FORD FORD MADOX

PRIVY SEAL: HIS LAST VENTURE

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Privy Seal: His Last Venture

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Privy Seal: His Last Venture:

Содержание

Ford Madox Ford
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To

Frau Laura Schmedding

who has so often combated

my prejudices and corrected

my assertions

this with affection

PART ONE
THE RISING SUN

I

The Magister Udal sat in the room of his inn in Paris, where customarily the King of France lodged such envoys as came at his expense. He had been sent there to Latinise the letters that passed between Sir Thomas Wyatt and the King's Ministers of France, for he was esteemed the most learned man in these islands. He had groaned much at being sent there, for he must leave in England so many loves – the great, blonde Margot Poins, that was maid to Katharine Howard; the tall, swaying Katharine Howard herself; Judge Cantre's wife that had fed him well; and two other women, with all of whom he had succeeded easily or succeeded in no wise at all. But the mission was so well paid – with as many crowns the day as he had had groats for teaching the Lady Mary of England – that fain he had been to go. Moreover, it was by way of being a favour of Privy Seal's. The magister had written for him a play in English; the rich post was the reward – and it was an ill thing, a thing the magister dreaded, to refuse the favours of Privy Seal. He consoled himself with the thought that the writing of letters in Latin might wash from his mouth

the savour of the play he had written in the vulgar tongue.

But his work in Paris was ended – for with the flight of Cardinal Pole, who had left Paris precipitately upon news that the King of England had sent a drunken roisterer to assassinate him, it was imagined that soon now more concord between Francis and England might ensue, and the magister sat in his room planning his voyage back to Dover. The room was great in size, panelled mostly in wood, lit with lampwicks that floated in oil dishes and heated with a sea-coal fire, for though it was April the magister was of a cold disposition of the hands and shins. The inn – of the Golden Astrolabe – was kept by an Englishwoman, a masterful widow with a broad face and a great mouth that smiled. She stood beside him there. Forty-seven she might have been, and she called herself the Widow Annot.

The magister sat over his fire with his gown parted from his legs to warm his shins, but his hands waved angrily and his face was crestfallen.

'Oh, keeper of a tavern,' he said. 'It is set down in holy writ that it is not good for a man to be alone.'

'That a hostess shall keep her tavern clean is writ in the books of the provost of Paris town,' the Widow Annot answered, and the shadow of her great white hood, which she wore in the older English fashion, danced over the brown wooden beams of the ceiling.

'Nay, nay,' he answered, 'it is written there that it is the enjoined devoir of every hotelier to provide things fitting for the

sojourners' ease, pleasure and recreation.'

'The maid is locked in another house,' the hostess answered, 'and should have been this three week.' She swung her keys on a black riband and gazed at him masterfully. 'Will your magistership eat capon or young goat?'

'Capon will have a savour like sawdust, and young goat like the dust of the road,' the magister moaned. 'Give me the girl to wait upon me again.'

'No maid will wait upon thee,' she answered.

'Even thou thyself?' he asked. He glanced across his shoulder and his eyes measured her, hers him. She had large shoulders, a high, full stomacher, and her cheeks were an apple-red. 'The maiden was a fair piece,' he tittered.

'Therefore you must spoil the ring of the coin,' she answered.

He sighed: 'Then eat you with me. "*Soli cantare periti Arcades.*" But it is cold here alone of nights.'

They ate goat and green leeks sweetened with honey, and wood thrushes pickled in wine, and salt fish from the mouth of the Beauce. And because this gave the magister a great thirst he drank much of a warmed wine from Burgundy that the hostess brought herself. They sat, byside, on cushions on a couch before the warm fire.

'*Filia pulchra mater pulchrior!*' the magister muttered, and he cast his arms about her soft and plump waist. 'The maid was a fair skewer, the hostess is a plumper roasting bit.' She took his kisses on her fire-warmed cheeks, but in the end she thrust him

mightily from her with a large elbow.

He gasped with the strength of her thrust, and she said:

'Greedy dogs getten them hard cuffs,' and rearranged her neckercher. When he tried to come nearer her she laughed and thrust him aback.

'You have tried and tasted,' she said. 'A fuller meal you must pay for.'

He stood before her, lean and lank, his gown flapping about his calves, his eyes smiling humorously, his lips twitching.

'Oh soft and warm woman,' he cried, 'payment shall be yours'; and whilst he fumbled furiously in his clothes-press, he quoted from Tully: '*Haec civitas mulieri redimiculum praebuit.*' He pulled out one small bag: '*Haec in collum.*' She took another. '*Haec in crines!*' and he added a third, saying: 'Here is all I have,' and cast the three into her lap. Whilst she counted the coins composedly on the table before her he added: 'Leave me nevertheless the price to come to England with.'

'Sir Magister,' she said, turning her large face to him. 'This is not one-tenth enough. You have tasted an ensample. Will you have the whole meal?'

'Oh, unconscionable,' he cried. 'More I have not!' He began to wave his hands. 'Consider what you do do,' he uttered. 'Think of what a pest is love. How many have died of it. Pyramus, Thisbe, Dido, Medea, Croesus, Callirhoe, Theagines the philosopher … Consider what writes Gordonius: "*Prognosticatio est talis: si non succuratur iis aut in maniam cadunt: aut moriuntur.*" Unless

lovers be succoured either they fall into a madness, either they die or grow mad. And Fabian Montaltus: "If this passion be not assuaged, the inflammation cometh to the brain. It drieth up the blood. Then followeth madness or men make themselves away." I would have you ponder of what saith Parthenium and what Plutarch in his tales of lovers.'

Her face appeared comely and smooth in his eyes, but she shook her head at him.

'These be woeful and pretty stories,' she said. 'I would have you to tell me many of them.'

'All through the night,' he said eagerly, and made to clasp her in his arms. But she pushed him back again with her hand on his chest.

'All through the night an you will,' she said. 'But first you shall tell a prettier tale before a man in a frock.'

He sprang full four feet back at one spring.

'I have wedded no woman, yet,' he said.

'Then it is time you wed one now,' she answered.

'Oh widow, bethink you,' he pleaded. 'Would you spoil so pretty a tale? Would you humble so goodly a man's pride?'

'Why, it were a pity,' she said. 'But I am minded to take a husband.'

'You have done well this ten years without one,' he cried out.

Her face seemed to set like adamant as she turned her cheek to him.

'Call it a woman's mad freak,' she said.

'Six and twenty pupils in the fair game of love I have had,' he said. 'You shall be the seven and twentieth. Twenty and seven are seven and two. Seven and two are nine. Now nine is the luckiest of numbers. Be you that one.'

'Nay,' she answered. 'It is time you learned husbandry who have taught so many and earned so little.'

He slipped himself softly into the cushions beside her.

'Would you spoil so fair a tale?' he said. 'Would you have me to break so many vows? I have promised a mort of women marriage, and so long as I be not wed I may keep faith with any one of them.'

She held her face away from him and laughed.

'That is as it may be,' she said. 'But when you wed with me to-night you will keep faith with one woman.'

'Woman,' he pleaded. 'I am a great scholar.'

'Ay,' she answered, 'and great scholars have climbed to great estates.'

She continued to count the coins that came from his little money-bags; the shadow of her hood upon the great beams grew more portentous.

'It is thought that your magistership may rise to be Chancellor of the Realm of England,' she added.

He clutched his forehead.

'Eheu!' he said. 'If you have heard men say that, you know that wedded to thee I could never climb.'

'Then I shall very comfortably keep my inn here in Paris

town,' she answered. 'You have here fourteen pounds and eleven shillings.'

He stretched forth his lean hands:

'Why, I will marry thee in the morning,' he said, and he moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue. Outside the door there was a shuffling of several feet.

'I knew not other guests were in the house,' he uttered, and fell again to kissing her.

'Knew you not an envoy was come from Cleves?' she whispered.

Her head fell back and he supported it with one trembling hand. He shook like a leaf when her voice rang out:

'*Au secours! Au secours!*'

There was a great jangle, light fell into the dusky room through the doorhole, and he found himself beneath the eyes of many scullions with spits, cooks with carving forks, and kitchenmaids with sharpened distaffs of steel.

'Now I will be wed this night,' she laughed.

He moved to the end of the couch and blinked at her in the strong light.

'I will be wed this night,' she said again, and rearranged her head-dress, revealing, as her sleeves fell open, her white, plump arms.

'Why, no!' he answered irresolutely.

She said in French to her aids:

'Come near him with the spits!'

They moved towards him, a white-clad body with their pointed things glittering in the light of torches. He sprang behind the great table against the window and seized the heavy-leaden sandarach. The French scullions knew, tho' he had no French, that he would cleave one of their skulls, and they stood, a knot of seven – four men and three maids – in blue hoods, in the centre of the room.

'By Mars and by Apollo!' he said, 'I was minded to wed with thee if I could no other way. But now, like Phaeton, I will cast myself from the window and die, or like the wretches thrown from the rock, called Tarpeian. I was minded to a folly: now I am minded rather for death.'

'How nobly thy tongue doth wag, husband,' she said, and cried in French for the rogues to be gone. When the door closed upon the lights she said in the comfortable gloom: 'I dote upon thy words. My first was tongue-tied.' She beckoned him to her and folded her arms. 'Let us discourse upon this matter,' she said comfortably. 'Thus I will put it: you wed with me or spring from the window.'

'I am even trapped?' he asked.

'So it comes to all foxes that too long seek for capons,' she answered.

'But consider,' he said. He sat himself by the fireside upon a stool, being minded to avoid temptation.

'I would have your magistership forget the rogues that be without,' she said.

'They were a nightmare's tale,' he said.

'Yet forget them not too utterly,' she answered. 'For I am of some birth. My father had seven horses and never followed the plough.'

'Oh buxom one!' he answered. 'Of a comfortable birth and girth thou art. Yet with thee around my neck I might not easily climb.'

'Magister,' she said, 'whilst thou climbest in London town thy wife will bide in Paris.'

'Consider!' he said. 'There is in London town a fair, large maid called Margot Poins.'

'Is she more fair than I?' she asked. 'I will swear she is.'

He tilted his stool forward.

'No; no, I swear it,' he said eagerly.

'Then I will swear she is more large.'

'No; not one half so bounteous is her form,' he answered, and moved across to the couch.

'Then if you can bear her weight up you can bear mine,' she said, and moved away from him.

'Nay,' he answered. 'She would help me on,' and he fumbled in the shadows for her hand. She drew herself together into a small space.

'You affect her more than me,' she said, with a swift motion simulating jealousy.

'By the breasts of Venus, no!' he answered.

'Oh, once more use such words,' she murmured, and

surrendered to him her soft hand. He rubbed it between both of his cold ones and uttered:

'By the Paphian Queen: by her teams of doves and sparrows! By the bower of Phyllis and the girdle of Egypt's self! I love thee!'

She gurgled 'oh's' of pleasure.

'But this Margot Poins is tirewoman to the Lady Katharine Howard.'

'I am tirewoman to mine own self alone,' she said. 'Therefore you love her better.'

'Nay, oh nay,' he said gently. 'But this Lady Katharine Howard is mistress to the King's self.'

'And I have been mistress to no married man save my husbands,' she answered. 'Therefore you love this Margot Poins better.'

He fingered her soft palm and rubbed it across his own neck.

'Nay, nay,' he said. 'But I must wed with Margot Poins.'

'Why with her more than with me or any other of your score and seven?' she said softly.

'Since the Lady Katharine will be Queen,' he answered, and once again he was close against her side. She sighed softly.

'Thus if you wed with me you will never be Chancellor,' she said.

'I would not anger the Queen,' he answered. She nestled bountifully and warmly against him.

'Swear even again that you like me more than the fair, large wench in London town,' she whispered against his ear.

'Even as Jove prized Danaë above the Queen of Heaven, even as Narcissus prized his shadow above all the nymphs, even as Hercules placed Omphale above his strength, or even as David the King of the Jews Bathsheba above…'

She murmured 'Oh, oh,' and placed her arms around his shoulders.

'How I love thy brave words!'

'And being Chancellor,' he swore, 'I will come back to thee, oh woman of the sweet smiles, honey of Hymettus, Cypriote wine…'

She moved herself a little from him in the darkness.

'And if you do not wed with Margot Poins…'

'I pray a plague may fall upon her, but I must wed with her,' he answered. 'Come now; come now!'

'Else the Lady Katharine shall be displeased with your magistership?'

He sought to draw her to him, but she stiffened herself a little.

'And this Lady Katharine is mistress to the King of England's realm?'

His hands moved tremblingly towards her in the darkness.

'And this Lady Katharine shall be Queen?'

A hiss of exasperation came upon his lips, for she had slipped from beneath his hands into the darkness.

'Why, then, I will not stay your climbing,' she said. 'Good-night,' and in the darkness he heard her sob.

The couch fell backwards as he swore and sprang towards her

voice.

'Magister!' she said. 'Hands off! Unwed thou shalt not have me, for I have sworn it.'

'I have sworn to wed seven and twenty women,' he said, 'and have wedded with none.'

'Nay, nay,' she sobbed. 'Hands off. Henceforth I will make no vows – but no one but thee shall wed me.'

'Then wed me, in God's name!' he cried, and, screaming:

'*Ho là! Apportez le prestre!*' she softened herself in his arms.

The magister confronted the lights, the leering scullions and the grinning maids with their great mantles; his brown, woodpecker-like face was alike crestfallen and thirsty with desire. A lean Dominican, with his brown cowl back and spectacles of horn, gabbled over his missal and took a crown's fee – then asked another by way of penitence for the sin with the maid locked up in another house. When they brought the bride favours of pink to pin into her gorget she said:

'I long had loved thee for thy great words, husband. Therefore all these I had in readiness.'

With that knot fast upon him, the magister, clasping his gown upon his shins, looked askance at the floor. Whilst they made ready the bride, with great lights and laughter, she said:

'I was minded to have a comfortable husband. And a comfortable husband is a husband much absent. What more comfortable than me in Paris town and thee in London city? I keep my inn here, thou mindest thy book there. Thou shalt here

find a goodly capon upon occasion, and when thou hast a better house in London I will come share it.'

'Trapped! Trapped!' the magister muttered to himself. 'Even as was Sir Launcelot!'

He considered of the fair and resentful Margot Poins whom it was incumbent indeed that he should wed: that Katharine Howard loved her well and was in these matters strait-laced. When his eyes measured his wife he licked his lips; when his eyes were on the floor his jaw fell. At best the new Mistress Udal would be in Paris. He looked at the rope tied round the thin middle of the brown priest, and suddenly he leered and cast off his cloak.

'Let me remember to keep an equal mind in these hard matters,' he quoted, and fell to laughing.

For he remembered that in England no marriage by a friar or monk held good in those years. Therefore he was the winner. And the long, square room, with the cave bed behind its shutter in the hollow of the wall, the light-coloured, square beams, and the foaming basin of bride-ale that a fat-armed girl in a blue kerseymere gown served out to scullion after scullion; the open windows from which a little knave was casting bride-pennies to some screaming beggars and women in the street; the blind hornman whose unseeing eyes glanced along the reed of his bassoon that he played before the open door; the two saucy maids striving to wrest the bride's stockings one from the other – all these things appeared friendly and jovial in his eyes. So that,

when one of the maids, wresting the stocking, fell hard against him, he clasped her in his arms and kissed her till she struggled from him to drink a mug of bride-ale.

'*Hodie mihi: mihi atque cras!*' he said. For it was in his mind a goodly thing to pay a usuress with base coins.

II

It was three days later, in the morning, that his captress said to the Magister Udal:

'Husband, it is time that I gave thee the bridal gift.'

The magister, happy with a bellyful of carp, bread and breakfast ale, muttered 'Anan?' from above his copy of Lucretius. He sat in the window-seat of the great stone kitchen. Upon one long iron spit before the fire fourteen trussed capons turned in unison; the wooden shoes of the basting-maid clattered industriously; and from the chimney came the clank of the invisible smoke-vanes and the be-sooted chains. The magister, who loved above all things warmth, a full stomach, a comfortable woman and a good book, had all these things; he was well minded to stay in Paris town for fourteen days, when they were to slay a brown pig from the Ardennes, against whose death he had written an elegy in Sapphics.

'For,' said his better half, standing before him with a great loaf clasped to her bosom, 'if you turn a horse from the stable between full and half full, like as not he will return of fair will to the crib.'

'Oh Venus and Hebe in one body,' the magister said, 'I am minded to end here my scholarly days.'

'I am minded that ye shall travel far erstwhile,' she answered.

He laid down his book upon a clean chopping-board.

'I know a good harbourage,' he said.

She sat down beside him in the window and fingered the fur on his long gown, saying that, in this light, it showed ill-favouredly worm-eaten; and he answered that he never had wishes nor money for gowning himself, who cultivated the muses upon short commons. She turned rightway to the front the medal upon his chest, and folded her arms.

'Whilst ye have no better house to harbour us,' she said, 'this shall serve. Let us talk of the to-come.'

He groaned a little.

'Let us love to-day that's here,' he said. 'I will read thee a verse from Lucretius, and you shall tell me the history of that fourth capon' – he pointed to a browned carcase that, upon the spit, whirled its elbows a full third longer than any of the line.

'That is the master roasting-piece,' she said, 'so he browns there not too far, nor too close, for the envoy's own eating.'

He considered the chicken with his head to one side.

'It is the place of a wife to be subject to her lord,' he said.

'It is the place of a husband that he fendeth for 's wife,' she answered him. She tapped her fingers determinedly upon her elbows.

'So it is,' she continued. 'To-morrow you shall set out for London city to make road towards becoming Sir Chancellor.' Whilst he groaned she laid down for him her law. He was to go to England, he was to strive for great posts: if he gained, she would come share them; if he failed, he might at odd moments come

back to her fireside. 'Have done with groaning now,' she said, stilling his lamentations.' 'Keep them even for the next wench that you shall sue to – of me you have had all you asked.'

He considered for five seconds, his elbow upon his crossed knees and his wrist supporting his lean brown face.

'It is in the essence of it a good bargain,' he said. 'You put against the chance of being, you a chancellor's madam, mine of having for certain a capon in Paris town.'

He tapped his long nose. 'Nevertheless, for your stake you have cast down a very little: three nights of bed and board against the chaining me up.'

'Husband,' she answered. 'More than that you shall have.'

He wriggled a little beneath his furs.

'Husband is an ill name,'he commented. 'It smarts.'

'But it fills the belly.'

'Aye,'he said. 'Therefore I am minded to bide here and take with the sourness the sweet of it.'

She laughed a little, and, with a great knife, cut a large manchet from the loaf between them.

'Nay,' she said, 'to-morrow my army with their spits and forks shall drive thee from the door.'

He grinned with his lips. She was fair and fat beneath her hood, but she was resolute. 'I have it in me greatly to advance you,' she said.

A boy brought her a trencher filled with chopped things, and a man in a blue jerkin came to her side bearing a middling pig,

seared to a pale clear pinkness. The boy held the slit stomach carefully apart, and she lined it with slices of bread, dropping into the hollow chives, nutmegs, lumps of salt, the buds of bergamot, and marigold seeds with their acrid perfume, and balls of honied suet. She bound round it a fair linen cloth that she stitched with a great bone needle.

'Oh ingenuous countenance,' the magister mused above the pig's mild face. 'Is it not even the spit of the Cleves envoy's? And the Cleves envoy shall eat this adorable monster. Oh, cruel anthropophagist!'

She resigned her burden to the spit and gave the loaf to the boy, wiped her fingers upon her apron, and said:

'That pig shall help thee far upon thy road.'

'Goes it into my wallet?' he asked joyfully.

She answered: 'Nay; into the Cleves envoy's weam.'

'You speak in hard riddles,' he uttered.

'Nay,' she laughed, 'a baby could unriddle it.' She looked at him for a moment to enjoy her triumph of mystery. 'Husband mine, a pig thus stuffed is good eating for Cleves men. I have not kept a hostel for twelve years for envoys and secretaries without learning what each eats with pleasure. And long have I thought that if I wed a man it should be such a man as could thrive by learning of envoys' secrets.'

He leaned towards her earnestly.

'You know wherefore the man from Cleves is come?'

'You are, even as I have heard it said, a spy of Thomas

Cromwell?' she asked in return.

He looked suddenly abashed, but she held to her question.

'I pass for Privy Seal's man,' he answered at last.

'But you have played him false,' she said. He grew pale, glanced over his shoulder, and put his finger on his lips.

'I'll wager it was for a woman,' she accused him. She wiped her lips with her apron and dropped her hands upon her lap.

'Why, keep troth to Cromwell if you can,' she said.

'I do think his sun sets,' he whispered.

'Why, I am sorry for it,' she answered. 'I have always loved him for a brewer's son. My father was a brewer.'

'Cromwell was begotten even by the devil,' Udal answered. 'He made me write a comedy in the vulgar tongue.'

'Be it as you will,' she answered. 'You shall know on which side to bite your cake better than I.'

He was still a little shaken at the thought of Privy Seal.

'If you know wherefore cometh Cleves' envoy, much it shall help me to share the knowledge,' he said at last, 'for by that I may know whether Cromwell or we do rise or fall.'

'If you have made a pact with a woman, have very great cares,' she answered dispassionately. 'Doubtless you know how the dog wags its tail; but you are always a fool with a woman.'

'This woman shall be Queen if Cromwell fall,' the magister said, 'and I shall rise with her.'

'But is no woman from Cleves' Queen there now?' she asked.

'Cicely,' he answered highly, 'you know much of capons and

beeves, but there are queens that are none and do not queen it, and queans that are no queens and queen it.'

'And so 'twill be whilst men are men,' she retorted. 'But neither my first nor my second had his doxies ruling within my house, do what they might beyond the door.'

He tried to impart to her some of the adoration he had for Katharine Howard – her learning, her faith, her tallness, her wit, and the deserved empiry that she had over King Henry VIII; but she only answered:

'Why, kiss the wench all you will, but do not come to tell me how she smells!' – and to his new protests: 'Aye, you may well be right and she may well be Queen – for I know you will sacrifice your ease for no wench that shall not help you somewhere forwards.'

The magister held his hands above his head in shocked negation of this injustice – but there came from the street the thin wail of a trumpet; another joined it, and a third; the three sounds executed a triple convolution and died away one by one. Holding his thin hand out for silence and better hearing, he muttered:

'Norfolk's tucket! Then it is true that Norfolk comes to Paris.'

His wife slipped down from her seat.

'Gave I you not the ostler's gossip from Calais three days since?' she said, and went towards her roastings.

'But wherefore comes the yellow dog to Paris?' Udal persisted.

'That you may go seek,' she answered. 'But believe always what an innkeeper says of who are on the road.'

Udal too slipped down from the window-seat; he buttoned his gown down to his shins, pulled his hat over his ears and hurried through the galleried courtyard into the comfortless shadows of the street. There was no doubt that Norfolk was coming; round the tiny crack that, two houses away, served for all the space that the road had between the towering housefronts, two men in scarlet and yellow, with leopards and lions and fleurs-de-lis on their chests, walked between two in white, tabarded with the great lilies of France. They crushed round the corner, for there was scarce space for four men abreast; behind them squeezed men in purple with the Howard knot, bearing pikes, and men in mustard yellow with the eagle's wing and ship badge of the Provost of Paris. In the broader space before the arch of Udal's courtyard they stayed to wait for the horsemen to disentangle themselves from the alley; the Englishmen looked glumly at the tall housefronts; the French loosened the mouthplates of their helmets to breathe the air for a minute. Hostlers, packmen and pedlars began to fill the space behind Udal, and he heard his wife's voice calling shrilly to a cook who had run across the yard.

The crowd a little shielded him from the draught which came through the arch, and he waited with more contentment. Undoubtedly there was Norfolk upon a great yellow horse, so high that it made his bonnet almost touch the overhanging storey of the third house; behind him the white and gold litter of the provost, who, having three weeks before broken his leg at tennis-play, was still unable to sit in a saddle. The duke rode as if

implacably rigid, his yellow, long face set, listening as if with a sour deafness to something that the provost from below called to him with a great, laughing voice.

The provost's litter, too, came up alongside the duke's horse in the open space, then they all moved forward at the slow processional: three steps and a halt for the trumpets to blow a tucket; three more and another tucket; the great yellow horse stepping high and casting up his head, from which flew many flakes of white foam. With its slow, regularly interrupted gait, dominated by the impassive yellow face of Norfolk, the whole band had an air of performing a solemn dance, and Udal shivered for a long time, till amidst the train of mules bearing leathern sacks, cupboards, chests and commodes, he saw come riding a familiar figure in a scholar's gown – the young pedagogue and companion of the Earl of Surrey. He was a fair, bearded youth with blue eyes, riding a restless colt that embroiled itself and plunged amongst the mules' legs. The young man leaned forward in the saddle and craned to avoid a clothes chest.

The magister called to him:

'Ho, Longstaffe!' and having caught his pleased eyes: *'Ecce quis sto in arce plenitatis. Veni atque bibe! Magister sum. Udal sum. Longstaffe ave.'*

Longstaffe slipped from his horse, which he left to be rescued by whom it might from amongst the hard-angled cases.

'Assuredly,' he said, 'there is no love between that beast and me as there was betwixt his lord and Bucephalus,' and

he followed Udal into the galleried courtyard, where their two gowned figures alone sought shelter from the March showers.

'News from overseas there is none,' he said. 'Privy Seal ruleth still about the King; the German astronomers have put forth a tract *De Quadratura Circuli*; the lost continent of Atlantis is a lost continent still – and my bones ache.'

'But your mission?' Udal asked.

The doctor, his hard blue eyes spinning with sardonic humour beneath his black beretta, said that his mission, even as Udal's had been, was to gain some crowns by setting into the learned language letters that should pass between his ambassador and the King's men of France. Udal grinned disconcertedly.

'Be certified in your mind,' he said, 'that I am not here a spy or informer of Privy Seal's.'

'Forbid it, God,' Doctor Longstaffe answered good-humouredly. None the less his jaw hardened beneath his fair beard and he answered, 'I have as yet written no letters —*litteras nullas scripsi: argal nihil scio*.'

'Why, ye shall drink a warmed draught and eat a drippinged soppet,' Udal said, 'and you shall tell me what in England is said of this mission.'

He led the fair doctor into the great kitchen, and felt a great stab of dislike when the young man set his arm round the hostess's waist and kissed her on the red cheeks. The young man laughed:

'Aye indeed; I am *mancipium paucae lectionis* set beside so

learned a man as the magister.'

The hostess received him with a bridling favour, rubbing her cheek pleasantly, whilst Udal was seeking to persuade himself that, since the woman was in law no wife of his, he had no need to fear. Nevertheless rage tore him when the doctor, leaning his back against the window-side, talked to the woman. She stood between them holding a pewter flagon of mulled hypocras upon a salver of burnished pewter.

'Who I be,' he said, gazing complacently at her, 'is a poor student of good letters; how I be here is as one of the amanuenses of the Duke of Norfolk. Origen, Eusebius telleth, had seven, given him by Ambrosius to do his behest. The duke hath but two, given him by the grace of God and of the King's high mercy.'

'I make no doubt,' she answered, 'ye be as learned as the seven were.'

'I be twice as hungry,' he laughed; 'but with me it has always been "*Quid scribam non quemadmodum*," wherein I follow Seneca.'

'Doctor,' the magister uttered, quivering, 'you shall tell me why this mission – which is a very special embassy – at this time cometh to this town of Paris.'

'Magister,' the doctor answered, wagging his beard upon his poor collar to signify that he desired to keep his neck where it was, 'I know not.'

'Injurious man,' Udal fulminated, 'I be no spy.'

The doctor surveyed his perturbation with cross-legged

calmness.

'An ye were,' he said – 'and it is renowned that ye are – ye could get no knowledge from where none is.'

'Why, tell me of a woman,' the hostess said. 'Who is Kat Howard?'

The doctor's blue eyes shot a hard glance at her, and he let his head sink down.

'I have copied to her eyes a sonnet or twain,' he said, 'and they were writ by my master, Surrey, the Duke o' Norfolk's son.'

'Then these rave upon her as doth the magister?' she asked.

'Why, an ye be jealous of the magister here,' the doctor clipped his words precisely, 'cast him away and take me who am a proper sweetheart.'

'I be wed,' she answered pleasantly.

'What matters that,' he said, 'when husbands are not near?'

The magister, torn between his unaccustomed gust of jealousy and the desire to hide his marriage from a disastrous discovery in England, clutched with straining fingers at his gown.

'Tell wherefore cometh your mission,' he said.

'We spoke of a fair woman,' the doctor answered. 'Shame it were before Apollo and Priapus that men's missions should come before kings' mistresses.'

'It is true, then, that she shall be queen?' Udal's wife asked.

The fall of a great dish in the rear of the tall kitchen gave the scholar time to collect his suspicions – for he took it for an easy thing that this woman, if she were Udal's leman, might be, she

too, a spy in the service of Privy Seal.

'Forbid it, God,' he said, 'that ye take my words as other than allegorical. The lady Katharine may be spoken of as a king's mistress since in truth she were a fit mistress for a king, being fair, devout, learned, courteous, tall and sweet-voiced. But that she hath been kind to the King, God forbid that I should say it.'

'Aye,' Udal said, 'but if she hath sent this mission?'

Panic rose in the heart of the doctor; he beheld himself there, in what seemed a spy's kitchen, asked disastrous questions by a man and woman and pinned into a window-seat. For there was no doubt that the rumour ran in England that this mission had been sent by the King because Katharine Howard so wished it sent. In that age of spies and treacheries no man's head was safe on his shoulders – and here were Cromwell's spies asking news of Cromwell's chief enemy.

He stretched out a calm hand and spoke slowly:

'Madam hostess,' he said, 'if ye be jealous of the magister ye may well be jealous, for great beauty and worship hath this lady.' Yet she need be little jealous, for this lady was nowadays prized so high that she might marry any man in the land – and learned men were little prized. Any man in the land of England she might wed – saving only such as were wed, amongst whom was their lord the King, who was happily wed to the gracious lady whom my Lord Privy Seal did bring from Cleves to be their very virtuous Queen.

Here, it seemed to him, he had cleared himself very

handsomely of suspicion of ill will to Privy Seal or of wishing ill to Anne of Cleves.

'For the rest,' he said, sighing with relief to be away from dangerous grounds, 'your magister is safe from the toils of marriage with the Lady Katharine.' Still it might be held that jealousy is aroused by the loving and not by the returning of that love; for it was very certain that the magister much had loved this lady. Many did hold it a treachery in him, till now, to the Privy Seal whom he served. But now he might love her duteously, since our lord the King had commanded the Lady Katharine to join hands with Privy Seal, and Privy Seal to cement a friendly edifice in his heart towards the lady. Thus it was no treason to Privy Seal in him to love her. But to her it was a treason great and not to be comprehended.

He ogled Udal's wife in the gallant manner and prayed her to prepare a bed for him in that hostelry. He had been minded to lodge with a Frenchman named Clement; but having seen her …

'Learned sir,' she answered, 'a good bed I have for you.' But if he sought to go beyond her lips she had a body-guard of spitmen that the magister's self had seen.

The doctor kissed her agreeably and, with a great sigh of relief, hurried from the door.

'May Bacchus who maketh mad, and the Furies that pursued Orestes, defile the day when I cross this step again,' he muttered as he swung under the arch and ran to follow the mule train.

For the magister, by playing with his reputation of being

Cromwell's spy, had so effectually caused terror of himself to pervade those who supported the old faith that he had much ado at times to find company even amongst the lovers of good letters.

III

In the kitchen the spits had ceased turning, the dishes had been borne upstairs to the envoy from Cleves, the scullions were wiping knives, the maids were rubbing pieces of bread in the dripping pans and licking their fingers after the succulent morsels. The magister stood, a long crimson blot in the window-way; the hostess was setting flagons carefully into the great armoury.

'Madam wife,' the magister said to her at last, when she came near, 'ye see how weighty it is that I bide here.'

'Husband,' she said, 'I see how weighty it is that ye hasten to London.'

His rage broke – he whirled his arms above his head.

'Naughty woman!' he screamed harshly. 'Shalt be beaten.' He strode across to the basting range and gripped a great ladle, his brown eyes glinting, and stood caressing his thin chin passionately.

She folded her arms complacently.

'Husband,' she said, 'it is well that wives be beaten when they have merited it. But, till I have, I have seven cooks and five knaves to bear my part.'

Udal's hand fell suddenly and dispiritedly to his side. What indeed could he do? He could not beat this woman unless she would be beaten – and she stood there, square, buxom, solid

and composed. He had indeed that sense that all scholars must have in presence of assured wives, that she was the better man. Moreover, the rage that had filled him in presence of Doctor Longstaffe had cooled down to nothing in Longstaffe's absence.

He folded his arms and tried impatiently to think where, in this pickle, his feet had landed him. His wife turned once more to place flagons in the armoury.

'Woman,' he said at last, in a tone half of majesty, half of appeal, 'see ye not how weighty it is that I bide here?'

'Husband,' she answered with her tranquil nonchalance, 'see ye not how weighty it is that ye waste here no more days?'

'But very well you know,' and he stretched out to her a thin hand, 'that here be two embassies of mystery: you have had, these three days, the Cleves envoy in the house. You have seen that the Duke of Norfolk comes here as ambassador.'

She took a stool and sat near his feet to listen to him.

'Now,' he began again, 'if I be in truth a spy for Thomas Cromwell, Lord Privy Seal, where can I spy better for him than here? For the Cleves people are befriended with Privy Seal; then why come they to France, where bide only Privy Seal's enemies? Now Norfolk is the chiefest enemy of Privy Seal; then wherefore cometh Norfolk to this land, where abide only these foes of Privy Seal?'

She set her elbows on her knees and her knuckles below her chin, and gazed up at him like a child.

'Tell me, husband,' she said; 'be ye a true spy for Thomas

Cromwell?'

He glanced round him with terror – but no man stood nearer than the meat boards across the kitchen, so far out of earshot that they could not hear feet upon the bricks.

'Nay, ye may tell me the very truth of the very truth,' she said. 'These be false days – but my kitchen gear is thine, and nothing doth so bind folks together.'

'But other listeners – ' he said.

'Hosts and hostesses are listeners,' she answered. '"Tis their trade. And their trade it is, too, to fend from them all other listeners. Here you may speak. Tell me then, if I may serve you, very truly whether ye be a true spy for Thomas Cromwell or against him.'

Her round face, beneath the great white hood, had a childish earnestness.

'Why, you are a fair doxy,' he said. He hung his head for some more minutes, then he spoke again.

'It is a folly to speak of me as Privy Seal's spy, though I have so spoken of myself. For why? It gaineth me worship, maketh men to fear me and women to be dazzled by my power. But in truth, I have little power.'

'That is the very truth?' she asked.

He nodded nonchalantly and waited again to find very clear words for her understanding.

'But, though it be true that I am no spy of Cromwell's, true it is also that I am a very poor man who craves very much for money.

For I love good books that cost much gold; comely women that cost far more; succulent meats, sweet wines, high piled fires and warm furs.'

He smacked his lips thinking of these same things.

'I am, in short, no stoic,' he said, 'the stoics being ancient curmudgeons that were low-stomached.' Now, he continued, the Old Faith he loved well, but not over well; the Protestants he called busy knaves, but the New Learning he loved beyond life. Cromwell thwacked the Old Faith; he loved him not for that. Cromwell upheld in a sort the Protestants; he little loved him for that. 'But the New Learning he loveth, and, oh fair sharer of my dreams o' nights, Cromwell holdeth the strings of the money-bags.'

She scratched her cheek meditatively, and then unfolded her arms.

'How then ha' ye come by his broad pieces?'

'It is three years since,' he answered, 'that Privy Seal sent for me. I had been cast out of my mastership at Eton College, for they said – foul liars said – that I had stolen the silver salt-cellars.' He had been teaching, for his sins, in the house of the Lord Edmund Howard, where he had had his best pupil, but no more salary than what his belly could hold of poor mutton. 'So Privy Seal did send for me – '

'Kat Howard was thy best pupil?' his wife asked meditatively.

'By the shrine of Saint Eloi – ' he commenced to swear.

'Nay, lie not,' she cut him short. 'You love Kat Howard and

six other wenches. I know it well. What said Privy Seal?'

He meditated again to protest that he loved not Katharine, but her quiet stolidity set him to change his mind.

'It was that the Lady Mary of England needed a preceptor, an amanuensis, an aid for her studies in the learned language.' For the King's Highness' daughter had a great learning and was agate of writing a commentary of Plautus his plays. But the Lady Mary hated also virulently – and with what cause all men know – the King her father. And for years long, since the death of the Queen her mother – whom God preserve in Paradise! – for years long the Lady Mary had maintained a treasonable correspondence with the King's enemies, with the Emperor, with the Bishop of Rome —

'Our Holy Father the Pope,' his wife said, and crossed herself.

'And with this King here of France,' Udal continued, whilst he too crossed himself with graceful waves of his brown hand. He continued to report that the way in which the Lady Mary sent her letters abroad had never been found; that Cromwell had appointed three tutors in succession to be aid to the Lady Mary in her studies. Each of these three she had broken and cast out from her doors, she being by far the more learned, so that, though Privy Seal in his might had seven thousand spies throughout the realm of England, he had among them no man learned enough to take this place and to spy out the things that he would learn.

'Therefore Privy Seal did send for thee, who art accounted the most learned doctor in Christendom.' His wife's eyes glowed and

her face became ruddy with pride in her husband's fame.

The magister waved his hand pleasantly.

'Therefore he did send for me.' Privy Seal had promised him seven hundred pounds, farms with sixty pounds by the year, or the headship of New College if the magister could discover how the Lady Mary wrote her letters abroad.

'So I have stayed three years with the Lady Mary,' Udal said. 'But before God,' he asseverated, 'though I have known these twenty-nine months that she sent away her letters in the crusts of pudding pies, never hath cur Crummock had word of it.'

'A fool he, to set thee to spy upon a petticoat,' she answered pleasantly.

'Woman,' he answered hotly, 'crowns I have made by making reports to Privy Seal. I have set his men to watch doors and windows where none came in or entered; I have reported treasons of men whose heads had already fallen by the axe; I have told him of words uttered by maids of honour whom he knew full well already miscalled him. Sometimes I have had a crown or two from him, sometimes more; but no good man hath been hurt by my spying.'

'Husband,' she uttered, with her face set expressionlessly, 'knew ye that the Frenchman's cook that made the pudding pies had been taken and cast into the Tower gaol?'

Udal's arms flew above his head; his eyes started from their sockets; his tongue came forth from his pale mouth to lick his dry lips, and his legs failed him so that he sat himself down, wavering

from side to side in the window-seat.

'Then the commentary of Plautus shall never be written,' he wailed. He wrung his hands. 'Whom have they taken else?' he said. 'How knew ye these things when I nothing knew? What make of house is this where such things be known?'

'Husband,' she answered, 'this house is even an inn. Where many travellers pass through, many secrets are known. I know of this cook's fate since the fate of cooks is much spoken of in kitchens, and this was the cook of a Frenchman, and this is France.'

'Save us, oh pitiful saints!' the magister whispered. 'Who else is taken? What more do ye know? Many others have aided. I too. And there be friends I love.'

'Husband,' she answered, 'I know no more than this: three days ago the cook stood where now you stand – '

He clasped his hair so that his cap fell to the ground.

'Here!' he said. 'But he was in the Tower!'

'He was in the Tower, but stood here free,' she answered. Udal groaned.

'Then he hath blabbed. We are lost.'

She answered:

'That may be the truth. But I think it is not. For so the matter is that the cook told me.' He was taken and set in the Tower by the men of Privy Seal. Yet within ten hours came the men of the King; these took him aboard a cogger, the cogger took them to Calais, and at the gate of Calais town the King's men kicked him

into the country of France, he having sworn on oath never more to tread on English soil.

Udal groaned.

'Aye! But what others were taken? What others shall be?'

She shook her head.

The report ran: a boy called Poins, a lady called Elliott, and a lady called Howard. Yet all three drank the free air before that day at nightfall.

Udal, huddled against the wall, took these blows of fate with a quiver for each. In the back of the kitchen the servers, come down from the meal of the Cleves envoy, made a great clatter with their dishes of pewter and alloy. The hostess, working with her comfortable sway of the hips, drove them gently through the door to let a silence fall; but gradually Udal's jaw closed, his eyes grew smaller, he started suddenly and the muscles of his knees regained their tension. The hostess, swishing her many petticoats beneath her, sat down again on the stool.

'*Insipiens et infacetus quin sum!*' the magister mused. 'Fool that I am! Wherefore see I no clue?' He hung his head; frowned; then started anew with his hand on his side.

'Wherefore shall I not read pure joy in this?' he said, 'save that Austin waileth: "*Inter delicias semper aliquid saevi nos strangulat.*" I would be joyful – but that I fear.' Norfolk had come upon an embassy here; then assuredly Cromwell's power waned, or never had this foe of his been sent in this office of honour. The cook was cast in the Tower, but set free by the King's men;

young Poins was cast too, but set free – the Lady Elliott – and the Lady Howard. What then? What then?

'Husband,' she said, 'have you naught forgotten?'

Udal, musing with his hand upon his chin, shook his head negligently.

'I keep more track of the King's leman than thou, then,' she said. 'What was it Longstaffe said of her?'

'Nay,' Udal answered, 'so turned my bowels were with jealousy that little I noted.'

'Why, you are a fine spy,' she said. And she repeated to him that Longstaffe had reported the King's commanding Katharine and Privy Seal to join hands and be friends. Udal shook his head gloomily.

'I would not have my best pupil friends with Cromwell,' he said.

'Oh, magister,' she retorted, with a first touch of scorn in her voice; 'have you, who have had so much truck with women, yet to learn that you may command a woman to be friends with a man, yet no power on earth shall make her love him. Nevertheless, well might Cromwell seek to win her love, and thence these pardons.'

Udal started forward upon his tiptoes.

'I must to London!' he cried. She smiled at him as at a child.

'You are come to be of my advice,' she said.

Udal gazed at her with a wondering patronage.

'Why, what a wench it is,' he said, and he crooked his arm around her ample waist. His face shone with pleasure. 'Angel!' he

uttered; 'for Angelos is the Greek for messenger, and signifieth more especially one that bringeth good tidings.' Out of all this holus bolus of envoys, ambassadors, cooks and prisoners one thing appeared plain to view: that, for the first time, *a solis ortus cardine*, Cromwell had loosened his grip of some that he held. 'And if Crummock looseneth grip, Crummock's power in the land waneth.'

She looked up at him with a coy pleasure.

'Hatest Cromwell then full fell-ly?' she asked.

He put his hands upon her shoulders and solemnly regarded her.

'Woman,' he said; 'this man rideth England with seven thousand spies; these three years I have lived in terror of my life. I have had no bliss that fear hath not entered into – in very truth *inter delicias semper aliquid saevi nos strangulavit*.' His lugubrious tones grew higher with hatred; he raised one hand above his head and one gripped tight her fat shoulder. 'Terror hath bestridden our realm of England; no man dares to whisper his hate even to the rushes. Me! Me! Me!' he reached a pitch of high-voiced fury. 'Me! *Virum doctissimum!* Me, the first learned man in Britain, he did force to write a play in the vulgar tongue. Me, a master of Latin, to write in English! I had pardoned him my terror. I had pardoned him the heads of the good men he hath struck off. For that princes should inspire terror is just, and that the great ones of the earth should prey one upon the other is a thing all history giveth precedent for since the days when Sylla

hunted to death Marius that sat amidst the ruins of Carthage. But that the learned should be put to shame! that good letters should be cast into the mire! History showeth no ensample of a man so vile since the Emperor Alexander removed his shadow from before the tub of Diogenes.'

'In truth,' she said, blenching a little before his fury, 'I was ever one that loved the rolling sound of your Greek and your Roman.'

'Give me my journey money,' he said, 'let me begone to England. For, if indeed the Lady Katharine hath the King's ear, much may I aid her with my counsels.'

She began to fumble in beneath her apron, and then, as if she suddenly remembered herself, she placed her finger upon her lips.

'Husband,' she said, 'I have for you a gift. How it shall value itself to you I little know, but I have before been much besought and offered high payment for that which now I offer thee. Come.'

The finger still upon her plump lips, she led him to a small door behind the chimney stack. They climbed up through cobwebs, ham, flitches of smoked beef, and darkness, and the reek of wood-smoke, until they came, high up, to a store-room in the slope of a mansard roof. Light filtered dimly between the tiles, and many bales and sacks lay upon the raftered floor like huge monsters in a huge, dim cave.

'Hearken! make no sound,' she whispered, and in the intense gloom they heard a sullen, stertorous, intermittent rumble.

'The envoy sleeps,' she said. She set her eye to a knot-hole in

the planked wall. "A sleeps!' she whispered. 'My pigling made a great thirst in him. Much wine he drank. Set your eye to the knot-hole.'

With his face glued against the rough wood, the magister could see in the large room a great fair man, in a great blue chair behind a littered table. His head hung forward, shewed only a pink bald spot in the thin hair, and brilliant red ears. A slow rumble of snoring came for a long minute, then ceased for as long.

From behind Udal's back came a crash, and he started back to see the large woman, who had overturned a chest.

'That is to test how he sleeps,' she said. 'See if he have moved.' The man, plain to see through the knot-hole, had stirred no muscle; again the heavy rumble of the snore came to them. She spoke quite loudly now. 'Why, naught shall wake him these five hours. 'A hath bolted the door; thus his secretaries shall not come to him. See now.'

She slid back a board in the wall, and Udal could see into what appeared to be a cupboard filled with a litter of papers and of parchments. Udal's heart began to beat so that he noted it there; his eyes searched hers with a glittering excitement – nevertheless a half fear of awakening the envoy kept him from speaking.

'Take them! Take them!' she nudged him with her elbow. 'Six hours ye have to read and to copy.'

'What papers are these?' he muttered, his voice thick betwixt incredulous joy and fear.

'They be the envoy's papers,' she said; 'doubtless these be his

letters to the king of this land… What there may be I know not else.'

Udal's hands were in at the hole with the swift clutch of a miser visiting his treasure-chest. The woman surveyed him with pleasure and with pride in her achievement, and with the calmness of routine she fitted a bar across the door of the cupboard where it opened into the envoy's room. Udal was fumbling already with the strings of a packet, his eyes searching the superscription in the gloom.

'Six hours ye have to read and to copy,' she said happily, 'for, for six hours the poppy seed in his wine that he drank shall surely keep him snoring.' And, whilst they went again down the stairway, the papers secreted beneath the magister's gown, she explained with her pride and happiness. The aumbry was so contrived that any envoy or secretary sleeping in her best room must needs put his papers therein, since there was in the room no other chest that locked. And the King of France's chancellors allotted to all envoys her hostelry for a lodging; and once there, she made them heavy with wine and poppy seed after a receipt she had from an Egyptian, and at the appointed time the King of France's men came to read through the papers and to pay her much money and many kisses.

It was six hours later that the magister stood in his own room crushing a fillet of papers into the breast of his brown jerkin. The hostess, walking always calmly as if disorder of the mind were a thing she were a stranger to, had reclimbed the narrow stairway,

replaced the papers in the envoy's cupboard and returned to her husband. She sought, mutely, for commendations, and he gave her them.

'Y'have made me the man that holds the secret of England's future,' he said. 'All England that groans beneath Cromwell awaiteth to hear how the cat jumps in Cleves. Now I know how the cat jumps in Cleves.'

She wiped the dust from her hands upon her apron.

'See that ye make good use of the knowledge,' she said. She considered for a moment whilst he ferreted amongst his clothes in the great black press beside the great white bed. 'I have long thought,' she said, 'that greatly might I be of service to a man of laws and of policies. But I have long known that to serve a man is to have little reward unless a woman tie him up in fast bonds – ' He made one of his broad gestures of negation, but she cut in upon his words: 'Aye, so it is. A gossip may serve a man how she will, but once his occasion is past he shall leave her in the ditch for the first fairer face. So I made resolve to make such a man my husband, that his being advanced might advance me. For, for sure this shall not be the last spying service I shall do thee. Many envoys more shall be lodged in this house and many more secrets ye shall learn.'

'Oh beloved Pandora!' he cried; 'opener of all secret places, caskets, aumbries, caves of the winds, thrice blessed Sibyl of the keyhole!' She nodded her head with grave contentment.

'I chose thee for thy resounding speeches,' she said. Her

tranquillity and her buxom pleasantness overcame him with sudden affection. He was minded to tell her – because indeed she had made his fortunes for him – that her marriage to him did not hold good since a friar had read the rites.

'I chose thee for thy resounding speeches,' she said, 'and because art so ill-clothed i' the ribs. Give me a thin man of policies to move my bowels of compassion, say I.' For with her secret closets she might make him stand well among the princes, and with her goodly capons set grease upon his ribs, poor soul!

'Oh Guenevere!' he said; 'for was it not the queen of Arthur that made bag-puddings for his starving knights?'

'Aye,' she said; 'great learning you possess.' A little moisture bedewed her blue eyes. 'It grieves me that you must begone. I love to hear thy broad o's and a's!'

'Then by all that is fattest in the land hight Cokaigne I will stay here, thy dutiful goodman,' he said, and tears filled his own eyes.

'Oh nay,' she answered; 'you shall get yourself into the Chancellery, and merry will we feast and devise beneath the gilded roofs.' Her eyes sought the brown beams that ceiled the long room. 'I have heard that chancellors have always gilded roofs.'

Again the tenderness overcame him for the touch of simple pride in her voice. And the confession slipped from his lips:

'Poor befooled soul! Shalt never be a chancellor's dame.'

She was sobbing a little.

'Oh aye,' she said; 'thou shalt yet be chancellor, and I will baste

thy cooks' ribs an they baste not thy meat full well.' Such a man as he would find favour with princes for his glosing tongue – aye, and with queens too. At that she covered her face with her apron, and from beneath it her voice came forth:

'If this Kat Howard come to be queen, shall not the old faith be restored?'

The recollection of this particular certainty affected the magister like a stab, for, if the old faith came back, then assuredly marriages by friars should again be acknowledged. He cursed himself beneath his breath: he was loath to leave the woman in the ditch, her trusting face and pleasing ways stirred the strings of his heart. But he was more than loath that the wedding should hold a wedding. He shook his perplexity from him with starting towards the door.

'Time to be gone!' he said, and added, 'Be certain and take care that no Englishman heareth of wedding betwixt thee and me.' It must in England work his sure undoing.

She removed her apron and nodded gravely.

'Aye,' she said, 'that is certain enow with Court ladies, such as they be to-day.' But she asked that when he went among women she should hear nothing of it. For she had had three husbands and several courtiers to prove it upon, that it is better to be lied to than to know truth.

'There is in the world no woman like to thee!' he said with a great sincerity. Once more she nodded.

'Aye, that is the lie that I would hear,' she said. On his part,

he started suddenly with pain.

'But thee!' he uttered.

'Aye,' she cried again, 'that too is needed. But be very certain of this, that not easily will I plant upon thy brow that which most husbands wear!' She paused, and once more rubbed her hands. Courteous she must be, since her calling called therefor. But assuredly, having had three husbands, she had had embraces enow to crave little for men. And, if she did that which few good women have a need to – save very piteous women in ballads – she would suffer him to belabour her; – she nodded again – 'And that to a man is a great solace.'

He fled with precipitancy from the thought of this solace, brushing through the narrow passages, stalking across the great guest-chamber and the greater kitchen where, in the falling dusk, the fires glowed red upon the maids' faces and the cooks' aprons, the smoke rose unctuously upward tended with rich smells of meat, and the windjacks clanked in the chimneys. She trotted behind him, weeping in the gloaming.

'If you come to be chancellor in five years,' she whimpered, 'I shall come across the seas to ye. If ye fail, this shall be your plenteous house.'

Whilst she hung round his neck in the shadowy courtyard and he had already one foot in the stirrup, she begged for one more great speech.

'Before Jupiter!' he said, 'I can think of none for crying!'

The big black horse, with its bags before and behind the

saddle, stirred, so that, standing upon one foot, he fell away from her. But he swung astride the saddle, his cloak flying, his long legs clasping round the belly. It reared and pawed the twilight mists, but he smote it over one ear with his palm, and it stood trembling.

'This is a fine beast y'have given me,' he said, pleasure thrilling his limbs.

'I have given it a fine rider!' she cried. He wheeled it near her and stooped right down to kiss her face. He was very sure in his saddle, having learned the trick of the stirrup from old Rowfant, that had taught the King.

'Wife,' he said, 'I have bethought me of this: *Post equitem sedet*– ' He faltered – '*sedet – Behind the rider sitteth*– But for the life of me I know not whether it be *atra cura* or no.'

And, as he left Paris gates behind him and speeded towards the black hills, bending low to face the cold wind of night, for the life of him he knew not whether black care sat behind him or no. Only, as night came down and he sped forward, he knew that he was speeding for England with the great news that the Duke of Cleves was seeking to make his peace with the Emperor and the Pope through the mediancy of the king of that land and, on the soft road, the hoofs of the horse seemed to beat out the rhythm of the words:

'Crummock is down: Cromwell is down. Crummock is down: Cromwell is down.'

He rode all through the night thinking of these things, for,

because he carried letters from the English ambassador to the King of England, the gates of no small town could stay his passing through.

IV

Five men talked in the long gallery overlooking the River Thames. It was in the Lord Cromwell's house, upon which the April showers fell like handsful of peas, with a sifting sound, between showers of sunshine that fell themselves like rain, so that at times all the long empty gallery was gilded with light and at times it was all saddened and frosty. They were talking all, and all with earnestness and concern, as all the Court and the city were talking now, of Katharine Howard whom the King loved.

The Archbishop leant against one side of a window, close beside him his spy Lascelles; the Archbishop's face was round but worn, his large eyes bore the trace of sleeplessness, his plump hands were a little tremulous within his lawn sleeves.

'Sir,' he said, 'we must bow to the breeze. In time to come we may stand straight enow.' His eyes seemed to plead with Privy Seal, who paced the gallery in short, pursy strides, his plump hands hidden in the furs behind his back. Lascelles, the Archbishop's spy, nodded his head sagaciously; his yellow hair came from high on his crown and was brushed forward towards his brows. He did not speak, being in such high company, but looking at him, the Archbishop gained confidence from the support of his nod.

'If we needs must go with the Lady Katharine towards Rome,' he pleaded again, 'consider that it is but for a short time.'

Cromwell passed him in his pacing and, unsure of having caught his ear, Cranmer addressed himself to Throckmorton and Wriothesley, the two men of forty who stood gravely, side by side, fingering their long beards. 'For sure,' Cranmer appealed to the three silent men, 'what we must avoid is crossing the King's Highness. For his Highness, crossed, hath a swift and sudden habit of action.' Wriothesley nodded, and: 'Very sudden,' Lascelles allowed himself utterance, in a low voice. Throckmorton's eyes alone danced and span; he neither nodded nor spoke, and, because he was thought to have a great say in the councils of Privy Seal, it was to him that Cranmer once more addressed himself urgently:

'Full-bodied men who are come upon failing years are very prone to women. 'Tis a condition of the body, a humour, a malady that passeth. But, while it lasteth, it must be bowed to.'

Cromwell, with his deaf face, passed once more before them. He addressed himself in brief, sharp tones to Wriothesley:

'You say, in Paris an envoy from Cleves was come a week agone?' and passed on.

'It must be bowed to,' Cranmer continued his speech. 'I do maintain it. There is no way but to divorce the Queen.' Again Lascelles nodded; it was Wriothesley this time who spoke.

'It is a lamentable thing!' and there was a heavy sincerity in his utterance, his pose, with his foot weightily upon the ground, being that of an honest man. 'But I do think you have the right of it. We, and the new faith with us, are between Scylla and

Charybdis. For certain, our two paths do lie between divorcing the Queen and seeing you, great lords, who so well defend us, cast down.'

Coming up behind him, Cromwell placed a hand upon his shoulder.

'Goodly knight,' he said, 'let us hear thy thoughts. His Grace's of Canterbury we do know very well. He is for keeping a whole skin!'

Cranmer threw up his hands, and Lascelles looked at the ground. Throckmorton's eyes were filled with admiration of this master of his that he was betraying now. He muttered in his long, golden beard.

'Pity we must have thy head.'

Wriothesley cleared his throat, and having considered, spoke earnestly.

'It is before all things expedient and necessary,' he said, 'that we do keep you, my Lord Privy Seal, and you, my Lord of Canterbury, at the head of the State.' That was above all necessary. For assuredly this land, though these two had brought it to a great pitch of wealth, clean living, true faith and prosperity, this land needed my Lord Privy Seal before all men to shield it from the treason of the old faith. There were many lands now, bringing wealth and commodity to the republic, that should soon again revert towards and pay all their fruits to Rome; there were many cleaned and whitened churches that should again hear the old nasty songs and again be tricked with gewgaws of the

idolaters. Therefore, before all things, my Lord Privy Seal must retain the love of the King's Highness – Cromwell, who had resumed his pacing, stayed for a moment to listen.

'Wherefore brought ye not news of why Cleves' envoy came to Paris town?' he said pleasantly. 'All the door turneth upon that hinge.'

Wriothesley stuttered and reddened.

'What gold could purchase, I purchased of news,' he said. 'But this envoy would not speak; his knaves took my gold and had no news. The King of France's men – '

'Oh aye,' Cromwell continued; 'speak on about the other matter.'

Wriothesley turned his slow mind from his vexation in Paris, whence he had come a special journey to report of the envoy from Cleves. He spoke again swiftly, turning right round to Cromwell.

'Sir,' he said, 'study above all to please the King. For unless you guide us we are lost indeed.'

Cromwell worked his lips one upon another and moved a hand.

'Aye,' Wriothesley continued; 'it can be done only by bringing the King's Highness and the Lady Katharine to a marriage.'

'Only by that?' Cromwell asked enigmatically.

Throckmorton spoke at last:

'Your lordship jests,' he said; 'since the King is not a man, but a high and beneficent prince with a noble stomach.'

Cromwell tapped him upon the cheek.

'That you do see through a millstone I know,' he said. 'But I was minded to hear how these men do think. You and I do think alike.'

'Aye, my lord,' Throckmorton answered boldly. 'But in ten minutes I must be with the Lady Katharine, and I am minded to hear the upshot of this conference.'

Cromwell laughed at him sunnily:

'Go and do your message with the lady. An you hasten, you may return ere ever this conference ends, since slow wits like ours need a store of words to speak their minds with.'

Lascelles, the silent spy of the archbishop, devoured with envious eyes Throckmorton's great back and golden beard. For his life he dared not speak three words unbidden in this company. But Throckmorton being gone the discussion renewed itself, Wriothesley speaking again.

He voiced always the same ideas, for the same motives: Cromwell must maintain his place at the cost of all things, for the sake of all these men who leaned upon him. And it was certain that the King loved this lady. If he had sent her few gifts and given her no titles nor farms, it was because – either of nature or to enhance the King's appetite – she shewed a prudish disposition. But day by day and week in week out the King went with his little son in his times of ease to the rooms of the Lady Mary. And there he went, assuredly, not to see the glum face of the daughter that hated him, but to converse in Latin with his daughter's waiting-

maid of honour. All the Court knew this. Who there had not seen how the King smiled when he came new from the Lady Mary's rooms? He was heavy enow at all other times. This fair woman that hated alike the new faith and all its ways had utterly bewitched and enslaved the King's eyes, ears and understanding. If the King would have Katharine Howard his wife the King must have her. Anne of Cleves must be sent back to Germany; Cromwell must sue for peace with the Howard wench; a way must be found to bribe her till the King tired of her; then Katharine must go in her turn, once more Cromwell would have his own, and the Protestants be reinstated. Cromwell retained his silence; at the last he uttered his unfailing words with which he closed all these discussions:

'Well, it is a great matter.'

The gusts of rain and showers of sun pursued each other down the river; the lights and shadows succeeded upon the cloaked and capped shapes of the men who huddled their figures together in the tall window. At last the Archbishop lost his patience and cried out:

'What will you *do*? What will you *do*?'

Cromwell swung his figure round before him.

'I will discover what Cleves will do in this matter,' he said. 'All dependeth therefrom.'

'Nay; make a peace with Rome,' Cranmer uttered suddenly. 'I am weary of these strivings.'

But Wriothesley clenched his fist.

'Before ye shall do that I will die, and twenty thousand others!'

Cranmer quailed.

'Sir,' he temporised. 'We will give back to the Bishop of Rome nothing that we have taken of property. But the Bishop of Rome may have Peter's Pence and the deciding of doctrines.'

'Canterbury,' Wriothesley said, 'I had rather Antichrist had his old goods and gear in this realm than the handling of our faith.'

Cromwell drew in the air through his nostrils, and still smiled.

'Be sure the Bishop of Rome shall have no more gear and no more guidance of this realm than his Highness and I need give,' he said. 'No stranger shall have any say in the councils of this realm.' He smiled noiselessly again. 'Still and still, all turneth upon Cleves.'

For the first time Lascelles spoke:

'All turneth upon Cleves,' he said.

Cromwell surveyed him, narrowing his eyes.

'Speak you now of your wisdom,' he uttered with neither friendliness nor contempt. Lascelles caressed his shaven chin and spoke:

'The King's Highness I have observed to be a man for women – a man who will give all his goods and all his gear to a woman. Assuredly he will not take this woman to his leman; his princely stomach revolteth against an easy won mastership. He will pay dear, he will pay his crown to win her. Yet the King would not give his policies. Neither would he retrace his steps for a woman's sake unless Fate too cried out that he must.'

Cromwell nodded his head. It pleased him that this young man set a virtue sufficiently high upon his prince.

'Sirs,' he said, 'daily have I seen this King in ten years, and I do tell ye no man knoweth how the King loves kingcraft as I know.' He nodded again to Lascelles, whose small stature seemed to gain bulk, whose thin voice seemed to gain volume from this approval and from his 'Speak on. About Cleves.'

'Sirs,' Lascelles spoke again, 'whiles there remains the shade of a chance that Cleves' Duke shall lead the princes of Germany against the Emperor and France, assuredly the King shall stay his longing for the Lady Katharine. He shall stay firm in his marriage with the Queen.' Again Cromwell nodded. 'Till then it booteth little to move towards a divorce; but if that day should come, then our Lord Privy Seal must bethink himself. That is in our lord's mind.'

'By Bacchus!' Cromwell said, 'your Grace of Canterbury hath a jewel in your crony and helper. And again I say, we must wait upon Cleves.' He seemed to pursue the sunbeams along the gallery, then returned to say:

'I know ye know I love little to speak my mind. What I think or how I will act I keep to myself. But this I will tell you:' Cleves might have two minds in sending to France an envoy. On the one hand, he might be minded to abandon Henry and make submission to the Emperor and to Rome. For, in the end, was not the Duke of Cleves a vassal of the Emperor? It might be that. Or it might be that he was sending merely to ask the King of France

to intercede betwixt him and his offended lord. The Emperor was preparing to wage war upon Cleves. That was known. And doubtless Cleves, desiring to retain his friendship with Henry, might have it in mind to keep friends with both. There the matter hinged, Cromwell repeated. For, if Cleves remained loyal to the King of England, Henry would hear nothing of divorcing Cleves' sister, and would master his desire for Katharine.

'Believe me when I speak,' Cromwell added earnestly. 'Ye do wrong to think of this King as a lecher after the common report. He is a man very continent for a king. His kingcraft cometh before all women. If the Duke of Cleves be firm friend to him, firm friend he will be to the Duke's sister. The Lady Howard will be his friend, but the Lady Howard will be neither his leman nor his guide to Rome. He will please her if he may. But his kingcraft. Never!' He broke off and laughed noiselessly at the Archbishop's face of dismay. 'Your Grace would make a pact with Rome?' he asked.

'Why, these are very evil times,' Cranmer answered. 'And if the Bishop of Rome will give way to us, why may we not give pence to the Bishop of Rome?'

'Goodman,' Cromwell answered, 'these are evil times because we men are evil.' He pulled a paper from his belt. 'Sirs,' he said, 'will ye know what manner of woman this Katharine Howard is?' and to their murmurs of assent: 'This lady hath asked to speak with me. Will ye hear her speak? Then bide ye here. Throckmorton is gone to seek her.'

V

Katharine Howard sat in her own room; it had in it little of sumptuousness, for all the King so much affected her. It was the room she had first had at Hampton after coming to be maid to the King's daughter, and it had the old, green hangings that had always been round the walls, the long oak table, the box-bed set in the wall, the high chair and the three stools round the fire. The only thing she had taken of the King was a curtain in red cloth to hang on a rod before the door where was a great draught, the leading of the windows being rotted. She had lived so poor a life, her father having been a very poor lord with many children – she was so attuned to flaws of the wind, ill-feeding and harsh clothes, that such a tall room as she there had seemed goodly enough for her. Barely three months ago she had come to the palace of Greenwich riding upon a mule. Now accident, or maybe the design of the dear saints, had set her so high in the King's esteem that she might well try a fall with Privy Seal.

She sat there dressed, awaiting the summons to go to him. She wore a long dress of red velvet, worked around the breast-lines with little silver anchors and hearts, and her hood was of black lawn and fell near to her hips behind. And she had read and learned by heart passages from Plutarch, from Tacitus, from Diodorus Siculus, from Seneca and from Tully, each one inculcating how salutary a thing in a man was the love of justice.

Therefore she felt herself well prepared to try a fall with the chief enemy of her faith, and awaited with impatience his summons to speak with him. For she was anxious, now at last, to speak out her mind, and Privy Seal's agents had worked upon the religious of a poor little convent near her father's house a wrong so baleful that she could no longer contain herself. Either Privy Seal must redress or she must go to the King for justice to these poor women that had taught her the very elements of virtue and lay now in gaol.

So she spoke to her two chief friends, her that had been Cicely Elliott and her old husband Rochford, the knight of Bosworth Hedge. They happened in upon her just after she was attired and had sent her maid to fetch her dinner from the buttery.

'Three months agone,' she said, 'the King's Highness did bid me cease from crying out upon Privy Seal; and not the King's Highness' self can say that in that time I have spoken word against the Lord Cromwell.'

Cicely Elliott, who dressed, in spite of her new wedding, all in black for the sake of some dead men, laughed round at her from her little stool by the fire.

'God help you! that must have been hard, to keep thy tongue from the flail of all Papists.'

The old knight, who was habited like Katharine, all in red, because at that season the King favoured that colour, pulled nervously at his little goat's beard, for all conversations that savoured of politics and religion were to him very fearful. He

stood back against the green hangings and fidgeted with his feet.

But Katharine, who for the love of the King had been silent, was now set to speak her mind.

'It is Seneca,' she said, 'who tells us to have a check upon our tongues, but only till the moment approaches to speak.'

'Aye, goodman Seneca!' Cicely laughed round at her. Katharine smoothed her hair, but her eyes gleamed deeply.

'The moment approaches,' she said; 'I do like my King, but better I like my Church.' She swallowed in her throat. 'I had thought,' she said, 'that Privy Seal would stay his harryings of the goodly nuns in this land.' But now she had a petition, come that day from Lincoln gaol. Cromwell's servants were more bitter still than ever against the religious. Here was a false accusation of treason against her foster-mother's self. 'I will soon end it or mend it, or lose mine own head,' Katharine ended.

'Aye, pull down Cur Crummock,' Cicely said. 'I think the King shall not long stay away from thy desires.'

The old knight burst in:

'I take it ill that ye speak of these things. I take it ill. I will not have 'ee lose thy head in these quarrels.'

'Husband,' Cicely laughed round at him, 'three years ago Cur Crummock had the heads of all my menfolk, having sworn they were traitors.'

'The more reason that he have not mine and thine now,' the old knight answered grimly. 'I am not for these meddlings in things that concern neither me nor thee.'

Cicely Elliott set her elbows upon her knees and her chin upon her knuckles. She gazed into the fire and grew moody, as was her wont when she had chanced to think of her menfolk that Cromwell had executed.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.