The Elizabeth Omnibus

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Young Bess

‘Such incredible fierce desire’
Nan Bullen

CHAPTER ONE

She had been allowed to come out to the royal flagship, and had been eating cherries and strawberries dipped in wine. All round her the sea was a flaming white glitter, the air was hot high summer, the wind in a mad mood; she was twelve years old, and Tom Seymour, who was Admiral of the Fleet and her favourite step-uncle, was talking to her as though she were rather more; he was joking and chaffing her, but then he did that with all women, even with the Queen.

And he went on talking to her, looking down at her with wickedly merry eyes half shut against the sunlight, watching her as though he really wanted to know how she would answer.

'And what will you do when England is invaded?' he asked her. 'Will you raise a regiment and ride at the head of it? Will you be Colonel Eliza or Captain Bess?'

'England won't be invaded. She never has been.'

'Not by the Normans?'

'Five hundred years ago! And they were us, or they couldn't have done it.'

'There speaks the proud Plantagenet!'

She stamped like a wilful pony and tossed her head, and the wind seized a strand of her smooth hair and pulled it out from

under her little jewelled cap, tossing it like a wisp of flame, teasing her just as he was doing; but it was a bad joke to mock the thin strain of royal Plantagenet in the Tudor blood – and with her father on board.

'It's lucky for you I'm no tell-tale-tit.'

'No, you'll never be that.'

'How can you tell what I'll be?'

All her egoism was agog. What would she be? At twelve years old anything was possible. And so he seemed to think as he scanned her, and the wind flicked the wisp of hair into her eyes and made her blink.

'How can I tell what you'll be? You may become anything. Elizabeth the Enigma. Will you be beautiful? Will you be plain? You might so easily be either. Will you have a pinched whey-face and carrot-coloured hair and a big peeled forehead like a pale green cooking apple? Or will you suddenly be mysteriously lovely, with your hair aflame over that white face, and that quick secret look of yours? What will you become, you strange secret little thing?'

'I *will* be beautiful, I *will*!'

But how astonishing that he should dare to talk to her like this. The man could be afraid of nothing.

He saw her thought and laughed again. The light reflected from the sea rippled up and up over them in a ceaseless wavering pattern. Their faces were still in that moment of silence, and their eyes looked steadily at each other; but all the time the flickering movement went on, a current of sea-light weaving its web over them both, over their bright, stiff clothes, the golden point of his beard, the red lights in her hair, the soft gleam of her bare neck and shoulders. For the

moment they seemed quite alone on board the *Great Harry* on the summer sea, the sails soaring above them like big white clouds, and the other ships careening and skimming past them, trailing their blue shadows over the sparkling water. They were here to defend the English shore, the long line of emerald downs behind them, and in front the golden shimmer of reeds that surrounded the Isle of Wight.

At any moment the enemy fleet might heave into sight out of the blue distance, the biggest fleet ever gathered together against this country. It was, as she had frequently heard of late, the most fateful moment in all their history. And she had been allowed on board the royal flagship! So great was the privilege, so lovely the day, so bright the air, so dangerous the moment, that perhaps it really did not matter what one said. She gave a swift glance behind her; no one was near. She said, very low, the thing she must not say; she spoke of the person who must never be mentioned.

'My mother – was she beautiful?'

The air still quivered in the sunlight, the deck shone smooth as satin; even the flighty wind had dropped for the moment as if to hold its breath. But her step-uncle still stood and looked at her; he did not turn away muttering some excuse to leave her as fast as possible; he did not even turn pale nor pull at his elegant little foreign-looking beard. He answered, without even lowering his voice, as though it were quite natural that she should speak of her mother.

'No, she was not beautiful. But she was clever enough to make anyone think so whom she wished.'

The child drew a deep breath as though they had stepped past a precipice.

'Well, I am clever, so all my tutors say. I too will make people think I am beautiful.'

'Who do you want to think it?'

She looked up at him and a deep mischievous smile stole over her pale little face. Tom Seymour was certain that the answer would be one swift monosyllable – 'You!' But it was not. With an odd mixture of childish coquetry and passionate sincerity she replied, 'Everybody!'

'What! Do you want the whole world for your lover?'

'Yes, or at least the whole country. I don't mind so much about foreigners.'

He flicked her cheek. 'What a wanton! And I thought you a modest little maid. There's another puzzle. Will you be good? Or will you be naughty – like your mother?'

There again. Yet the deck did not open and let him fall straight into the sea.

'You remember her?' she just breathed.

'As if I had this moment heard her laugh. "Ha, ha!", that was how all the Londoners read it when your father had his initial and hers intertwined over the gateways. H.A. – HA HA! They read right, for she laughed at everything and everybody.'

'Even at—'

'Yes, even at him. She was clever, but not wise. She danced herself into his favour and laughed herself out of it – to her death. And she went laughing to that death. The Sheriff was shocked.'

He fell silent, hearing once again across the years an echo of the shrill mocking note, clear as the call of a bird, and as wild and void of human meaning, that had made men call Nan

Bullen a witch. Well, she had used her witchcraft on the King, enslaved him, scorned him, held him off from her for six long years, while to suit her plans he wrecked the whole structure of the English Church, and built it up anew with himself as Pope in England. The King himself said he had been seduced by her sorcery to marry her, but that was after little Bess was born and no boy for heir, and the King had by then turned to Tom Seymour's meek little sister, Jane. Plain Jane her brother rudely called her, though she was pretty enough, but with a prim mouth and pale eyes and no charms that could vie with Nan's, except the charm of being wholly unlike her. Unlike Nan, she was a gentlewoman by behaviour as well as by good, though not noble, solid county family birth.

That had brought Bess's first step-uncles on to the scene; the eldest, Edward Seymour, newly created Earl of Hertford, tall, sparely built, keen-faced, of the kind that goes on being called a rising young man even when rising forty; fiercely and coldly intellectual in his pursuit of his ideals, or, some said, of his ambitions. He had married one sister to the King, another to the grandson of a blacksmith, but both, it was thought, to the same purpose, for the blacksmith's son had been Thomas Cromwell, the King's greatest minister, and his heir a catch even for a rising earl.

His second brother, Henry, flatly refused to rise. He had heard enough of public life to prefer to remain a simple country squire, declining all honours and even invitations to Court.

The youngest, Tom Seymour, acclaimed the handsomest man in England, was the complete opposite of Edward – a wild rascal whom no semi-royal responsibility could sober,

and with a proficiency in swearing so picturesque that he had said it was his chief qualification for the post of Admiral of the Fleet. That he had others was evident from the work entrusted to him at this dangerous crisis; he and his ships had been stationed at Dover to defend the Kentish coast against the French invasion, and had now joined up with the main fleet, under his command, at Portsmouth. Soldier, sailor, and foreign diplomat, Tom Seymour had had a brilliant career in all three professions, and had started it well before his sisters' marriages had helped on the family. He had been abroad for the best part of the last seven years, on embassies to the French Court, to the King of Hungary, and to Nuremberg; he had been in Vienna for two years and seen a good deal of the war against the Turks; he had exchanged the job of Ambassador to the Netherlands for that of Marshal of the English army fighting against Spain, and done it so well that he was appointed Master of the Ordnance for life in reward for his military services.

His reckless courage had given rise to a score of wild stories; so had his attraction for women. His good looks were the least part of that attraction; it was his careless talk, his great infectious laugh, his good-humoured gaiety and utter lack of premeditation or caution, in a Court growing paralysed with these things, that made him irresistible. Though nearing the middle thirties, he had managed to evade all his matrimonial pursuers, and they were many. The Duke of Norfolk's beautiful daughter had been desperately anxious to marry him for years, but her brother, the young Earl of Surrey, declared the Seymours were upstarts and wouldn't hear of it. His father, the old Duke, was as harsh and intolerant an aristocrat as his

son, but not when it suited his self-interest, and he had rather favoured the match, since the Seymour brothers were now the most powerful men in the country, next to the King; it was not merely that they had provided him with one of his wives, but that she had provided him with his only male heir, Edward, the little Prince of Wales. There were no 'steps' in that relationship; they were the flesh-and-blood uncles of the undoubted heir to the throne. Prince Edward was legitimate by all counts and all religions, whereas nobody could be quite sure how the King's two daughters stood; so often had their father bastardised them by turns. 'The Little Bastard' had been the most frequent informal title given to the Princess Elizabeth at her birth; nearly three years later her father had himself endorsed it by Act of Parliament.

And now the Little Bastard herself asked about that title. Standing by Tom Seymour, leaning over the gunwale, the light from the water rippling up under the soft childish chin, her head turned sideways towards him, her eyes, so clear and light, taking their colour from the sea, fixed themselves upon his face. She said in a voice that he could only just hear above the creak of the ropes and the wash of the waves against the boat's side: 'The women are no use. They answer what they think one ought to think. Can you tell me who I am? I once heard my sister Mary say to another woman that she did not believe I was even the King's bastard – I was just like Mark Smeaton, the handsome musician that was beheaded with my mother – and the woman laughed and said there was choice enough, since three other men had been beheaded too, and one of them her own brother.'

Tom Seymour gave a startling exhibition of his choice of oaths. 'Your sister Mary is a sour old maid, poisoned with hate and jealousy of your mother.'

'But she doesn't hate me – or at any rate she is very kind to me. She did not know I was listening.'

'And well whipped you should have been for it – and would have been, had I been there. But never mind that, or her. I tell you, by God's most precious soul, you are the King's daughter every inch of you, and none could doubt it who looks at you. Can you doubt it yourself, standing here on his flagship, the *Great Harry*? And by God,' he muttered on a sudden drop in tone, 'here comes Great Harry himself.'

Yes, here he came, rather like his own ship, she thought, as he swung portentously into their line of vision, a ship with huge bellying sails ('bellying' is good, she thought, with a pert snigger concealed behind the grave mask of her face as she sank to the deck in a deep curtsy), his silks and jewels flashing in the sunlight and his great hot red face beaming and glistening like a painted block of wood carved on a ship, while beside him Edward Seymour, Earl of Hertford, stalked earnestly like a lean shadow.

Now the King was in front of her, towering over her, blocking out the sunlight, with his silly little flat cap squat on top of all that bulk, and his finger and thumb, hot and sticky as a pair of sausages and yet with surprising force beneath all their fat, pinched her chin and pulled her upright from her curtsy; now she must look him in the face and smile, for he couldn't abide sullen, scared children; they should be frank and fearless as he had been himself. So she stood straight and looked him squarely in the eyes and gave him a charming,

ingenuously admiring smile, while he playfully tugged at the loose strand of her hair, and tucked it back under her cap, and she thought: was this enormous being before her, man or monster or god?

He himself did not quite know, for with his arm flung round the nervously smiling Chancellor Wriothesley he was talking of his last Chancellor, jolly Tom Cromwell, and lamenting that he had not got him here now – a pack of rascals had schemed against 'the best of his servants' and so brought him to the block, the more's the pity. Terrible, jovial, at his nod the greatest heads in the kingdom fell, struck by Jove's thunderbolt – and then he seemed astonished and annoyed that he was not sufficiently a god to put them on again. She had seen him weep brokenheartedly over his first wife, 'the best of women', over his last one, Cat Howard, 'the lovely little wretch' – he'd done them both to death but he still loved them. (But no one had ever heard him mention Nan Bullen since her death.)

His present wife, Catherine Parr, had been a widow almost as often and as briefly as King Henry had been a widower. One could not imagine her without a husband, it would have been such a waste of gentle, humorous, infinitely tolerant benevolence. She put a hand on Elizabeth's arm as the child stood there watching the Ship of State surge on, having laid his grappling arms on Tom Seymour now; you could almost hear the young man's wiry frame crack as that obese giant flung his free arm round his shoulders.

'Why so pensive, Bess my sweetheart?' asked Queen Catherine's pleasant smiling voice.

Bess said demurely, 'I was thinking, Madam, of the story

of the fisherman my nurse used to tell me.'

'And what was that?'

The royal procession was well past now.

'Oh, there was a flounder in the sea that promised the poor fisherman three wishes, and his wife made him go down night after night to ask them, though the wind rose and the waves roared and at the last he had to bellow through the storm:

"Flounder, flounder in the sea
Come and listen unto me.
Come, for my wife Isabel
Wishes what I dare not tell."

For she made him ask first to be King, and then Pope, and then God.'

Catherine shook her head, but the little face remained as blankly innocent as a baby's. You could not even see that she was frightened, but she was. ('Dear God, have I gone too far this time again? No, not this time, not with nice soft Pussy-Cat Purr. She'll see no further than's good for me – or her.')

The two were great friends. Elizabeth had a pretty knack with stepmothers. The four that she had known had all been fond of her, one after the other; she had written letters to them in French, Italian and Latin, and this present one made as much a companion of her as if she were grown up. They read French and Latin together, and with little Edward, so much younger than Elizabeth but already the cleverest of the family, and with Mary, so much older, but, in Elizabeth's opinion at any rate, so much the stupidest. Catherine Parr, a born homemaker, was in fact succeeding almost miraculously in

making a real home for the King's three ill-assorted children by different mothers.

Family life was a difficult affair with a father who had repudiated two of his six wives, beheaded two others, and bastardised both his daughters; yet Catherine managed to bring to it some sense of coherence and even security. She rescued Edward on the one hand from being utterly overlaid by tutors; and on the other, instead of discouraging Mary from reading in bed at night as did everyone else because it was bad for her very weak eyes, she suggested her translating Erasmus's Latin treatises. The poor girl, no longer a girl, badly needed other occupation than fussing over her clothes and other people's babies, and it might flick her pride to read in Udall's preface the praises of modern learning in 'gentlewomen who, instead of vain communication about the moon shining in the water, use grave and substantial talk in Greek or Latin.'

There had been no such need to flick little Bess's mental energy into action. Last New Year's Day the child had given her latest stepmother a present of a prose translation she had made herself of a very long religious poem by the present Queen Marguerite of Navarre, sister to King François I, that brilliantly learned and witty lady. Yet she could perpetrate the 'Mirrour of a Guilty Sowle,' which ran, or rather limped, to a hundred and twenty-eight pages of the Princess Elizabeth's childish but beautifully clear and regular handwriting, and of Queen Marguerite's edifying sentiments expressed in a profusion of confused dullness. But no one could doubt the suitability of the little girl's choice; it would never have done to present a new stepmother with a translation of one of the

merry and improper stories in Marguerite's *Heptameron*. Nor were learning and propriety the only qualities displayed in the gift; Elizabeth had made the canvas binding of the book and embroidered it with gold and silver braid and silken pansies, purple and yellow, and one tiny green leaf; it was the part she had most enjoyed doing – at first; though she got tired of it long before the end, and the stitches went straggly.

She liked to make her own presents, and had always insisted on her own choice in them. At six years old she had flatly refused to give her baby brother Edward any of the jewels or elaborate ornaments that were offered to her as suitable gifts for his second birthday; no, she would have none of them, though tempted momentarily by a bush of rosemary covered with gold spangles, which, however, on reflection she decided to keep for herself. And she carried out her determination of making the baby a cambric shirt.

A small girl so practical and independent was wasted in a royal household, the women decided; Bess was clearly cut out to be a good wife and mother in a poor household with a host of children. But Bess did not agree, though she did not say so. Even at six years old she had become something of an adept at not saying things, though she could not always keep it up, for she was also an adept at pert answers. And nothing could alter her quick and imperious temper, which had shown itself so masterfully before she was quite three years old that her distracted governess had written long garrulous letters to the Lords of the Council about the difficulty of controlling 'my lady's' princely demands for the same wines and meats that her grown-up companions were having at table. Bess's state had been far from princely then; her clothes were all

outgrown and there were no new ones for her; she had been sent away into the country with no provision made for her, and her governess at her wits' end as to how to clothe and feed her.

Yet only a very short time before, her father had tossed her up in his arms, and crowds of gorgeous strangers had thronged round her, uttered ecstatic little cries at the sight of her, bowed down to her and pressed glittering toys into her hands.

There was a winter's evening when she was just two and a half years old (she always remembered it, though people said she could only have remembered hearing of it) when that enormous figure, not nearly as stout as now but seeming even taller, and dressed from top to toe in yellow satin like a monstrous giant toad, hoisted her up on to a vast padded shoulder, where she clutched at the white feather in his flat cap, and carried her round at that dizzy height, showing her off to everybody, shouting, 'Thank God the old harridan is dead! Here is your future Queen – Elizabeth!' And all the courtiers shouted back, and the dark crowds in the street below the window where he stood with her, in a terrifying exciting roar, 'God save the King! God save the Princess Elizabeth!'

'The old harridan' was her father's first wife and her half-sister Mary's mother, Queen Katherine of Aragon, that noble Spanish princess who had been hounded to death at last by her husband's six-year persecution. That was at the end of January, and by the following May Bess's mother too was dead, her head cut off by her father's orders; and by the next morning he was wedded to Jane Seymour.

Bess did not know that at the time, only that she went away into the country, that there were no more crowds nor shouting for her, that her clothes grew shabby and uncomfortably small for her, and no one was in the least excited or pleased to see her.

'Here we go up, up, up,
Here we go down, down, down,'

so the children sang, playing on the see-saw on the village green, but she was not allowed to play with them either. The time of neglect and poverty passed; she went up again, though never to the dizzying height of her first two and a half years; she went back to Court, where, however, a new baby, a tiny boy, was now the centre of all the swaying, bowing crowds, carried aloft on that towering shoulder.

It was he now whom the giant King would dandle and toss in his arms by the hour together, and stand at a window showing him to the crowds below; and their roars would surge up in rugged waves of sound, 'God save King Hal!' 'God save the Prince!' 'Long live Prince Edward!'

The baby's mother, Jane Seymour, was not there. She had died in giving birth to him – 'my poor little Jane,' the King said occasionally with a sob.

He did not seem to like Bess now, he was odd and uncomfortable with her; sometimes she would catch him looking at her with a strange intent gaze, and then when she looked back he would turn away and talk to someone else. And he never again called her Elizabeth, but only Young Bess, which should have sounded more affectionate, but did not.

Long afterwards she guessed that he had ceased to feel her worthy of the name, for he had bestowed it on her in memory of his mother, that gracious and beloved princess, last of the royal Plantagenets, who had given him his most legitimate claim to the throne.

But at the time Bess only knew that she must be very good and quiet and not thrust herself forward. Her half-sister Mary, a grown-up woman, said: 'It is your turn now to learn to be silent, as I have done.'

She said it on a note of acid triumph, for she had been forced to agree to the Act of Parliament that declared her mother's marriage illegal and herself illegitimate, forced to acknowledge this baby sister's prior right to the throne over herself, to let her take public precedence to her everywhere, and even to serve as maid-of-honour to her. That had been when Elizabeth was 'up, up, up'; now she too had been bastardised and was 'down, down, down,' where Mary had been for many years now. She looked cowed and dull. She was a good woman and did not seek to revenge herself on her small half-sister for the agonies and humiliations she had had to suffer on her behalf; instead she tried hard to be kind to her, but Bess knew she did not like her.

The King talked about finding a new mother for his poor motherless children, and then something opened in Mary's dull face: in one instant it had shut again, but in that instant Bess felt she had seen into hell.

It was not so easy a task by now to find a new Queen for England. The foreign princesses were growing wary. A Danish one said that if she had two heads she would be delighted to lay one at the English King's disposal; a French one, tall and

stately, of the House of Guise, was told that Henry wished for her as he was so big himself, he needed a big wife; and she replied, 'Ah, but my neck is small.' And Mary of Guise had the effrontery to marry his nephew instead, that young whippersnapper King James V of Scotland. Then Tom Cromwell, the 'best of his servants,' engineered a German Protestant alliance and a marriage with the Bavarian princess, Anne of Cleves, whose portrait was very pretty, but not, Bess decided, as quick and chic and merry-looking as that of her own mother, Anne.

But when the new bride arrived, and all the Court went to meet her with the King (Bess, now six years old, by the side of her twenty-five-year-old sister, Mary), then everybody saw with a shock that the bride was not pretty at all. Fat 'Crum' was bustling about with a staff in his hand, sweating with energy and anxiety – 'just like a post boy,' Tom Seymour whispered wickedly, though Bess thought him much more like a panting ox. He acted as interpreter between the King and the large raw-boned German princess, who beamed effusively and said 'Ya, Ya,' for she was as stupid as she was plain, she could speak no language but her own, to the shocked amazement of Bess, who had never heard of a princess who couldn't speak at least six languages including Greek and Latin. Crum remarked to the King that she looked 'very queenly,' but he did it timidly, 'as though he were offering a coin to an elephant,' said Tom Seymour.

The elephant rejected it; he shot one red glance at the best of his servants and trumpeted two words: 'What remedy?' In six months he had found it; annulled his marriage with Anne, and beheaded Cromwell.

Elizabeth heard of it a month before her seventh birthday, while she was stitching at the shirt for her baby brother. She knew by now that this ox, who could pounce like a tiger, had got her mother beheaded, after making her Queen; and now he was beheaded himself. 'Here we go down, down down.'

Anne of Cleves lived on in England; she said she would 'always be a sister' to Henry, she was kind and friendly to his daughters, and she did not even mind (perhaps she was relieved) when he married Cat Howard, an enchanting creature not quite eighteen.

Mary was cold and haughty to Cat, a flighty girl, seven years younger than herself, who had scrambled up to womanhood in the careless modern fashion among a host of boys and girls as wild and reckless as herself. She said Cat was of inferior rank and not at all fitted to be their father's wife. In her scorn of Cat, Bess could see what this daughter of the Spanish kings had felt for Bess's mother, Nan Bullen, whose family had lately started to spell their name Boleyn to make it sound grander. They were relations of the Howards – but of far less noble stock, and Nan was the granddaughter of a mercer and Lord Mayor of London, as Mary once blurted out to the child when provoked by her to one of her hysterical rages.

It was perhaps the worst shock to her self-esteem that Bess had received in her childhood. There was no disgrace in having some of your family executed; it was a thing that might happen to anybody, and frequently did; and under the Tudors, the more noble the family, the more likely it was to happen. But a mercer, a Lord Mayor! She flung an inkpot at Mary, called her a liar, and rushed screaming with fury to her

beloved governess, Mrs Ashley, who soothed her with reminders of her mother's Howard uncle, the great Duke of Norfolk, of one of the oldest families in the kingdom. But Bess was not impressed; she thought her great-uncle Norfolk a vulgar old man who said very rude things, and she had heard that he was always ready to do the King's dirty work for him; this she imagined to be something to do with cleaning his horse or his boots when on an expedition together.

Mrs Ashley was worrying about something more important; Bess must be very careful never to quarrel with her half-sister, the Lady Mary, 'for one never knows – And she had good reason to hate your mother, Queen Anne, who was, God forgive her, very unkind to her and to her poor mother, Katherine of Aragon – and *she* was a saint if ever there was one.'

Bess said mutinously, 'Well, I'd rather have a witch for my mother than a saint – and an Englishwoman than a Spaniard – and anyway, why should Mary turn up her nose at Cat Howard?'

She adored the lovely warm impulsive creature, the Rose without a Thorn the King called her, who insisted on giving Bess the place of honour next herself, as she was her cousin. She brought gaiety into all their lives; she coaxed the King with such endearments as 'her little pig,' for he was growing very stout; but, determined to defy it, he rose at five or six and rode and went hunting and hawking with her every day and often all day, sometimes tiring out nine or ten horses in a single hunt. King François's sister, the fascinating Marguerite, kept asking flatteringly but tactlessly for his portrait, and he

hoped to give Holbein a chance to show how young he'd grown in body as well as heart – but alas he was still 'marvellously excessive in drinking and eating', so people noticed; and also that he often held quite different opinions in the morning from those he held after dinner.

And the months went on passing and Cat gave no sign of bearing a child.

But on the whole he was in a sunny humour, so much so that he quite forgot his awkwardness with Bess and treated her once again as his especial favourite, so that the child came under his wayward, extraordinary spell, and saw how it worked on others; they might be baffled, thwarted, exasperated, even terrified or loathing, but, when he chose, they could not resist him. Nor could Bess. She tingled with triumph when he laughed at her bright answers and quoted them to the Court as remarkable specimens of childish wit. It was a thrilling sport, this answering back; she knew that she must go about it as warily as if 'offering a coin to an elephant,' for she could never be sure if the offer would be accepted with a slap of his thigh that sounded as though he were thumping a cushion, and a delighted roar that he would write and tell that to old Foxnose François himself, by God so he would! Or else a sudden terrifying knitting of those infantile eyebrows, a pursing of the little slit of a mouth, a narrow glance like the thrust of a stiletto, and the sharp command to get out of his presence for an impudent little bastard. 'By God you go too far!'

There came a dreadful day when she went so far that she never came back for a whole year, and never knew what she had said to put him in such a lasting rage. But that was after

he had become indifferent again, sunk in gloom and fat, his cheeks grey and flabby, and had a horrible tendency to burst into tears in front of everybody – for it was after he had had Cat Howard beheaded for adultery.

'It is no more the time to dance,' they told Cat when they came to arrest her, and sent away her musicians. They took her to the Tower, the royal palace, fortress, prison, where she had slept before her Coronation, as her cousin Nan Bullen had slept before hers; but this time she went in by the Traitors' Water Gate, as Nan Bullen had done the second time she went there, and like Cat, left it only for the block.

'It won't be hard to find a nickname for me,' Nan had giggled with desperate gallantry. 'I shall be called Anne Sans-Tête!' and she had put her hands round her long slender throat and promised the executioner an easy task. 'They might make ballads of me now,' she said, 'but there is no one left to make them now they've killed my brother. Oh yes, there is my cousin Tom Wyatt – but he is in the Tower too.' There had been a vein of wild poetry in Nan herself, a living echo to the art of her brother and cousin.

But the people did not make ballads of her, they did not like her enough. Their legends of her were not pretty; they said she had tried to poison the Princess Mary; that she had a rudimentary sixth finger on her left hand, though so tiny that few ever noticed, and that it was a teat to suckle her devil's imps who told her how to bewitch the King. In any case, she was an upstart who had worked and schemed and waited for six years to oust the Good Queen Katherine of Aragon and her daughter Mary, the true heir to the throne; she had been hard and sharp and tyrannised over everyone, even the King;

had loved to crack her whip at him and show her power; she had met him at a dance, and a pretty dance she had led him ever since – so they said when, for her too, it was no more the time to dance.

She had been unpopular, and that was the real reason she died; and her daughter knew this by the time her gay, kind-hearted cousin Cat Howard met the same fate, while still in her teens.

Bess was eight when this happened; nine when she offended her father and was sent away from Court; ten when she returned again at the entreaty of yet another stepmother, another Queen Cat, no wild heedless kitten this time, but her motherly Pussy-Cat Purr, as Bess instantly called her.

Would this one stay? Bess passionately hoped so. She had stayed two whole years by now, a record in the child's experience. She never flirted with anyone else, she was wise and kind and tactful, but could anyone ever be tactful enough with the King? She had found that she herself could not; and Bess had a good opinion, and with reason, of her own tact. And Queen Catherine had given no sign of bearing him an heir, and everyone hoped for a baby Duke of York to follow the little Prince of Wales – 'in case.' It was the lack of direct male heirs to the throne that had torn and ruined the country with the Wars of the Roses in the last century. To secure the Succession, Bess knew this to be the one unswerving purpose behind her father's murderous philanderings.

She had noticed the sudden hush, the shiver of excited apprehension that seized the gay rollicking girls of the Court when the King's gaze fell on one of them a trifle longer and more weightily than it was wont, 'Was the King about to seek

a new wife?' The whisper would run like wildfire through the Court, and following it in the minds of all, though unspoken – how soon would yet another Queen be told that 'it was no more the time to dance'?

She watched her stepmother with a solicitude that was positively maternal; she was watching her so now, on the deck of the royal flagship, as they walked up and down in the wake of Great Harry. The men were talking of the danger of invasion – a nice safe subject, she considered; one could hardly go wrong over that. In fact, it put all the men in a good humour, as usual. Her magnificent Howard cousin, the young Earl of Surrey, the soldier-poet, blazing in scarlet from head to foot, was saying in his cool insolent drawl that all the men between sixteen and sixty had been called up along the coasts, and could be called out at an hour's notice; his father, the Duke of Norfolk, that lean old wolf, was snapping his jaws in a hungry grin as he told how all his stout fellows of Norfolk had sent a deputation to him begging him that 'if the French come, for God's sake bring us between the sea and them that we may fight them before they get back to their ships.' God's body, that was the spirit!

Tom Seymour said it was sheer folly of the French to bring galleys from Marseilles, and barges – they would all be boarded as easily as jumping off a log. At which Edward Seymour drily remarked that they had three hundred tall ships as well.

Tom flung back his head and shouted with laughter, 'D'you think I'd forgotten their tall ships? They'd no reason to forget ours when I sailed slap through their blockade and re-victualled our garrison at Boulogne under their noses.'

'Braggart!' muttered Edward, and for an instant the two brothers looked daggers at each other; but just then the King's voice boomed out like a foghorn:

'We whipped them by land and sea last year, and by God we'll do it again.'

Certainly an invasion was the best thing to talk about. And next to that, the Scots. The King had beaten them last year too. But the Scots were not quite so good, for they would not stay beaten. He (or rather Norfolk) had smashed their whole nation years ago at Flodden, where his brother-in- law, King James IV, had got killed together with most of his nobles; he had smashed them again about a couple of years ago at Solway Moss when his nephew, young King James V, died of a broken heart from his defeat; and since then Edward Seymour, Earl of Hertford, had destroyed Melrose Abbey and Dryburgh, and 7 monasteries, 5 market towns, 243 villages, 13 mills and 3 hospitals in one district alone. But still the unspeakable villains would not stay smashed; though ruled only by James's French widow, Mary of Guise, that very same tall lady who had had the effrontery to refuse King Henry's offer of marriage with an unseemly joke about the smallness of her neck, and to prefer his red-headed rascal of a nephew to himself. She was now refusing his offers of marriage for her infant daughter Mary to his little son Edward, or rather (for she would have agreed to the marriage without his conditions) she was refusing to send her baby away from her to be brought up at the English Court under the charge of her great-uncle who had caused the death of that baby's father and grandfather; such ungrateful, unnatural, unwomanly behaviour made Henry purple with rage every time he issued

orders to his armies to raze Edinburgh and all the Border cities to the ground, exterminate every man, woman and child in them, and above all seize the person of the infant Queen of Scots. But she had not yet been caught, although she had had to be hurried away into lonely mountain fastnesses to escape. It was early to begin adventure, very early to be a queen, almost as soon as she was born. Elizabeth felt a thrill of envy for the tiny mountain princess whose mother was guarding her so indomitably.

Here came the gentle Archbishop Cranmer, his heavy sagging cheeks more yellow even than usual, for he had just been seasick. Bess detested his soft voice and nervous eyes, even as her mother had done. He had helped Nan Bullen to the Crown, but done nothing to hinder her from the block; his 'former good opinion of her prompted him to think her innocent,' so he wrote to the King; but then 'his knowledge of the King's prudence and justice induced him to think her guilty.' Such balanced casuistry had echoed down the years, even to Nan's little daughter.

Henry flung out a great wave of charm at the Archbishop's approach, and a padded arm like a silken bolster round his shoulder, sweeping him in his stride ahead of the others.

'Aha, my chaplain, I've news for you. I know now who is the greatest heretic in Kent!'

The Archbishop's eyes seemed to bolt out of his head like a startled rabbit's. For an instant Bess thought he was going to be sick again, on the royal sleeve. And no wonder, for Henry, watching him sideways with some amusement out of the poached eyes set flat on his cheeks, was twitting him with his own words; had he, or had he not, burst out to his Chapter at

Canterbury, 'You will not leave your old Mumpsimuses, but I'll make you repent it!'

'Old Mumpsimuses,' the King pointed out, was not the way an archbishop ought to refer to the ancient holy forms of religion; it was small wonder that the Chapter had retaliated by sending out an accusation of heresy against him and his chaplains. And from the very sleeve that was now enfolding the victim's neck in the affectionate grip of a grizzly bear Henry produced the paper of the accusation, while in a jocular aside he reminded his friend that three heretics had lately been burnt alive on Windsor Green: 'And what do you say to that, my old Mumpsimus?'

Cranmer had so much to say that the King quickly cut him short, and Norfolk seized his chance to cut in. He shared Bess's feelings about the Archbishop. Cat Howard had been Norfolk's niece as well as Nan Bullen, he had worked for her marriage to the King as hard as he knew. And then that sneaking Lutheran fellow, who had picked up a wife in Germany, as well as a lot of these poisonous new revolutionary notions, had gone and destroyed all his work by getting poor Cat beheaded, just as Nan had been, and the whole family had shared in the disgrace for a time.

'For my part,' he growled virtuously, 'I never read the Scriptures and never will. It was merry in England before this new learning came up, but now every ploughboy thinks he's as good as the priest – and maybe he is, seeing what some priests are!'

He glared at the Archbishop, who weakly averted his gaze. Henry, cocking an amused little gooseberry eye at Norfolk, called out, 'Paws off there! Down – good dog, down! You got

your teeth into a Cardinal when you shogged off Wolsey – must you worry an Archbishop too?'

'God's body, Your Majesty, I only meant that I wish everything were just the same as it used to be in the good old days. New ideas indeed!' His glare had swivelled round on to Edward Seymour, who was of the advanced party and eager for reform in politics as well as religion. 'New ideas – and a brand-new peer to lead 'em! All this fine talk of the rights of the people – rank revolution, that's all it amounts to,' he snarled at Seymour, but the King clapped a hand on his shoulder.

'No more of that now, or you'll be giving us one of your Council speeches till we all get lost in your thirdlys and fourthlys.' He turned to his anxiously waiting Archbishop, but only to deal him some heavyhanded chaff about his wife. Was it true that Cranmer had had her smuggled from Germany into England in a packing-case which some careless porter had placed upside down, so that she had had to scream to be rescued? 'There's a fine tale of a wife tails up! Well, well, I owe a couple or so of my wives to your services, so no doubt you think I should wink at yours, but it's a big wink that will cover an archbishop's wife boarded up in a box. Old Wolsey had as fine a mistress as money could buy, but that was all correct and above-board – not under the boards!'

Cranmer became incoherent in his denials and protestations; he would not dream of evading the law against married clergy, he had never seen his wife since he came to England to be Archbishop – at least, not, not—

'Not in a packing-case, hey? Or did you send her packing?'

Like some huge cat with a shivering mouse, he played with

the terrified little man, enjoying his discomfiture and the roars of laughter from Norfolk and the others. Just as Cranmer was certain that the blow would fall on him both for heresy and illegal matrimony, Henry suddenly returned to the former charge and rumbled out, 'That little matter of your Chapter's complaints is easily handled. I'll appoint a commission to examine the charges – and put you at the head of it! *And* help you with the answers. I've not forgotten my theology. That will cook their goose for them. So whichever goose roasts, it won't be you.'

His hearty friendliness made Cranmer almost blubber with thankfulness; it made his small daughter grow thoughtful. The Queen was still with the two men, though Henry had outstripped the rest of the company, but he had beckoned her on, so he must wish her to hear this conversation. Bess they did not notice; she was, indeed, at some distance and looking out to sea as though absorbed in the other ships, but her sharp ears had been listening acutely. Why was her father so kind to old Mumpsimus? (Yes, that was the perfect name for him and his meek bag face – a mouse with the mumps!) Henry had, as it happened, a warm and affectionate respect for Cranmer's disinterested love of learning and his lack of ambition, but as these qualities did not appeal to Bess, she discounted them. And the King had been angry enough, so she had heard, when he had first received the accusation of his Archbishop's toying with heresy. But then someone had said Cranmer was too useful for the King to lose him. How useful?

Was it because he had already got rid of three wives out of six for the King, and might be required to get rid of a fourth? The notion came to her on a sudden heartstop of dismay as

she realised what prompted it, for she could hear her father's and stepmother's voices – arguing! How could the Queen be such a goose? 'Whichever goose roasts' – the King always said he liked nothing so well as a good theological argument; that he liked women to be intelligent – but surely anyone would know that he only liked an argument when he got the better of it; and however intelligent a woman might be, she must be less so than himself. Queen Catherine was arguing the case for translating the Bible into English; Henry was shouting that, in consequence, 'that precious jewel, the Word of God, was being disputed, sung, and jangled in every alehouse and tavern,' which showed how he was getting the worst of it, for he was only quoting from his last speech in Parliament, since he could not think of a fresher answer.

Catherine evidently began to get some sense of her danger, for without any crude change of subject she adroitly introduced some flattery on the great and beneficial changes Henry had made in England's religion. But that wouldn't do; couldn't she see that the King had never wanted to introduce any changes in religion, that he was as ardent and conservative a Papist as anybody – with this one exception, that he alone was to be Pope.

And behind all Bess's anxiety was the terrifying fact that the Queen's friend, Lady Anne Askew, had been arrested for denouncing the Mass, and had been tortured in the Tower more than once. Was it an attempt to make her implicate the Queen? Whatever happened, Catherine must not plead the cause of her friend now – let her be tortured, racked, burnt, but if the name of Anne Askew were mentioned now, it would be the death-knell of Catherine Parr.

It didn't look as though Catherine would get the chance to mention it, for Henry was doing all the talking now, watching her out of the corner of a hot, intemperate eye while he threw out some ominous chaff: 'So you've become a learned doctor, have you, Kate? You're here to instruct us, we take it, not to be instructed or directed by us?'

Kate quickly protested, but, unheeding, he began to roll his great head and mutter, 'That's a pretty business when women turn clerics; a fine comfort for me in my old age, to be taught by my wife!'

It was going to happen – it was happening now – nothing could stop it. Bess shut her lips tight to keep from screaming aloud. Could nothing else happen to prevent it? Why couldn't the French sail up *now* and attack? More fervently than any stout fellow of Norfolk, she prayed silently for a sight of their foes. 'Oh God, let them come and invade England *now*, quick!'

'Anne Askew!' The fatal name had been spoken, it crashed on the air like the crack of thunder. But it was not the Queen who had uttered it; it was the King, accusing her of having sent the condemned woman money and promises of help, of having received heretical books from her in times past, of – would the next word be – 'Treason!'?

Bess opened her lips and screamed.

They all turned towards her, hurried towards her, cried out what was the matter. Now she would have to find an answer. Had she twisted her foot? Seen a mermaid or a sea-serpent? She would only be scolded and sent below, and the King's rage increased by so momentary an interruption. She screamed again, on a high note of childish excitement, and pointed:

'The French! Their ships – far out to sea – coming up like clouds!'

So intense was the conviction in her voice that for an instant they believed her. Then, as no confirmation came from the crow's nest, they said she must have imagined it and taken the white clouds on the horizon for the sails of the French fleet. Her best retreat would be to look childishly stupid and sulky, admit she had been frightened, perhaps even shed a few tears. But she decided to brazen it out. 'I *did* see the ships – for a moment. They've disappeared now. Perhaps they saw us and sailed away.'

Henry's infantile eyebrows puckered in his vast face. His just anger had been interrupted by this false alarm, and now surged back, redoubled. 'The girl's lying!' he roared. 'The French have been reported miles away. She could never have seen them.'

He looked at his daughter and saw her mother's face, the big forehead, the clever bright eyes, the silly little rosebud of a mouth that had smiled so sweetly at him – and at others. 'Take the little bastard away!' he shouted,

But at that moment Elizabeth had one of those stupendous strokes of luck that were enough to accuse her as well as her mother of witchcraft.

A shout came ringing over the sea and was echoed by another. The alarm had been raised in good earnest, the French fleet sighted, sailing straight towards Portsmouth.