed some modesty and my loosened hair would hide my face as I stooped to tie my lover’s hose points to his gypon.

‘Who is this?’ the stranger asked, prowling as I performed a servant’s duty.

Hastings ignored him. ‘Find my other boot, sweetheart.’

It lay within the shadow of the bedsteps and he took it from me with thanks. ‘You can leave my robe here when you are finished.’ A command that mightily displeased me, but I smiled up at him in gratitude, my only act of defiance to his friend’s impatience. The strategy worked. Lord Hastings touched his lips to mine and then, as if to stoke the other man’s annoyance, he gave me a deep farewell kiss that told me we should couple again before long.

‘God keep you, my lord,’ I whispered huskily as he lifted his face back from mine, and still I kept my arms defiantly wrapped about his neck.

The stranger’s spurs jingled as he strode to the door and held it open. ‘Are you done, Will?’ he demanded impatiently. Then they were gone and I was left alone with Hastings’ kiss drying on my lips.

Fragrance in a vial of Venetian glass was discreetly delivered by a servant next day with a spoken message of thanks but

no explanation of why my lover had left in such a hurry. My imagination had a fearful riot all by itself. Did the Lord Chamberlain and his swaggering friend have an appetite for 'pretty fellows' or had they been promised to some drinking orgy? Then a few days later I heard Shore talking about how the King had signed a military treaty with Duke Francis of Brittany. Oh dear, perhaps my lascivious sodomites had been the silver-haired Breton ambassadors desperate for a pledge of military aid against the King of France?

Had I shown too much ardour or not enough? Alas, I heard nothing more from Lord Hastings and I wanted nothing but more. Had Heloise burned so for Abelard? Ah, I burned night after night and waited day after day, my blood seething with anticipation, my tide of hope rising with the dawn and ebbing at nightfall.

Like some fantastical sea creature, my tendrils snared each morsel of gossip that eddied out from the court. Was my lord gone with the court to Eltham? Did he attend King Edward's meeting with the Merchants of the Staple? Oh, I was tempted to loiter outside Beaumont's Inn or take a wherry to Westminster and lurk like a stalking hunter. But what man wants a stinging gadfly pursuing his hide? Ah, I am amused now, remembering my impatience, but at the time, it was like having your tongue cut out when you have tasted the elixir of the angels.

I was returning from Mass at St Mary's Aldermary when, at last, a retainer with Hastings' badge stitched upon his cap waylaid

me.

‘My lord begs that you will meet him at five o’clock on Monday evening for supper. The same chamber as before.’ The servant’s eyes slid over my person with approval. I made pretence of gravely considering the matter, before I nodded graciously.

VI

I took the same trouble as before in choosing my apparel. My rose madder gown had a splash upon the skirt, but ashes-in-lye took care of that.

Attempting to be inconspicuous on the street and alluring in the bedchamber was not easy. The day was windy and it was going to be a battle to keep my veil from fluttering up, but at least most passers-by would have their eyes down to avoid the dust. I resolved to wear my voluminous dark blue cloak, and instead of the silly affected headdress, all wires and stiffened gauze, which my lover no doubt had found a nuisance, I plaited my hair loosely and pinned on a simple cap that had a hood at the back to hide my hair.

What concerned me most was finding an excuse to leave our house after four o'clock supper. Earlier in the day it was easier because Shore would be down in the workshop or busy with customers, but at four he would leave Howe in charge and come up to supper and unless he was meeting with friends, he would linger at the board. In case he decided not to go out, I told our cook to make a batch of oatcakes that I might take to a poor family down off Cornhill. And so it was that I had to sneak out with my basket by the back postern, for Shore was still at home.

It was not just the fear of his questions later that had me anxious; I was very unhappy at being on the street at this hour for

there were plenty of braggarts strolling between taverns and the watch did not start their rounds until nine o'clock. Safeguarding my good name from tittle-tattle bothered me as well. I was certain Hastings would arrange an escort to see me safely back to Cheapside before curfew but the less his people knew of me, the happier I should be. I resolved to bid his servants leave me at the nearest corner to my house and then scurry on alone.

Gerrard's Hall was still serving supper as I arrived and this time I made my way alone past the tree. I could hear laughter and talk from all the lower chambers and to my dismay I espied several well-clothed men leaning upon the gallery rail as they conversed. A trio of hawks. I understood now why rabbits and voles dart so fast. Resolving that I would never agree to come at this time again, I affected the dignity of a noble married traveller and made my way upstairs.

Not only did the men at the rail watch me pass but I found two retainers sitting cross-legged outside 'Ashby's' door playing at dice. Both scrambled to their feet at my arrival. One touched his cap to me with a wink.

'Mas'er Ashby be 'ere shortly, Mistress.'

'Then go and buy yourselves some ale,' I said sweetly finding them each a coin. I did not want any eavesdroppers. They seemed surprised at my largesse – or perhaps the paucity of it – but they politely accepted.

The small oil lamp hanging above the bed was lit and a potkin of sweet violets neighboured a bowl of blushing apples on the

small table beside the bed.

I hung up my cloak and veil behind the door, set my basket down upon the bed and then I leaned against the bedpost to let my heartbeat settle.

A rustle disturbed me. Turning, I saw the hem of the recess curtain billow subtly. I smiled. Ah, so his servants had dissembled; my lover was already here.

Mischievously I tiptoed across to make a gleeful pounce, but it was the breeze from the window light that teased the curtain. The alcove was pristine. Fresh napkins were folded on the wooden rail above the washstand. I lifted the jug beside the ewer and took a deep breath. Today the water was perfumed with sandalwood; last time it had been rosemary. But I could still smell rosemary; yes, a ribboned spray of silvery spikes and tiny mauve flowers lay upon the cloth that disguised the stool of ease.

Lord Hastings' blue robe was hanging on a wall hook with a bronze hued wrap beneath it. I dreamily lifted a silken fold of the blue to my cheek, trying not to think about how many other women had worn the bronze. No worse than a communion cup at Easter, I consoled my conscience, but I would not put it on.

He was late. The bell struck the quarter before swift, heavy footsteps stopped outside. The latch rose. But it was not Hastings. It was the stranger who had disturbed us last time. He was wearing the same black hat tugged forward over his face and I remembered the broadness of him.

I glared at him with dislike, sure now that he was not a

courtier. The corner of his earth brown cloak was thrust up over the opposite shoulder like a night thief's, but the huge gloves and creaking leather doublet trumpeted soldier – soldier with a message from Hastings that would render this evening's subterfuge a waste of time.

No, I was wrong. He was removing his gloves with the air of a man who was staying. If only I had not sent Hastings' servants away!

'Mistress Shore, I believe.' He touched his hat brim with a slight bow.

I did not curtsy. I was so angry, so hurt. This was betrayal.

'Ah you must not blame Will,' he said cheerfully, unwinding his cloak. 'We hauled him down into the Tower dungeons, thrust him upon the Duke of Exeter's daughter and turned the screws.'

I had not one iota what he was talking about. 'Pray do not make yourself at home,' I said, with contempt underscoring every syllable.

'It could be a threesome if you insist.'

I must have looked shocked, for he quickly added, 'Except Will doesn't know I am here. Listen, I do apologise for tricking you but he's up at Ashby-de-la-Zouch and I thought you might lack for decent company.'

'Please leave, sirrah.'

'Oh,' he lamented, cocking his head like a crestfallen rooster. 'I beg you give me a fighting chance.'

I remembered my father's lectures. 'Three things,' I growled,

restraining the urge to stick my fists on my hips. ‘Firstly, I am not a harlot; secondly, if I have any arrangement with Lord Hastings, it is none of your business; and thirdly, I am leaving. Now remove yourself from between me and the door or I shall kick you so hard in the ballocks you will have difficulty walking, let alone procreating with your wife or anyone else.’

‘*What!*’ He was laughing but in ridicule. ‘Firstly,’ he spluttered, ‘whether you are no harlot does not matter; secondly, I do not think you are giving us a fair chance to be acquainted; and thirdly, although you may be tall for a woman, I am six foot-three inches tall and long in the arm, so I think your chance of getting anywhere near my ballocks – with your clothes on, that is – will be highly unlikely.’

A scratch at the door. He opened it and the two retainers carried in trays, set them upon the bed, bowed and departed. I cursed inwardly. Why had I not noticed earlier that neither of the fellows had worn Hastings’ livery?

‘Hungry?’ My unwelcome host uncovered the platter, crossed himself with his right hand and a mutter of grace, then spiked a twirl of beef and held it out to me.

‘I hope you choke,’ I said coldly.

‘No!’ He ate the meat himself, followed it with a sliver of fruit, and then drew a fastidious finger across his lips. ‘No, you can’t wish that. It’s against the law.’

‘Not in my book, it’s not.’ This was ridiculous. I grabbed my basket and swept to the door. ‘Good day to you, sir.’ I inclined

my head with a dignity he did not deserve.

‘In my book, it’s treason, Mistress Shore.’ His voice had changed.

The threat in it brought me up short. My hand froze upon my cloak. I had no idea who this man was. If he was the same rank as Hastings, then he had the power to destroy my reputation. Malice is a cruel enemy. I had no intention of staying, but if he was going to set a torch to my honour, maybe I still had a chance to staunch the flame.

I turned. ‘I beg your pardon then, sir, but the jest is on Lord Hastings not me.’

‘Please do not go, Mistress Shore.’ His voice had grown kind again. ‘I realise we have not been introduced and you are at a disadvantage.’ He swept off his hat. The lion mane of bushy, brown hair tiptoeing on those broad, high shoulders seemed coarse and exuberant compared to Hastings’ sleek fairness. His face surprised me: not the fist-in-your-teeth features that usually went with a large body and stubborn nature but fine hazel eyes, a noble nose and delicate mouth. Now I could see him better, he reminded me of someone. He bowed, not deeply, more a teasing concession, a curl of shoulder, his head remaining superior. ‘My name is Edward, I am the King of England.’

‘Oh yes, and I am the Holy Roman Em—’ The words jammed in my throat. Without his hat ... O Blessed Christ defend me!

I had only ever seen King Edward from a distance in recent years – a playing card, cloth-of-gold figure watching the

tournaments at Smithfield or else just a gloved hand, resting on velvet, half-hidden by purple curtains aboard the royal barge. But I knew the triumphant bow of this man's lips, the victor of Mortimer's Cross and bloody Towton, the nemesis of Warwick, Queen Margaret and King Henry; the upthrust fist that betokened the victorious conqueror.

Trembling, I sank in the lowest curtsy I had ever made, wishing the rushes and floor might swallow me out of sight. As if in punishment, I was left to wobble there in misery. Then he relented. A strong hand grasped my arm and helped me to my feet.

'Now we have that out the way ...' He kept hold of me like a diligent groom until I was steady, before he stepped back.

I could not answer the look of inquiry. It would need a hue and cry to find my voice.

'It will come back,' he assured me affably. 'Always does.' Then, as if giving me time to regain my wits, he prowled across to inspect my basket and, like a curious child, flicked up its cover. 'Mm-mmm, oatcakes! May I?'

I nodded, still in shock.

'Ah, I've not had one of these for years,' he exclaimed joyously, healthy white teeth taking a bite. 'Hmm-mm, just the right hint of cinnamon. Good, very good.' And then he astonished me even more. 'Lambard's girl, aren't you?' he said, savouring another mouthful and observing me with the curiosity of a lion that could crush a mouse with a swipe of his paw.

‘Stout heart and generous, your sire. Loaned my father money when he was at low ebb. Helped me out as well back in ‘61, convinced the city to let me in so I could be proclaimed king. Not forgotten, I assure you.’ Then his friendly tone weathervaned to a cool north again. ‘Now are you recovered enough to have some supper? Some poor beast has died to give us food and we should be grateful.’

Refusal was impossible. ‘So please you, gracious lord.’

He gestured me to sit on the bedsteps, filled a platter for me and passed it down. ‘Usually takes half an hour for it to pass,’ he told me as he selected some viands for himself.

‘To p-pass, your highness?’

‘The awe,’ he said dryly, licking the sauce from his fingers and then wiping them on a napkin. ‘Eat!’

I was not sure I could, but I watched in fascination as he moved the tray bearing the jug and goblets to the floor and heaved out the nearest bolster from beneath the pillows. Doubled against the wall, it made a reasonable seat and he lowered himself down. With a wifely instinct that might have passed for repentance, I poured out the wine and that pleased him. He took up his mazer and held it out. I lifted mine, and the surface of the wine quivered as my hand shook. Metal kissed metal.

I found my regular voice again, albeit humble and wary. ‘Good health, my lord.’

He took a gulp and winced. ‘Too sweet, more my brother George’s taste. What do you think, Mistress Shore?’

Me? My first thought was that he was gulling me; the second that he meant it.

‘I prefer a red, fuller-flavoured wine with beef, my lord.’

The answer satisfied him. He settled back watching me still and at last I retrieved my appetite. It was part expedience. I could hardly sit opposite him idle. Later, I would laugh to myself that King Edward had sat on the floor to dine with me like some itinerant tinker. In fact, I suppose it was in deference to my sensibility that we were not seated in comfort upon the bed and I was grateful.

On the same level, without his great height towering over me, I found him less daunting. His complexion was pale with a sprinkling of freckles and he had a Cupid’s bow mouth, narrow but full-lipped. I reckon his worst feature was his chin – too dimpled – and his neck might thicken with age – but he had intelligent eyes, hazel with flecks of green gold, which reminded me of sunlight shining through a meadow pool. Hastings’ eyes were more handsome, possessing translucence like clean-sheared crystal, yet there was a playfulness in the King’s that was very charming.

‘Is he in good health, old John, your father?’

‘Yes, I thank your highness. A touch of stiffness in the knees but otherwise quite hale.’

‘And your mother, Anne ... no, Amy, yes?’

‘Anne. Very well, I thank you. Father has bought some land in Hertfordshire and is gradually letting my brothers take over the

business. Robert is in Calais and Jack runs the shop.'

'Jack? Ah, John Lambard the younger. Doing well?'

I nodded. 'Yes, your highness.'

'I'm not surprised. Robert Cousin, my Master of the Wardrobe, bought some Florentine sarsynett from your brother this week for seven shillings a yard.'

'That's ridiculously high,' I exclaimed and then clapped my hand to my lips mortified.

The King's face hardened. 'Are you saying my officer was fleeced?' A glimmer of humour that did not quite flatten the corners of his mouth replenished my courage.

'Shorn might be a better word,' I replied demurely, shaking some crumbs from my skirts.

My audacity amused him. 'So what should he have paid?'

'No more than five shillings and sixpence.'

'Hmm.' He swished his mouth sideways. 'I'd better have a word with Rob.'

'There are some really beautiful summer brocades due in any day now. I saw the samples a few months ago. The Queen has—'

He grinned. 'Ah, gotten an order in already, has she?' He took a gulp of wine and waved a hand while he swallowed. 'Separate household, see. 'Course being in business, you'd know how it all works. Can I have another of your cakes, if you please?' I reached up for the basket and passed two across.

He demolished one and took a bite of the other. 'So how long have you been married?'

‘Since I was twelve.’

‘Any whelps?’

‘Whelps?’

‘Children. I have five princesses, two princes and at least two bastards.’ He thought about it. ‘No, more, I daresay.’

‘I haven’t any, your grace.’

‘What, none?’ He thumbed the crumbs from his lips. ‘No ... no ...’ A languid flourish of fingers sufficed as though the word for stillbirth was only for a woman’s use.

‘No, your highness, I believe I was wed too soon.’

He frowned, his eyes sympathetic. ‘Happened to Lady Margaret Beaufort, the Countess of Richmond. Not even fourteen when she birthed her son, Henry Tudor. Tudor, heard of him, yes? Lives on crumbs from the Count of Brittany’s trenchers. She never had any more progeny, thank the Lord.’ He had a most heartrending smile, I discovered, and he was using it on me now. ‘Does it sadden you, Mistress Shore?’

It? Being barren?

‘Not any more, your highness. I am happy to go down on all fours and play bears with my friends’ children, but at the end of the day I am content to hand them back.’

‘All fours?’ he echoed wickedly, laughter breeding with speculation in his expression and I could see he was imagining – O Jesu!

‘I growl very fiercely,’ I said quickly, hoping that he could not see my blushes. He really was sinfully attractive.

‘Oh, do you?’

The neighbourhood bells tolled six and I was still in the lion’s den. Children would have been a useful excuse to leave.

The King of England read my mind. ‘Curfew is three hours hence.’ *Wriggle out of that*, his expression told me.

‘Yes, your highness, but it is later than when I met Lord Hastings before and my husband—’

‘Is of no consequence, Will tells me.’

‘I am sorry,’ I murmured, rising to my feet, and again shaking the crumbs from my skirts. ‘I have the cakes to deliver ... to the poor, otherwise ...’

His highness stood up as if out of courtesy but his lower lip betrayed displeasure. Then he twisted, retrieved the bolster and, holding it against his body with one arm, sensuously slid his other hand down it. ‘I thought we might ...’ A jerk of his head towards the bed finished the question. At least it *was* a question.

I shook my head treasonously and Lord knows what else of me shook. Oh yes, my senses were stirred. Not just his handsome looks but the aura of power had me wondrously thrilled.

The bolster was flung aside with a deliberate menace. I briskly picked up my basket and hugged it to my waist. There was no way I could withstand him if he chose to stop me leaving so I stood there, my chin raised defiantly. It was his decision.

Tight, calculating tucks appeared in his cheeks. King Edward was watching me as though I was his assailant in the combat yard; all I had was basketwork. I clasped it tighter to my waist and

stared up at him defiantly, my heartbeat frantic.

A woman shrieked playfully outside. The floorboards creaked lightly as she ran across them. Heavier footsteps chased her. A guffaw of laughter. A door opening. No one would care if I screamed, and what difference would it make? The hawks outside were probably royal servants on subtle sentry duty.

At a loss in this impasse, I primly pulled the napkin back over the remaining cakes like a diligent housewife, without taking my eyes from my antagonist, and suddenly, mercifully, the swords between us were lowered. The King's cheeks grew full again, a smile grew and grew and then he laughed.

I took one step towards the door but his voice snapped out like a whip. 'The King has not given you leave, Mistress Shore.'

I looked around. 'Does he need to?' I chided gently.

'By the Devil,' he murmured, but it was amusement not arrogance that graced his face. 'Yes he does. Before you utterly devastate me by leaving, let us just get matters straight.'

I swallowed, glanced at the door, and then back at him, put down my basket and gave a shallow curtsy.

'Thank you,' he said sarcastically. The large gems on his pale hands flashed in the candlelight as he made a steeple of his fingers. 'Now let me understand this aright. You will lie with Will but not with me?' *Even though I am your king, younger and better looking*, the lift of eyebrows seemed to be saying.

I nodded, more apprehensive than ever. Apparently the bell had sounded for the second bout.

He swayed forward slightly but I did not dare recoil. I was not going to let him close me in with the bed at my back.

‘You do confound me, Mistress Shore,’ he murmured. ‘I understood that your liaison with my chamberlain is for the purpose of ... education?’

These two men had discussed me? Curse it! As what? A silly hen ripe for plucking?

‘Th—that is t-true, your highness. I wanted to find out ...’ I bit my lip, horrified at what he must believe about me. ‘It is most ... most generous of you to offer to ... to further the tuition but thank you, no.’

I curtsied, trying to hide my hurt. It was as if God had tipped burning oil upon my soul. Hastings had betrayed me. I was nothing but a jest.

‘Kings rarely make *offers* except to other royalty,’ he replied with hauteur. He strode from me and turned, his voice growing dryer with each syllable: ‘Kings tend to make commands.’

How should I escape him? Sweet Mother of God! I could hardly argue that I was virtuous.

‘It shames me that Lord Hastings told you of my circumstances, your highness.’

‘But you have signed an indenture with him and must keep loyal. Poor Mistress Shore, alas, how terrifying the consequences if you disobey. No doubt Hastings will slap my face with his glove on his return and slit my throat in fury. You’ll probably be hanged in one of your pretty garters.’

It was belittling.

‘I thank your grace most honestly for supper.’ I curtsied deeply.

He inclined his head haughtily. ‘Go, then.’

‘Please,’ I said to the King of England, and proffered my basket. ‘Would you like to take these back to the palace for your children?’

‘Where have you been?’ growled Shore, as I came in through the yard door.

‘Taking cakes to the poor.’ To a man poor in humility! God have mercy! What a fool I’d proved. I must be the laughing stock of Westminster.

‘Without a basket?’

‘Oh bother, I left the cursed thing behind.’ Was my face scarlet?

‘Tell me where you left it and ah’ll send one of the boys.’ By his tone, he was determined to make a liar of me.

‘Lordy, I cannot remember.’ I turned away, tucking my waistcloth into my belt.

‘Like that, is it?’

I closed my eyes, knowing the lid was off the seething pot. Was truth the best way, slid in cleanly like a dagger rather than administered in a slow poison? But it was he who astonished me. I knew all week that he had something on his mind and here at last came confession.

‘There’s summat ah have to tell you, wife. There was this

cherrylips came into the shop last week when ah was serving on my own. Tricked out in finery she was like a real lady. She swished abaht in her furs and trinkets, and when she'd made her choice, she offered to pay for t'cloth by spreadin' her legs. Ah said, yes, but she'd better be quick. Anyroad, ah locked the door and led her to t'stairs so as no one could see us from the street. She bared her breasts and eased her skirts slowly above her thigh. Had me in a raight sweat ...'

Please Heaven, it never rose, I prayed, imagining my argument for a divorce evaporating with Shore's resurrection. 'Did you ...'

'No, No, damn it, ah could not manage it, even with her! Christ!' He smote so hard upon the board that the inkpot jumped and then he grabbed the alejack and hurled it furiously at the wall. I stared open mouthed at the liquid, pale as urine, trickling down the whitewash.

He was breathing hard, staring at me like a cornered beast. I feared he might strike me. His mouth arced into an ugly loop of pain and tight slits of skin swallowed his eyes. 'O Jesu, Jesu, Jesu!' He sank to his knees, cradling his ribs and began an anguished keening.

I flung myself on my knees and drew him to me. 'There, there!' I soothed, stifling his howls against my bosom. I rocked him until the shudders ceased.

'Ah'm so sorry, Elizabeth,' he sobbed. 'All these years. Ah'm so sorry.' He tried to pull away but I held him fast.

'There is more to a man than his prick, William Shore.

The whole world knows that. You should not judge yourself so cruelly.'

'But ah'm no true man. I am cursed by God.'

'Then we both are, William.'

Still reeling from Hastings' betrayal, I needed a few moments to grasp the implications of Shore's confession. He was no longer blaming me for not giving him a child. I was unsaddled at last. No more guilt to carry like a weary packhorse.

'There is something I should tell *you*,' I said, holding by his sleeves so he could not pull away. 'I went with another man.' His reaction was a fierce start to free himself but I held on. 'So, you see, you must forgive me also. Two weeks ago for the first time. Just once. I wanted to know what it was like.'

'An' what was it like?'

'It was satisfactory. There was no commitment.'

'Yer tuphead,' he snarled. 'Dinna you make sure he was ... clean?'

My heart lurched. Whore's pox as well as a broken heart? By Heaven, I hoped not.

'Can you forgive me, William?'

His face was as chill as a Derby winter. 'Does it matter if ah can't?'

VII

‘You ignored my messengers.’ Hastings came striding up into my solar. It was the first time he had visited upstairs. He sounded peevish, great lord peevish. Not a surprise; I had ignored three notes and two noseays. Shore followed him in, mumbling about broadcloth.

‘Broadcloth, be damned!’ The Lord Chamberlain neatly slammed the door in my husband’s face. Then he opened it again. ‘Oh, Hell take it! Forgive the discourtesy, Shore. I thank you for your offer of assistance but pray don’t let me detain you. My steward will deal with the order.’ He waited until my stunned husband was downstairs before he dropped the latch. ‘*Well?*’

‘My lord.’ I rose from my curtsy, smoothed my skirts and looked up at him with my best businesslike face. ‘There was intervention.’

The frost melted slightly. He folded his arms and his elegant black sleeves flashed their amber taffeta linings.

‘Him?’ A condescending jerk of head towards the door

‘No, my lord, your friend, the one who charged in on us.’

‘That friend! I see. My abrupt departure annoyed you!’ He tossed his hat onto the small table and surprisingly donned the manner of sackcloth and ashes. ‘Well, I cannot blame you and I do apologise, but the Breton diplomats were anxious to sign the treaty and get back to Duke Francis.’

‘Your pardon, I did not understand that at the time.’ I poured him out some wine in a forgiving fashion.

He grinned sheepishly at me across the rim of our best goblet. ‘Just as well “my friend” interrupted, my luscious Elizabeth. I do not think I could have managed a fourth coupling.’ At least he had remembered the other three. ‘Anyway, I ask you to excuse my friend’s churlish manners. Sometimes he needs a boot on his arse.’

‘Do you bow, my lord, before you kick him?’

My question caused a little silence. He chewed his cheeks before he answered.

‘Ah. Clever of you to realise.’

‘I didn’t, my lord. Until I had a command from you to meet me at Gerrard’s Hall. Except you did not arrive, he did.’

Although Hastings seemed to be considering the revelation, I wondered if he had already known. ‘I see,’ he murmured with the cool worldliness that was still so alien to me, ‘and I daresay my “friend” usurped my favour with you.’

Such a conclusion mightily annoyed me. The bed-swapping habits of the palace might be commonplace to him but they were unacceptable to me.

‘He did not usurp anything, my lord, save two little oatcakes. I declined his request.’

Hastings’ beautiful eyes widened and emotion returned to his face, even if it was merely surprise. ‘Is my hearing amiss, Elizabeth? *You* said “no” to the King?’

‘Of course,’ I exclaimed passionately. ‘I do have some honour.’ Did he think of me only as fresh city meat? ‘I assure you I am no whore to be prancing in and out of gentlemen’s beds.’

‘Just so.’ His mouth was a grave slash now. Oh, such a diplomat, shifting position to accommodate my vehemence. A token flurry of jealousy would have been more acceptable. ‘Was that your only reason, Elizabeth?’

‘I felt some loyalty to you, my lord.’ *Some* – my fledgling attempt at Westminster nonchalance. ‘Please do not mistake me,’ I added swiftly to reassure him that I was not infatuated. ‘I certainly do not seek to put any obligation on you. We had an agreement – just you and I.’

‘Elizabeth, I hope you are not thinking that I put his grace up to this?’

‘No, of course not,’ I lied, resolving to sieve my feelings later. ‘He—’ I cleared my throat. ‘His highness explained you were at Ashleigh.’

‘Ashby,’ he corrected. ‘My castle at Ashby-de-la-Zouch.’ His hand rose in a flourish as to how I should find it. ‘West of Leicester.’

‘Oh, west,’ I echoed dryly.

‘We were celebrating my stepdaughter’s name day. I bought the jewelled girdle for her, remember?’

‘Yes.’ I was not a jealous person but I felt it now. Unreasonable of me. I desired his affection. But I had no right. I did not own him. What else had I expected?

‘Cecily was introduced to her future husband.’ With a scowl, he took a sweet wafer from the platter and carried his goblet to the window, where he stood, his back turned. With King Edward active on the board, perhaps, like me, he was uncertain of the next move in this game of seduction. *If there was a next move?* At the moment, trust lay between us like a bleeding corpse.

His fidelity was a matter of geography. I must accept that. And did Lady Katherine up at Ashby accept that? By Heaven, if his marriage vows could be bent, what rules *did* he play by? His loyalty to his king? Was that the only standard in his world? If King Edward said, ‘Give me that bread you are eating, that ring from your finger, that woman you are escrewing!’ Did he ever refuse? If his royal master wanted to sample Lady Cecily, his stepdaughter, what then?

‘Was she pleased, my lord?’

He turned. ‘Your pardon, she?’

‘Your stepdaughter. Was she pleased by her future husband?’

A sneer spoilt his face. ‘Yes, for now. That’s one hedge that won’t need jumping. His horns and the forked tail will only come out after they’re married.’ He took an angry swig of wine.

‘Who is *he*?’ I probed gently, seating myself on the footstool.

‘Queen’s eldest boy by her first marriage. Tom Grey, Marquis of Dorset. Cecily is a great heiress – vast estates in Devonshire. Fly in the web, poor child. If lightning strikes Tom Grey dead, there’s still his brother to snaffle her up.’

‘Can you not withhold your consent?’

Hastings shook his head. 'I might as well piss in the wind.' He downed the wine and slammed the goblet on the small table. 'And what is so ironic, sweetheart, is that before Ned married Elizabeth Grey – Baroness Ferrers of Groby, as she called herself – she and I had a neighbours' agreement that if Kate and I had a daughter, Tom would marry her.'

God's mercy, before the poor mite was even born!

I refilled his wine cup, flattered he felt free to speak his mind or was this a means to lull me back to trusting him?

'So Grey was not considered for Lady Cecily back then?' I asked.

'Hell, no. A landless nobody, son of an attainted traitor? No, Cecily was far too wealthy for the likes of him. It was sheer charity on my part to have any dealings with "the Widow Grey".' He took a gulp of wine. 'Of course, once Elizabeth became queen, she set her sights on Cecily's inheritance.'

'But you could delay the marriage, my lord. If Cecily is only fifteen, I beg of you, don't let her go to him yet.' I should not have spoken so but Hastings did not take offence.

With a fond look, he reached out a hand and caressed my cheek. 'You speak from the heart, do you not, sweetheart?'

I nodded and felt the tears pricking behind my lashes at the kindness of the gesture. I kissed his palm. 'My lord ...' I began but his mind had moved on.

'So have you've begun rattling the bars of Holy Church yet for your divorce?'

‘Rattling, yes. I’ve made a start.’

‘I’m glad to hear it. These matters take a millennium. If you don’t start proceedings straight away, you’ll still be waiting at the Second Coming.’ Then he realised his improper choice of words.

I pleated my lips trying not to giggle and then we both laughed. He rose to his feet and slid his arms about my thighs and drew me to him. ‘Let’s go and sup at Gerrard’s Hall. Time for another lesson, my beauteous scholar.’

Such cunning I learned from the tryst that evening: the act of love does not have to be with the woman underneath; a woman may straddle a man and, what’s more, a man and woman may lie busy tip to tail.

‘It is about power as well as passion, Elizabeth, conquest and surrender. A game of subtlety and strategy until you bring the protagonist to their knees, so to speak.’ That disarming smile. He encouraged me to use my imagination and to play out one of my fantasies. I had thought that the reality would spoil it, but with Hastings, I was wrong.

‘Soon there will be nothing left to teach you, mercer’s daughter.’ He whacked my behind playfully as I lay on my front after we had sported, and kissed the hollow of my back. ‘And now I desire to ask a favour. Remember I told you one of my duties was to organise revels for the court.’

‘Yes, my lord. You were considering *The Siege of Troy*.’

‘Well, the damned siege ladders are going up the walls tomorrow after supper if I haven’t fallen on my sword by then.’

Ah, if only he would give me a pass to witness such a spectacle. 'I'm sure it will be a marvel, my lord.'

He gave a humpf. 'Not with the citadel unfinished and Helen of Troy breaking his ankle in the palace yard last night.' His gaze swerved to meet mine. 'I don't suppose you'd like to take the part?'

'Me? You'd be better with a duck from the Thames. The last time I was in a pageant I had lost my two front teeth and was warned not to smile or the Devil would carry me off. No, I lie. I did dance once before Queen Margaret. Goodness, you are serious.'

'You can be a damnably acute mimic when it pleases you.'

'Yes, but that's just between us. Shore's hair would stand on end if I said yes.'

'I'm glad we would get a rise out of him somehow.'

I clapped my hand to my lips. 'That was unkind, my lord.' I spluttered, battling my guilt anew and ignoring his beseeching expression. 'Absolutely no. It would be like taking hemlock. Why, Shore and I could be struck off the guest list for next year's mayor-making.' I tried to keep a straight face but dissolved into laughter.

'Worse than death, eh? But seriously, Elizabeth Lambard, you'll enjoy yourself, I promise. It's very simple. Prince Paris watches you dance, scoops you off to Troy and the rest of the time you are on the Troy battlements watching the duels until Menelaus, your husband, carries you back to Greece. Not much

to it.'

'If she's "carried off" most of the time, I shouldn't think the broken ankle matters.' I turned away from him. 'And it doesn't have a happy ending if she has to go back to her husband.' I cradled my body, wondering how long these snatched moments with Hastings could last. 'I'm a real Helen and tonight I have to go back and there's no happy ending.'

'There will be if Catesby keeps your proctor's nose to the grindstone.' He kissed my shoulder. 'Humour me, play Helen. You said you would like to see the court.'

'See them, not hop around in front of them like a demented rabbit.'

'You can dance, my dear. I saw you in the shop and it was most charming.'

'I'm a mercer's wife, my lord, not a handmaiden from the court of Solomon.'

'Hmmm,' he put a hand on my backside again and shook me playfully. 'We could disguise you and it's a very pretty costume. I took your advice and got rid of the breast cones. Except.'

'No!'

How many times can a woman say no? Clearly, denial was not a word in Hastings' vocabulary. Next day at three o'clock, the shop had two visitors. The first was a servant of Sir Edward Brampton's requesting Shore to bring sample cloths to his house without delay. The second was one dainty Master Matthew Talwood, who carried an urgent letter from the Lord

Chamberlain asking me how he could put on *The Siege of Troy* without the Lady Helen? What's more, Hastings pledged he would buy me a wagon of lawyers and a score of girdles if I saved his reputation as Master of the King's Revels.

Ha, I did not believe a word but Talwood was insistent: my lord's barge was awaiting me at Puddle Wharf beside Beaumont's Inn. *His barge!* He'd sent an entire barge?

'A word for the wise, Mistress Shore,' said my visitor, flicking back his long grey locks. 'Save for his grace the King and his royal brothers, Lord Hastings is the most powerful nobleman in England. That letter is not a request, it's a command. There are plenty like you, Mistress Shore, but only one of him.'

VIII

The rebellious wench inside me was prancing with gleeful excitement as we boarded the barge, but behind my veil my lips were tense, and my knuckles gleamed white in my lap as I seated myself beneath the awning. Talwood started to tell me about the play and what was expected – just one dance, he said. Did he realise it could destroy my reputation forever if word reached the city? Just one dance! *Be brave*, I chided myself, *if you stumble and they laugh at you, it doesn't matter. At least you may glimpse King Edward in all his magnificence.* Yes, I admit I had been thinking much about King Edward.

Talwood had passes that saw us through a succession of courtyards and sentries until we reached the postern of a half-timbered building adjoining the Great Hall. The players' chamber proved a chaotic hell of spangles and peevish hubbub. At one end, men in wigs and leather kilts were in mock combat; at the other a large man with faux breasts and a wig that Medusa would have envied, was having red powder rubbed below his cheekbones. My destination was a side chamber where a baker's dozen of minstrels were practising.

Talwood introduced me to Walter Haliday, the hoary-headed Marshall of the King's Minstrels, and delivered a warning to the rest: 'Be diligent with our dancer, my masters. This is her only chance to practise and then she needs to get into costume with

great haste. The disports begin in an hour.'

An hour! I could have encircled Hastings' neck with a cord and tugged it tight.

I was supposed to rattle a timbrel as I danced but I asked Haliday if the tabor player could provide the rhythm instead.

'Pretend you have a mirror, dear. Gives you something to do with your hands,' suggested Talwood, and he kept directing me until he was satisfied.

The sound of clapping coming from the doorway made me turn. Hastings was standing behind me in his full court dress.

'As always, you underestimated your ability, mistress.'

I stared speechless at his splendour – the high-crowned, black hat with a jewelled band; the silver collar of Yorkist sunnes-and-roses straddling his shoulders; and the Order of the Garter encircling his thigh. Such tailoring, too; the way his slashed, damson sleeves were stitched in – pouched to give breadth at the shoulders.

He thanked the musicians and ushered me from the room. As no one was in sight in the passageway, he kissed me on the mouth. I imagine he tasted my nervousness.

'You are doing well, sweetheart.'

'My lord, in all honesty I am fearful.'

'Elizabeth, you will outshine the rest, believe me.'

I tried to smile. 'It's just that in your magnificence, you are like a stranger. Is every noble lord like to be dressed so? It dazzles me. I feel like a country mouse.'

‘But I know you are a proud little city mouse.’ He pinched my cheek. ‘You will surpass us all, believe me. And Talwood will look after you throughout. Do exactly as he says and all will go smoothly. Now, we must make haste. There’s a tailor standing by to make adjustments to your costume.’

I followed him back to the confusion of the greater chamber. The instant he entered, the room hushed. I swiftly curtsied to him with the rest.

‘Friends,’ Hastings began, addressing the players, ‘Remember the purpose of the disguising is to provide joy and laughter. If aught goes wrong, do not put on a grim visage but bluff it out. Are the battlements and wooden horse at the ready, Master Curthoyse?’

An officer straightened and stepped forward. ‘They are, my lord.’

‘Excellent. As you were, good friends. I leave you in the Master of the Wardrobe’s capable hands.’

No one moved.

‘Your pardon, my good lord,’ called out one of the actors, ‘but we ‘ave no Helen.’

Hastings gave a nod to Talwood to deal with the matter and left the chamber.

Talwood gestured me to my feet. ‘This is Helen.’

‘But she’s a woman.’

O Blessed Christ, I thought, I’m the only woman here. This is wrong, very wrong.

Beside me, Talwood bristled, ‘And your point, sirrah?’

‘Our point,’ yelled someone else, ‘is that only men can be players.’

Talwood was primed. ‘This woman is a dancer. She has no lines. *Pirouette, darling, pirouette!*’ he hissed. Scarlet-faced, I turned, swirling my skirt as gracefully as I might.

A dancer! I blew the actors a kiss and sank in a deep curtsy. Christ’s mercy, what if this reached the Guild? Shore would turn me out of doors. I could find myself begging on the streets tomorrow. I must be lunatic.

Appeased, the players returned to their preparations.

‘Thank Heaven for that,’ Talwood said, fanning himself. ‘Oh, they are so precious. Now, let’s get you dressed.’

There was no privacy and I had to swallow my sense of niceties. I had imagined a gorgeous robe with purfled hem; the tailor presented me with two lengths of thin blue silk. Secured at the shoulders and cinched with a narrow cloth-of-gold belt, this was Helen’s costume. That unravelled my excitement. The fabric scarcely covered my knees; the side slits – ‘devils’ windows’ – would expose me to the thigh; and the flesh-coloured hose and garters had gone missing. I refused to dance without a petticoat.

‘You’re a beautiful ancient Greek, remember, dearie,’ clucked the tailor from his knees as I insisted he close up the side seams. ‘Them maidens went bare-legged because of the heat, and bare-arsed too in case they met any of those lovely pagan gods. There, I’m not sewing the windows any lower.’

I refused the uncomfortable saffron wig. At least the pretty half-mask of white satin, edged with silver braid, was perfect, but as I began to tie it on, Master Talwood twittered in protest. Frantic gestures on his part summoned a man with several tubby facebrushes poking out of his waistcloth. Along with him came a boy with a peddler's tray – a minute woodland of charcoal sticks, kohl and pastes of all colours.

They smudged blushes across my cheekbones, puffed a fulsome shimmer of gold dust wherever my skin was uncovered and added red to my lips. Fine dark lines were gently drawn around my eyes and my hair was unbraided, draped over my right shoulder and tethered with a golden clasp.

Finally, Talwood took out a wrapper from his doublet and drew back its folds to reveal a necklace of gilded leaves. 'It's only lent to you by my lord, you understand,' he warned.

The boy offered me a silver mirror. Mistress Shore had vanished behind the pagan artifice. Caparisoned in mask and silks, I felt as skittish as an inexperienced tournament horse, and these last moments of waiting while the trestles of the great hall were stacked away could have been torture save some of the players joked with me in friendly fashion and smoothed away my fears.

Hastings came back to make a final inspection of us. 'Is Lord Paris not here yet?' he exclaimed wearily. 'Curthoyse, fetch him hither NOW!' He moved along the line and halted before me. 'Where in Hell is Helen's coronet?'

'Lordy!' The tailor scuttled out and returned with a circlet of tinsel threaded with artifice cornflowers, poppies and laurel.

'Princess.' Hastings clicked his fingers for the diadem. With the smile of a sinful archbishop, he crowned me.

Westminster Palace Hall was in shadow save for the bright ring of candles in the centre where we were to strut. We were herded behind a screen and there we huddled awaiting the return of the royal retinue. I was not the only player who gasped at the massive dimensions of the hall. Huge oaken beams, carved with angels' heads, thrust out from the walls above our heads and higher still was a great row of embrasured windows, set in jowls of stone, and in each stood a stern, crowned statue.

I knew from Father that a huge stone table ran along the dais. Peering between my companions' shoulders, I made out the glimmering stretch of white cloth. No one was seated there; the two thrones and benches were empty.

Below the dais at the sides of the hall stood massive cupboards with shelves of glinting platters and flagons. Every other inch of wall was lined with trestle tables propped lengthways. In front of these were the benches and here sat the rest of the court using the trestle supports as backrests.

A trumpet sounded. I heard the assembly rise in a rustle of apparel to make obeisance. Crammed as I was amongst the sweaty bodies jostling for a view, my mouth went dry and my heart panicked, but then the small pipes began and the Greek kings stepped forward leaving me space to breathe. I forced my

lungs to calm and crossed myself against evil. Vigilant Talwood patted my arm; I had no choice but to screw up my courage.

Our disport began with poetry but no one in the court was listening. Only when several gentlemen began to call out ribald comments to the players, did the fine lords hush to listen to the jests.

As each Greek king was introduced, I had the chance to distinguish the chief players. The man portraying my husband, King Menelaus of Sparta, was a scrag end of a creature. His brother and blustering overlord, King Agamemnon, looked fit to run a tavern. Achilles had such a magnificent body, all bronzed with metallic paint, that he had me wondering if the King, England's own 'Achilles', had stooped to play a part. No, as the warrior drew back, I heard a shrewish whine: "Ere, why 'as 'ector been given betta armour than me?"

Prince Paris, thank Heaven, was sufficiently manly to be Helen's lover. He drew great applause as he swaggered forth. Except for a glittering baldric, his chest was bare. I was shocked by his immodest kilt. The leather straps scarcely covered his breech clout.

'Be ready!' Talwood whispered as the Greek kings returned behind the screen.

The flute's voice sounded sensuously.

*And now Prince Paris, blessed by moonless sky,
Like a night thief hides among the shadows
To see this beauteous lady—*

'Now!' Talwood shoved me forth and there were whoops and cheers as I curtsied.

Hill, the tabor player, began a sensual beat and the beguiling notes of the small pipes softly slid into the rhythm.

Snared in the circle of light, I lifted my invisible hand mirror at arm's length and danced with my reflection. Hidden behind my mask, Elizabeth Lambard was unshackled, free to become Helen of Troy, a princess who knew she could make men kill to possess her. As I stilled, sensing Paris' presence, like a doe hearing her hunter, it was no longer Hastings' face in my make-believe mirror but a lover I'd always dreamed of.

When the music ended and the applause took over, my practical self dashed out from her temporary prison beneath my heart, trying to seize back control and dampen down her twin's sinful exuberance. I held her back a few moments longer, acknowledging the huzzahs like I imagined a real princess might with a gracious lowering of the head. Oh, this was heady, wonderful. I should not sleep tonight.

Paris grew impatient. He strode over and embraced me from behind, his prick hard beneath his kilt. Bastard! While the narrator tediously droned out the story for anyone thick as a London piecrust, this cursed Trojan was rubbing his groin against me. Sloppy kisses gushed up my arm from wrist to neck. Worse, he turned me in his embrace and went for my mouth. I resisted; his breath stank of wine but the fellow kept firm hold of my thighs.

‘Don’t overdo the virtue,’ he muttered against my lips. ‘Be craaaazed with love.’ He held me tight against his belly. When he adventured his hand down my throat to my breast, I was doing the stiffening.

‘Lovely,’ he murmured, leering down the gap. ‘Fancy a bit of ravishing afterwards?’

‘Squeeze either an’ you’ll be a coun’er tenor by tonight,’ I hissed back sweetly.

The verses ended. Paris neatly scooped me up with an arm beneath my knees. I pretended to look up at him lovingly. It was a shame he could not have kept my draperies secure. I think the whistles were for a side view of my thigh.

There was no time to chide. While the Greek princes were whining that Helen had been snatched by a Trojan and resolving to go to war to fetch her home, Talwood hauled me through the side door and we raced through passageways until we reached the mock barbican of Troy, where it stood outside the far end of the great hall. An icing of players already clung to its battlements.

Talwood pointed to the ladder. ‘Up! Be quick!’

Before I could get both feet on the plank that served as rampart, the ardent assistants whipped the ladder away. Queen Hecuba’s brawny arm saved me.

‘A squeeze, ain’t it?’ He evidently liked garlic in his stew.

‘God’s Blood,’ I muttered in an alley voice. ‘I feel like one of them jars too broad for a pantry shelf.’

‘An’ I’m a barrel. Move, you lardcakes! ‘Elen should be in the

middle.'

The 'lardcakes' obeyed. Cassandra, a youth in a long black wig, deftly swung around Hecuba, and we performed an intricate, perilous reversal so that I ended up midway next to Prince Hector's wife and son.

'Have to get it right, dearie,' Hecuba whispered. 'You bein' the last to leave.' He straightened his false bosom and then nudged me: 'Did Paris feel you up?'

'Aye, 'e did.'

The others laughed. 'Oooh, lucky you.'

'Tell me,' I whispered. "Ow's the player who was to be 'elen? Is 'is ankle mending?'

'He ain't done nothing to his ankle, luv. His lordship didn't want 'im to do it no more.'

Aha, I was beginning to suspect as much.

'So wot's your name, precious?' asked Hector's wife, but before I could answer, the edifice shook as the attendants grabbed hold.

"Ere we go, ladies,' chortled Hecuba, as the doors opened. 'Wave graciously. We're royalty, remember.'

The damnable barbican wobbled perilously as it was pushed forwards. Would the timber brackets break, spew us out across the flagstone plain of Troy in a tangle of gauze and wigs? The courtiers were laughing.

'Oh, I adore playing a queen to a queen,' Hecuba gushed, waving airily towards the heart of the dais. 'Ready to blub,

Mistress Hector? Got your onion, darlin'?"

With nothing to do save pose like a princess at a tournament, I began to enjoy myself. Although Hector and Achilles' wooden swords could not strike sparks, there was sufficient force in their combat to have the courtiers cheering. When Hector received the death blow, he pierced the bag hidden beneath his waist, and enacted copious spluttering and staggering as the blood oozed between his fingers.

The onion smell was strong but I wasn't prepared for the horrific scream right next to me. A shrieking Mistress Hector and son scrambled down to do a 'woe is me' over the corpse.

'employed for 'is screeches,' Hecuba informed me.

Then came the death of Achilles. He grabbed an arrow to his heel and died with a great deal of twitching. Finally, the Wooden Horse rumbled in. I was disappointed. It was just scaffolding with a painted great horse head sticking out on a pole. Its body was made up of warriors, each holding a curved, dun-coloured shield to resemble a horse's flanks.

'Doom, doom!' Cassandra, who had already climbed down, rushed at the horse waving his arms like a housewife chasing the pigeons from a pea crop. He was carried off in the mêlée as the Greek soldiers sprang down and some thirty men waged battle.

When the swords and verse came to a standstill, Hecuba descended to wring his huge hands over dead Paris. I tried to look bereft as 'she' was led away sobbing. Once all the corpses were dragged into the shadows, the fields of Troy lay deserted

and I realised with a jolt that I was the only player left on the battlements

Oh, for more onions. Broken hearted, I held my wrist to my eyes so I could glance back at Talwood. He was firmly signalling me to stay in place.

What in Heaven ...? Ah, phew, the narrator stepped back into the candlelight and King Menelaus strode up to the wall of Troy. The cascade of poetry stopped abruptly. Menelaus held out his hand, waiting for me to return with him to Sparta.

Devilment crept into me. Poor Helen. Had Menelaus been a William Shore? I gravely shook my head at his highness of Sparta and flapped my fingers like ass's ears. The court began to chuckle and then shriek with laughter as the player became really angry.

His overlord, King Agamemnon, joined him. He also held out his hand to me. Still I refused and then suddenly there was a scraping of chair, a movement across the high table, followed by applause. A third king! Tall and magnificent, King Edward halted before the gates of Troy, looked up at me and held out his hand.

By the Saints, I'd never intended this. How I managed that narrow ladder behind the edifice with my heart trying to escape my body, I'll never know.

England's king was a huge haze of gold and sable. I inclined my head to him like Princess Helen should, and he graciously led me forward to make a player's curtsy to the court, then keeping firm hold of my hand, he grinned down at me like a lion viewing

dinner.

‘I knew you’d come to me eventually,’ he said.

Mistress

I

Paris saved me from answering. Not to be excluded from the tumult of clapping and stamping, he materialised on my left, grabbed my hand with surprising assurance for an artisan, snatched off his wig and bowed. Tethered ash blond hair and smiling teeth gleamed in the candlelight. A young man with dangerous ebullience. He had to be one of the court, I realised, but I was so euphoric it did not matter. I tugged my hand free from his and beckoned the rest of the players out of the darkness. Just because they were not nobles, it did not diminish their right to tributes.

We all made obeisance again and then – thank God – proud hands clasped my shoulders. I knew Hastings was standing behind me.

‘Excellent, Will!’ exclaimed King Edward, but his eyes were on me. ‘Heard you helped out at the final moment, Mistress Shore. Our thanks to you and our compliments on your dancing.’

I could scarce whisper a thank you as I was high on the huzzahs. Sweet Heaven, name a woman who wouldn’t be!

‘I’m Dorset, by the way,’ said Paris in my ear, as if the revelation would ensure I melted. He kissed my hand.

‘Ignore him,’ said King Edward. ‘Paris has been defeated. Let us leave it that way.’

Hastings’ fingers tightened. “‘Helen” needs to change.’

‘Only her mind,’ murmured the King, ‘or is that now done?’

Too dazed to follow the footwork of this conversation, I did not dare stare above the diamond clasps of his highness’ doublet. ‘Later, then,’ he was saying to somebody.

‘Can we all come?’ quipped Dorset, his lascivious gaze upon my breasts.

And then the atmosphere chilled.

‘Elizabeth,’ purred King Edward.

I thought for a foolish instant that he spoke to me and then *she* appeared from the shadows, a woman in her late thirties, her belly high with child. His queen, Elizabeth Woodville, with emeralds glittering around her throat and golden threads crisscrossing her headdress. Behind the transparent demi-veil, a frown marred her perfect forehead and her full lower lip betrayed her to be somewhat out of temper. I was overwhelmed, not by her ill-humour, but because she was wearing one of Tabby’s girdles over her magnificent brocade gown. I gasped in delight and sank in a deep curtsy, far too euphoric to shiver at the malevolence flowing off her.

‘Ah, the Trojan horse,’ she remarked cryptically, setting her hand upon the King’s proffered wrist. ‘They say, “Beware the Greeks when they bring gifts”.’ Her moon-cool radiance beamed straight across my head at her husband’s friend.

‘Indeed, madame,’ agreed Hastings dryly. ‘Indeed.’

I expected no less than the promise of an escort home as soon as I had cleansed the colours from my face and wriggled back into

my own apparel, but when Lord Hastings sent a page requesting me to join him in his chambers, I agreed with delight. Even though the bells of St Martin-le-Grand would soon be sounding curfew in the city, I cheerfully followed Talwood through the coney warren of servants' passageways.

Hastings was sprawled with his feet upon a footstool and a fine glass goblet in his hand. His doublet and stomacher were gone, the collar of office dangled from the back of his chair, and only a gemmed cross glittered among the loosened laces of his shirt. He bestirred himself in welcome and kissed my cheek.

'Here is the necklace back, my lord,' I said, laying the golden leaves upon a little painted table.

'No, keep it as your player's fee, my dear Elizabeth. You exceeded all my expectations. Here, let me!' He fastened it back about my throat, before he poured me wine. Feeling the necklace against my skin and the costly goblet between my fingers, my senses thrilled. Elizabeth Lambard was in Westminster Palace drinking with the King's close friend. Except he looked haggard in the candlelight – utterly forgivable – *The Siege of Troy* would have leached anyone's vitality.

We touched rims. 'You did well,' he said, raising his glass to me.

I shook my head with genuine modesty. 'By the skin of my teeth. The other players were very kind and Master Talwood made a wondrous guardian angel. No, it is certainly you who deserve all the praise, my lord.' I drank to him.

There was no return sparkle in his eyes. No hint that he desired to make love tonight. Sometimes I forgot he was so much older. Around us, the silence seemed suddenly precipitous and my delight began to ebb. I took another sip of wine.

‘I noticed her highness was wearing one of my women’s girdles. Was that your doing, my lord?’

His forehead puckered as if the remark was not worthy of his attention. ‘No, I believe Lady Brampton presented it to her grace. Pray sit down, Elizabeth. I need to talk to you.’

Apprehensive, I made myself comfortable on a cross-legged chair and, with mounting dismay, watched him prowl across to the hearth and turn.

‘Elizabeth, you and I have come to a crossroads.’

I had anticipated this. But not so soon. Nothing lasts. I know that. The petals of the violet shrivel; its perfume lingers only in the memory.

‘You want no more to do with me?’ Had I behaved inappropriately tonight? Did I still lack the bedroom skills to please him? Or was I some matter to be tidied up before he left for France?

‘Stop it!’ he scolded. ‘I see all manner of thoughts flitting through your mind. Of course your company is a delight, my dear, but I can no longer be your lover. You need a younger man.’

‘But you are—’

‘Older than you by almost twenty years.’ I had thought him scarce forty. Astonishment must have blazed across my face for

he added: 'How kind of you to look surprised.'

'I am, I truly am. But, please, do not think that—'

He held a finger to his lips. '*Doucement*, little one. Our arrangement was temporary as we both agreed.' He drew a deep breath and I should have expected what came next. 'Out of loyalty to me or because of your sense of virtue, you have already said no to the King of England. Tonight you have a chance to reconsider.'

'*Tonight?*' Deep inside me, excitement began to stir but it was shackled by a suspicious anger. 'Was this your agenda all along, my lord? I know the man supposed to play Helen did not break his ankle.'

'Yes, you are right, he didn't. The opportunity was provided at royal request and now it is up to you, Elizabeth.' He took a taste of wine, watching me over the glass. 'I have brought the horse to water. You do not have to drink.'

So, broken in for the next rider, I was to be sold on.

'I trusted you, my lord.' Hurt underscored each word. My hand shook as I set down the glass. I intended to leave but he stepped into my path. '*Please-let-me-pass!*'

'No!' he said, holding up his palms. 'You must hear me out and ... and stop looking like an outraged virgin in a soldiers' bath-house!'

I sat down but I kept my back poker-stiff.

He dropped on his haunches beside me and his voice was gentler. 'Elizabeth, you offered yourself to me for no other reason than you wanted to learn and, by Heaven, I was happy to teach.'

All you asked of me was the name of a worthy lawyer, and in this world of venality I found that unselfishness remarkable, a breath of purest air. Now I am asking a favour. You have a choice tonight. The favour I ask is that you do not make your decision rashly.'

'A choice? Do I?' Disbelief spiked my voice; tears mustered behind my eyelids.

'Of course, you do, my dear.' He set a reassuring hand across mine. 'You can go back to your husband before curfew and nothing more will be asked of you ever again.' Back to my little kerchief of bleak space beyond the partition? A future of respectable celibacy – the worsted world of William Shore and lecherous Ralph the Younger?

The haughtiness left my spine and I stared unhappily down at my lap like a chastened child. His thumb scuffed my wrist. 'Can you not see that Life is challenging you, Elizabeth? Are you going to ride into the joust or watch from the crowd with everyone else?'

'Christ's mercy!' I rose to my feet in anguish. '*I am* everyone else. His grace said the awe would wear off but it hasn't. I am *nobody*, my lord.'

Hastings stayed where he was. 'Elizabeth, my dear, King Edward can have any woman in this entire kingdom – and he desires *you*.'

'Ha! Only because he saw me naked at Gerrard's Hall!' I exclaimed in disgust, rising and pacing to the window. 'I am a toy

on a stall. He just wants what you have, like a child that cannot bear to be left out.'

I heard the rustle of taffeta sleeves. He had climbed to his feet.

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