

# Portrait of an Unknown Woman

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PART ONE

Portrait of Sir Thomas  
More's Family

# 1

The house was turned upside down and inside out on the day the painter was to arrive. It was obvious to the meanest intelligence that everyone was in a high state of excitement about the picture the German was to make of us. If anyone had asked me, I would have said vanity comes in strange guises. But no one did. We weren't admitting to being so worldly. We were a Godly household, and we never forgot our virtuous modesty.

The excuse for all the bustle was that it was the first day of spring – or at least the first January day with a hint of warmth in the air – a chance to scrub and shake and plump and scrape at every surface, visible and invisible, in a mansion that was only a year old anyway, had cost a king's fortune in the first place, and scarcely needed any more primping and preening now to look good in the sunshine. From dawn onwards, there were village girls polishing every scrap of wood in the great hall until the table on the dais and the panels on the walls and the wooden screens by the door alike glistened with beeswax. More girls upstairs were turning over feather pillows and patting quilts and brushing off tapestries and letting in fresh air and strewing pomanders and lavender in chests.

The hay was changed in the privies. The fireplaces were scraped clean and laid with aromatic apple logs. By the time we came back from Matins, with the sun still not high in the sky, there were already clankings and chop-pings from the kitchen, the squawked death agony of birds, and the smell of energetically boiling savouries. We daughters (all, not necessarily by coincidence, in our be-ribboned, embroidered spring best) were put to work ourselves dusting off the lutes and viols on the shelf and arranging music. And outside, where Dame Alice kept finding herself on her majestic if slightly fretful tour of her troops (casting a watchful eye down the river to check what boats might be heading towards our stairs), there was what seemed to be Chelsea's entire supply of young boys, enthusiastically pruning back the mulberry tree that had been Father's first flourish as a landowner – its Latin name, *Morus*, is what he called himself in Latin too (and he was self-deprecating enough to think it funny that it also meant 'the fool'). Others were shaping the innocent rosemary bushes, or tying back the trees espaliered around the orchard walls like skinny prisoners; their pears and apples and apricots and plums, the fruits of our future summer happiness, still just buds and swellings, vulnerable to a late frost as they took tomorrow's shape.

It was the garden that kept drawing everyone out, and the river beyond the gate. Not our stretch of wild water, which the locals said danced to the sound of drowned fiddles and which was notoriously hard to navigate and moor from. Not the little boats that villagers used to go after salmon and carp and perch. Not the view of the gentle far shore, where the Surrey woods with their wild duck and waterfowl stretched back to the hills of Clapham and Sydenham. But the ribbon of river you could see from Father's favourite part of the garden, the raised area which gave the best possible view of London – the rooftops and

the smoke and the church spires – which used to be our home until we got quite so rich and powerful, and which he, almost as much as I, couldn't bear to pass a day without seeing.

First Margaret and Will Roper came out, arm in arm, decorous, stately, married, learned, modest, handsome and happy, seeming to me, on that scratchy morning, unbearably smug. Margaret, the oldest of the More children and my adopted sister, was twenty-two like her husband, a bit more than a year younger than me; but they were already so long settled in their shared happiness that they'd forgotten what it was to be alone. Then Cecily with her new husband, Giles Heron, and Elizabeth with hers, William Dauncey, all four younger than me, Elizabeth only eighteen, and all smirking with the secret pleasure of newlyweds, not to mention the more obvious pleasure of those who had had the good fortune to make advantageous marriages to their childhood sweethearts and find their new husbands' careers being advanced by regular trips to court and introductions to the great and good. Then Grandfather, old Sir John More, puffed up and dignified in a fur-trimmed cape (he'd reached the age where he worried about chills in the spring air). And young John, the youngest of the four More children, shivering in his undershirt, so busy peering upriver that he started absent-mindedly pulling leaves off a rose bush and scrunching them into tiny folds until Dame Alice materialised next to him, scolded him roundly for being destructive, and sent him off to wrap up more warmly against the river breezes. Then Anne Cresacre, another ward like me, managing, in her irritating way, to look artlessly pretty as she arranged her fifteen-year-old self and a piece of embroidery near John. In my view there was no need for all the draping of her long limbs and soft humming in her tuneful voice and that gentle smiling with her lovely

little face that she did whenever John was around. It was obvious. With all the money and estates she'd been left by her parents, Father would have John marry her the day she came of age. What would be the point of bringing up a rich ward otherwise? Of all his wards, it was only me he seemed to have forgotten to marry off, but then I was several years too old to marry his only son.) Anne Cresacre didn't need to try half so hard. Especially since you could see from the doggy way John looked at her that, even if he wasn't very clever, he knew enough to know that he'd been in love with her all his life.

The sun came out on young John's face as he came back, better dressed now for the gusty weather, and he screwed up his eyes painfully against the harshness of the light. And suddenly the peevish ill-temper that had been with me through a winter of other people's celebrations – a joint bride-ale for Cecily and Elizabeth and their husbands, followed by Christmas celebrations for our whole newly extended family – seemed to pass, and I felt a pang of sympathy for the newly man-height boy. 'Have you got your headache again?' I asked him in a whisper. He nodded, trying like me not to draw anyone's attention to my question. His head ached all the time; his eyes weren't strong enough for the studying that made up so much of our time, and he was always anxious that he wasn't going to perform well enough to please Father or impress pretty Anne, which only made it worse. I put a hand through his skinny arm and drew him away down the path to where we'd planted the vervain the previous spring. We both knew it helped with his headaches, but the clump that had survived was still woody and wintry. 'There's some dried stuff in the pantry,' I whispered. 'I'll make you a garland when we get back to the house, and you can lie down with it for a while after dinner.' He didn't say anything, but I could sense his

gratitude from the way he squeezed my hand against his bony ribs.

One moment of kindness reassured him; and it was enough to add honey to my view of everything too. When Dame Alice came back from her own spontaneous little stroll in the garden, rejoining the crowd gathered as if by chance and staring towards the spire of St Paul's, I was touched to see our stepmother – Father's second wife, who'd married him just before I'd come to the house, and looked after his four children and the wards he'd taken on, as sensibly and lovingly as if they'd been her own – had been quietly taking trouble with her hair. She always laughed robustly but she didn't like it when Father teased her about the size of her nose. Her great beauty was her beautiful broad forehead, and now she'd brushed her hair – with its stray streaks of grey blackened with the elderberry potion she liked me to make for her – back off it to show the unlined, luminous skin at its best.

Father's teasing could be cruel. Even Anne Cresacre, who had nerves of steel, wept with frustration over the box he gave her for her fifteenth birthday. She thought it would contain the pearl necklace she'd been asking for for so long. But it turned out there was nothing in it but a string of peas. 'We must not look to go to Heaven at our pleasure or on feather beds,' was his only comment, along with that quizzical, birdlike look from far away that reminded you he wore a hair shirt under his robes and wouldn't drink anything but water. At least she had enough presence of mind to overcome her disappointment and say to him at dinner, as prettily as ever, 'That is so good a lesson that I'll never forget it,' and win one of those sudden golden smiles of his that always made you forget your fury and be ready to do anything for him again. So that time it came out all right, and anyway Anne Cresacre could look after herself. But I thought he should be kinder to his own wife.

Dame Alice could do what she liked to her hair on this day, anyway. Father was the only one who wasn't here. He was away somewhere, like he always was since we'd moved to Chelsea. Court affairs; the King's business. I lost count of what and where. Even when he reappeared, looking tired, with the new gold spurs that he didn't really know what to do with clinking uselessly against a horse's muddy sides, and we all rushed out to see him, he just shut himself away in the private place he'd built in the garden – his New Building, his monk's cell – and prayed, and scourged himself, and fasted. We hardly knew him any more. But I had heard him promise Dame Alice when he last set off that he'd be back as soon as the painter arrived. And I happened to see that morning that she'd laid out some of his grandest clothes – the glistening fur-lined black cape, the doublet with the long, gathered sleeves of lustrous velvet attached that were long enough to hide the hands whose coarseness secretly embarrassed him. He liked to believe he just wanted his portrait painted to return likenesses of himself to his learned friends in Europe, who were always sending him their pictures. But being painted in those clothes spoke of something more. Even in him, worldly vanity couldn't quite be extinguished.

And so our eyes devoured the river. I could almost feel the pull of everyone's waiting and wishing. Longing to display ourselves to Hans Holbein, the young man sent to us from Basel by Erasmus – a living token of the old scholar's continuing affection for us, long after he stopped living with us and went back to his books abroad – in memory of the good old days when Father's friends were men of the mind, instead of the spare-faced bishops whose company he'd come to prefer these days. In those times ideas were still games, and the worst argument you could imagine was Father's with Erasmus over what he should call the book he was writing about an imaginary nowhere



land (which had ended up being as much of a best-seller as any of Erasmus' works). We were longing to show ourselves as the accomplished, educated graduates of an experimental family school that Erasmus had always, in his almost embarrassingly flattering and charming way, praised to the heavens all around Europe as Plato's Academy in its modern image. And longing to be back, at least on canvas, in a time when we were all together.

Except me. Even if I was staring upriver as longingly as anyone else, I certainly wasn't looking for any German craftsman bobbing up and down in the distance with a pile of travel-stained boxes and bags bouncing around next to him. He'd be along soon enough. Why wouldn't he, after all, with his way to make in the world, a recommendation in his pocket, and the chance to make his reputation by painting our famous faces? No, I was waiting for someone else. And even if it was a secret, childish kind of waiting – even though I had no real reason to believe my dream was about to come true and the face I so wanted to see was truly about to appear before me – it didn't lessen the intensity with which I found myself staring at each passing boat. I was looking for my teacher from the past. My hope for the future. The man I've always loved.

John Clement came to live with us when I was nine, not long after my parents died and I was sent from Norfolk to be brought up in Thomas More's family in London. John Clement had been teaching Latin and Greek at the school that Father's friend John Colet had set up in St Paul's churchyard, and Father and Erasmus and all the other friends of those days – Linacre and Grocyn and the rest – had made their passion.

They were all enthusiasm and experiment back then, all Father's learned friends. When the new king was

crowned, and the streets of London were hung with cloth of gold for the coronation – a sure sign that there'd be no more of the old King Henry's meanness – they somehow got it into their heads that a new golden age was beginning in which everyone would speak Greek and study astronomy and cleanse the Church of its mediaeval filth and laugh all day long and live happily ever after. Erasmus once told me that the letter his patron Lord Mountjoy sent him, telling him to come to England at once and sending him five pounds for his travel expenses, was half-crazy with happiness and hope about the new King Henry. 'The heavens laugh; the earth rejoices; all is milk and honey,' it said.

It would surely have curdled all that milk and honey they were swimming in back then if only they'd known how quickly everything would go wrong. That within ten years their playful shared mockery of the bad old ways the old Church had got into would have turned into the deadly battle over religion that we were living through now. That one of Erasmus' European disciples, Brother Martin of Wittenberg, would have pushed their notion of religious reform so far that peasants all over the German lands had started burning churches and denouncing the Pope and declaring war on both their spiritual and temporal rulers. That Father would have responded by giving up his belief in reforming Church corruption, taken court office instead, got rich, and been transformed into the fiercest defender of the Catholic faith against the radical new reformers he now called heretics – an about-face so dramatic that we didn't dare discuss or even mention it. That Erasmus, the only one to preserve the memory of those hopes that we'd all entered a more civilised age of debate and tolerance when the new king came to the throne, would leave our house and go back to Europe, from where he'd spend his old age wearily

mocking his greatest English friend for becoming a ‘total courtier’ and wondering at the evil real-life form his gentle dreams had taken.

But even back then, the happy humanist throng couldn’t just sit around all day laughing at the wonder of being alive in their land of milk and honey. They had to do something to mark the start of the golden age. First there was the school at St Paul’s. And then, when Father realised how many children he’d gathered in his own house, his four and the orphans like me and Giles and Anne, he persuaded Dean Colet to let him hire away a teacher from the school and set up his own personal humanist academy.

John Clement’s chambers were up at the top of the old-fashioned stone house we were brought up in in London, which had so many creaking wooden floors and dark little corridors and hidden chambers that it could easily have been a ship, so it was natural and pleasing that its name was the Old Barge. He lived at the other end of the corridor from our rooms, next to Erasmus and Andrew Ammonius. If we were playing in the corridor, we had to tiptoe past the grown-up end, shuffling our toes through the rushes, so as not to disturb them while they were thinking.

John Clement was big and tall – a gentle giant with an eagle’s nose and long patrician features and a dark, saturnine aspect that could easily have lent itself to looking bad-tempered if he hadn’t always worn a weary, kind, rather noble look instead. He had black hair and pale blue eyes with the sky in them. He was Father’s age, though taller, with broad warrior shoulders. You could guess at his physical energy – he strode off down the paving stones of Walbrook or Bucklersbury on great impatient legs every afternoon, instead of sleeping after dinner, and he taught us our Latin and Greek letters by pinning them to the archery target in the garden and letting us shoot them through with arrows. We were city children,

being raised in a mercantile elite of burghers and aldermen who only kept bows and arrows gathering dust on a hook because they were obliged to by law, and would never raise a sword, so that was our only experience of the aristocratic arts of war. We loved it. Dame Alice raised her eyebrows at John Clement's preference but Father just laughed. 'Let them try everything, wife,' he said. 'Why ever not?'

Despite his long, athletic body with its muscles and quick reflexes, there was nothing in John Clement that signalled any wish to fight. He had a natural authority that commanded our respect, but he was also very patient with us children, and always ready to listen to other people and draw stories out of them; a comforting paternal presence. He wasn't like the other adults we knew – the brilliant talkers and thinkers who came to Father's table – because he was shy about talking of himself. He read a lot; he studied Greek in his room; but he was modest about sharing his thoughts with adults, and especially quiet and respectful around the great minds Father gathered around himself.

It was a different story when he was alone with us. He was so good at playing with words that we children hardly noticed we were also learning Latin and Greek, rhetoric and grammar. To us it was all a great game: verbal melodies and counterpoint in which every voice was always on the verge of laughing and one voice, his, was shaping the jokes.

Of all the games, the one he played best was history. Our serious rhetoric lessons – we studied rhetoric and grammar for several years before moving on to the higher arts of music and astronomy – were drawn from the history games we played together. So were our Latin translation lessons and our first attempts at Greek. He took snippets of street stories about the long-gone wars and embroidered

them into tales of derring-do that made it easy for the youngest children in the group to enjoy themselves as much as Margaret and myself. We would put whatever had struck us most in our own lives into the story, then translate the latest bit of play-acting into Latin and back into English. One day, when I was still young and greedy and letting my mind wander to the strawberries ripening in the garden, I even put my gluttonous wish to eat them in. I made the wicked King Richard III pause before some villainous act and tell the Bishop of Ely: ‘My Lord, you have very good strawberries at your garden in Holborn. I require you to let us have a mess of them.’ It made everyone laugh. Father came into the classroom and helped us write the episode down *exertationis gratia* – for the sake of practice. One day, he said, he’d write a proper history of Richard III, and publish it, and it would be based on our games and the similar ones John had played with the boys at St Paul’s school when he was teaching there. And there was a dish of strawberries on our own table for dinner that day.

But it wasn’t all laughter and strawberries. There was always something sad about John Clement too: a sense of loss, a softness that I missed in the bright, brittle Mores.

He found me alone in my room one rainy Thursday, crying over the little box of things I’d brought with me from Norfolk. My father’s signet ring: I was remembering it on his little finger – a great sausage of a finger. And a prayer book that had belonged to my mother, whom I’d never seen, who died when I was born, but who my father had told me looked just like me – dark, and long-legged, and long-nosed, and creamy-skinned, with a serious demeanour but the hope of mischief always in her eyes. I didn’t remember much about my real father (except the official fact that he was a knight who left me just enough of a dowry to put me on the market for adoption by rich

Londoners after his death). But I still felt the warmth of him. He was a bear-hugger with a red face and a shock of dark hair. And when he had you inside one of his embraces, half-stifled but happy, you knew he'd always keep you safe. In his arms, talking about the person we'd both lost, so gently and fondly that our yearning for her almost re-created her. She would be kneeling at her prayers, with the book in hand. (That was the only way I could imagine her – like she was in the effigy in the chapel – impossible to picture what it would have felt like for this perfect woman to have touched or talked to me.)

My father and I were united by this love. So nothing prepared me for them bringing him back from hunting one morning on the back of his horse. He'd broken his neck at a jump – a foolish sort of death. No one comforted me. You're not really a child any more at nine. I dressed myself for his funeral, and dropped my own handful of soil on his coffin, and began several years of quiet life in corridors: watchful, eavesdropping on the lawyers and relatives as they made plans for me; picking things up, magpie fashion, storing away my few memories and what tokens of my parents I could before I was sent away to be watchful in other people's corridors. My mother had known Thomas More long ago, in London, before her marriage. It was a whim on his part – a kindly whim – to take me. But he wanted me to think of him as my father from now on. He told me that, with a sweet look on his face, when I turned up at the Old Barge.

Of course I knew nothing back then about how famous this man's mind had become all over Europe. And I had no clue that, because of my proximity to him, I too would now be moving in the kind of exalted intellectual circles where you could find a man of genius in every room in the house, with one or two to spare on a good day. Or that we girls – I was to have several new 'sisters' – would

be trained up to be Christendom's only women of genius. All I noticed on that first day was that the stranger I was to call 'Father' had a gentle face: kindly, with its dark features full of life and light. I warmed to him at once, to the face and the smile, Thomas More's compact body and the sense he gives everyone that only their wellbeing is important to him. Even if this stranger never quite replaced the memory of my real father, Thomas More's presence was comforting and flattering enough that the country child I still was then found herself eagerly trying out the word 'Father' as she looked at him, full of a hope she was too young to understand.

Life with the Mores had turned out to be many kinds of joy I could never have imagined at the age of nine; and now I couldn't think of living any other way or being anyone except a bit-player in this familiar company of mighty intellects. But the reality of my relationship with Father had never lived up to those first hopes. He was kind, proper, and distant. There were no embraces, no comforting, no special moments. He kept me at arm's length. He saved his hugs and horseplay for his own Margaret, Cecily, Elizabeth and John.

He saved his cheerful banter for their stepmother Alice, who came to him a widow eight years older than him, with her own estates and her own strong commonsensical views on life, just a year before I came to the house. Father's foreign houseguests found the new Mistress More harder going than the soft-spoken first wife. If you went along the upstairs corridor late at night and listened to what Erasmus and Andrew Ammonius were whispering in Greek, you'd always be sure to hear the words 'hag' and 'hook-nosed harpy' somewhere in the conversation. But More wasn't as delicate a flower as his learned foreign friends. He gave as good as he got from the Dame (we children all called her that, half-jokingly – the name seemed

to suit her). He joshed back like a real Londoner, enjoyed her plain cooking and ribald talk, and after his attempts to interest her in Latin had failed, he had some success in making her at least learn music. Father's new marriage seemed to suit something robust and down-to-earth in him, even if it coincided with – and perhaps caused – the end of some of his humanist friendships. In many ways it suited me and the other wards they adopted too, since no one could have been kinder or run a more welcoming home than Dame Alice. But no one treated me like a beloved child. And I'd have given almost anything for someone to act as though I was special.

For the first few years I was there I almost never dropped my guard except in the books I started reading (something I'd never have done if I'd stayed in Norfolk). Without feeling truly accepted by my new father, I found it hard to make friends with my new stepmother and sisters and brothers. An empty heart was safer than the darkness. At night I would wake up with jaws aching from not crying; eventually they put me in a room by myself because I ground my teeth in my sleep. Being by myself was both welcome and frightening: frightening because I didn't know what to do with the hot, dark, snivelling, smeary, gut-wrenching, dog-howling breathlessness of the misery that sometimes came to me now when there was no one to pretend to.

Until the teacher, with his big frame and his floppy dark hair, appeared when I was too lost in my feelings to stop, and stood in front of me with his own eyes filling with tears, just like mine. 'I understand how you feel, little Meg,' he said softly, understanding everything with so few words that my shame gave way to wonder. 'I lost my own father when I was a boy. I'm an orphan like you.' And he hugged me, and let me scrabble into the dark forgetfulness of his chest and arms like a lost infant



and sob my heart out, then found a handkerchief for my eyes, and took me on his walk.

‘Come on,’ he said lightly – looking even a bit naughty and conspiratorial – as we slipped out of the front door while everyone else was sleeping off their midday meal. ‘Don’t let’s wake everyone up.’ It must have been when I was thirteen or fourteen; early in the year; cold, in that London way, with a fierce drizzle beating into our faces. Even so, when we started down Walbrook (paved over by then, already, but our house on the corner had been called the Old Barge since the days when it really had been a brook, and boats had come up it from the Thames), the street stank. Naturally, since the pissing conduit was only a few yards away. Equally naturally, neither of us much wanted to walk in that stink.

‘Tell me . . .’ John Clement began, with a furrow up his forehead. I thought he might have been about to ask me about my real father, but I could also see that my grown-up tutor didn’t know how to continue or what comfort to give. I didn’t want to encourage him to try; it was too private to talk about. So it may have been me who, taking a rare decision on behalf of someone else, pulled John Clement the other way, out of the odours of Walbrook and into sweet-smelling Bucklersbury Street and the shadow of St Stephen Walbrook – where the paving stones were newer and smoother and the smells were gentler and we were more sheltered from the fitful rain.

Some of the apothecaries and herbalists on Bucklersbury had shops, with scales in the window and herbs and spices and preserves on shelves behind. Some plied their trade from the street. We were followed the length of the street by a mad beggar with rolling eyes, yelling comically, ‘Unicorn’s horn! Unicorn’s horn!’, which made John Clement laugh and give the man a coin to go away; which only made the man, who said he was called Davy, follow

us closer and louder than ever. It wasn't the unicorn's horn that John bought me in the end, or the dragon-water or treacle of the more respectable traders, or the dried crocodile hanging in the shop under the sign of the harp. It was a little bottle, painted sweetly with flowers, from an old countrywoman who had set up her stall on a wall away from the main rush of business.

'Good day, mistress,' he said courteously to her, 'I'm looking for heartsease,' and the wrinkled old white head nodded wisely at us both with a flash of pale eyes.

'Washes away your sorrows . . . raises your spirits,' she said knowingly. 'Add it to a glass of wine. Twice a day, morning and evening, six drops.'

He presented it to me with an adult's flourish; 'for sorrow,' he said lightly, and his favourite motto, 'never look back; tomorrow brings new joys'; but he didn't quite meet my eyes. It was as if this grown man, my teacher, had suddenly become just a little bit shy.

I kept the heartsease in its pretty bottle. (I couldn't bear to drink it. But it did its job even so.) It was only the first of my presents from walks in Bucklersbury, because we went back and back. That was just the beginning of our joint fascination with the secrets of the street. It wasn't just those two herbalists – Mad Davy with his unicorns' horns, pigs' trotters and tall stories, or old Nan with her pretty coloured potions – whom we got to know. They were my first favourites, but there was a whole crowd of other odd fish packed into Bucklersbury. Alchemists and barbers and surgeons and tooth-pullers; scientists and frauds and soothsayers. As the weeks and months went by, we got to know every wise man and eccentric in the place.

It was always on a Thursday, every week. It was our secret. I would put on my cape after dinner and be waiting for him by the door. ('You're like a dog, waiting

so faithfully, grinning,' Elizabeth said when she saw me there once; even at eight she had her sharp tongue. 'You make me want to kick you.' And she gave me a mean little smile. But I didn't care what she said.)

And every Thursday he'd give me something else for the medicine chest I was building up. When I was fifteen and Father asked John Clement to accompany him abroad for the summer and work as his secretary – on Father's first diplomatic mission to Calais and Bruges, a gesture of trust as Father moved into the King's circle that John said delightedly he'd never expected – John bought me a bigger present to remind me of our walks: a pair of scales to weigh the medicine I'd go on buying for myself and that I'd tell him about at harvest time.

But John didn't come back to us at the end of the summer. Father came back alone. He had no private explanation for me about what had become of John – as if he had never noticed the friendship developing between the two of us – just a bland phrase addressed to everyone present at his first dinner at the family table. 'John needs to broaden his horizons,' he said. 'I've helped him get some teaching at Oxford. There aren't many people there who know Greek.'

The looks Father gave me were as kindly as ever, the encouragement he gave to my studies just as heart-warming. But I knew he was more at ease with talk of philosophy and public expressions of goodwill than with private feelings, and I found that I wasn't brave enough to take him aside and venture into the personal. I couldn't find the courage to ask for more information about why John, the first adult I'd made a bond of friendship with – someone whose apparent warmth had reminded me of my country past – had vanished without a word. I retreated into my books and watchfulness again. But for all the sadness that went with that second loss of an adult I'd

become close to, I found the strength in the end to take it philosophically and see some good had come of it. My friendship with John had been interrupted, but my fascination with herbs and healing continued. For the awkward, learned but slightly shy girl I'd become, hesitating over how to or even whether to expose myself by expressing an emotion, the ability to treat those near me for the small ailments of everyday life was, if nothing else, a release: not just my form of excellence, my small spark of genius in the great fire of mental energy generated by the More household, but, perhaps more importantly, my way of showing love.

Even though John never wrote to me in the years that followed, I kept an ear tuned for mentions of him in other people's conversation. That's how I found out that his first Greek lecture was the best attended in the whole history of the university. It's also how I discovered, a year or so later, that he'd gone travelling again – the kind of travelling that men in the More family's circle of people of genius did. He'd gone to Italy – Padua and Siena – to study medicine. He'd learned his Greek when he'd attended another university abroad, long ago, even before he started teaching; I thought in the Low Countries, though he'd never said much about it. Perhaps he just felt now that there was nothing to draw him back to London. No family. No close friends. He probably thought I was just a child in need of kindness, and forgot me.

We had plenty of other tutors after that, and we crammed our heads with so much geometry and Greek and astronomy and Latin and prayer and virginal practice that we started being trotted out in front of all and sundry as an example of the new learning. There was nothing private about our lives, even if once we moved to Chelsea we were far from court. We were always on display. Father took to publishing every scrap of work we

produced: all those daily letters we were supposed to write him through our schooldays, practising verse composition and disputation, translating our every thought from Latin to Greek to English and back again, were much less private than we realised. He sent the best ones slyly off to Erasmus, complaining that our handwriting was terrible, and waited for Erasmus to profess himself ‘amazed’ by our wit and style – which of course Erasmus kindly did. And even the letters Father sent us – Latin letters to the ‘*schola*’, talking about how deep and tender his love was for all of us, how often he took us in his arms, how he fed us cake and pears, how he dressed us in silken garments and all the rest of it – got published too, and polished up and improved long after the event.

Yes, by the time the idea came up of getting our family portrait painted, Father had really got into the habit of dining out on stories of our brilliance. He loved to tell people that there was no reason why women’s brains, even if they were poorer spiritual soil than men’s, couldn’t produce wonderful plants if they were properly tended and planted; or to boast that he was so soft-hearted a parent that he’d only ever beaten his children with peacock feathers. In fact, we’d set such a fashion that the Eliots and the Parrs also started copying Father’s teaching methods. Little Katharine and William Parr were at risk of becoming as clever as us if they didn’t watch themselves. Father had even got interested enough in my modest medical expertise – it was more than just herbal remedies by the time I grew up; of course I’d also started taking a look at some of the Galen and Hippocrates that I imagined John Clement to have been studying in Italy – to be begging the others to read more medical texts too.

Still, none of the tutors we had after John Clement had ever become my special friend. Nor did anyone seem to have remembered to look for a husband for me through

all the alliance-making of the past few months, which had taken up so much of Father's time and effort on everyone else's behalf. That had left me all the time in the world to feel nostalgic about John Clement, who I still believed had loved me most, once, however impossible it now seemed given that all we'd heard about him for years was the occasional mention in a letter from Basel or Bruges from one of the learned friends who didn't come to the house any more.

Until yesterday. (It seemed incredible that it had been just a day, and here I was with my heart in my mouth already waiting for a sighting of him.)

Yesterday, when Elizabeth suddenly leaned forward at the end of dinner. It was a casual day; Dame Alice didn't bother so much about Bible readings when Father wasn't there, and Elizabeth's strangle-voiced new husband William had left the table to write letters. She gave me a meaningful look down her straight nose, and said, quietly, so only I could hear, 'I saw John Clement in London.'

I practically choked on my posset. But I kept my face composed.

'What do you mean?' I asked. 'He's in Italy, studying for his MD. Isn't he?'

'Not any more,' she said.

Elizabeth was one of those women I would never be: not a thinker, but small, neat and with alluring manners; catlike in the sense that she always landed on her feet and made it look effortless. She was the prettiest of the More daughters and the worldliest. She reeled in William Dauncey, with his Adam's apple and substantial income, on the basis of one evening at a court function and some demure-looking flirting; she got Father to place him in a sinecure job in the Duchy of Lancaster office right after their marriage and she was already fishing for better placements for him. I'd known from the first moment I saw

her, when we were children, that we would never be close. I didn't like to think it was just envy of her milky skin and blankly beautiful features that made me imagine her as the kind of person who'd always get her own way, and who would be as spiteful as a scratching kitten if she didn't. I preferred to think that I'd spotted a deep-seated mean-spiritedness in her that I knew I could never love. And now it flashed through my mind that her meanness might just stop her talking if she saw me wanting desperately to know what she had to say.

Still, I couldn't resist trying. Casually, very casually, I asked: 'How interesting. What's he doing now?'

'He's a server in the King's household for the moment. He's been back in London since he qualified last summer.' She paused. She always knew the details of people's positions. 'He says Father got him the job.'

We both let Father's omission in telling us that important fact pass, and our shared silence drew us closer. Some things were best left unsaid. There had been a lot of eloquent pauses in our household since we moved to Chelsea.

'He was at a dinner Father sent us to last month, right after the wedding. Part of this plan to get William and Giles seats in the next parliament.' (I tried, not completely successfully, to still the twinge of envy that this casual mention of her wifely plans set in motion inside me.) 'We were in the Duke's chambers and Father was called away suddenly to read something for the King before we even went in to dinner,' she paused again, looking at her golden ring, 'and then John Clement turned up. I nearly died of shock . . .' She stopped and looked out of the window. There was sunlight beating down on us. 'It's hotter than you'd expect for the time of year, isn't it?' she went on, even though the inside of the room, bare of decoration still because there'd been no time to commission drapes

and pictures yet (hence the Holbein portrait idea) was actually draughty and rather cold. ‘He looks older,’ she said, and there was something a bit wistful in her face. She twisted the wedding ring on her finger. ‘I saw quite a bit of him after that, actually.’

She’d been back for three days. Father had sent her and Cecily home on Sunday evening, earlier than they’d expected, to help prepare for the painter’s arrival. I’d hardly seen her. She’d kept to her room and her prayers and whatever whispered conversations young married women might have among themselves, but she hadn’t sought me out. Why had she held on to this piece of information for so long? And why was she telling me now? I could sense that, in her devious way, she was probing for some reaction from me. Not knowing what reaction she could be looking for made me feel uneasy, and stubbornly unwilling to give an inch.

‘He’s not going to become a “total courtier” too, is he?’ I asked. Eyes firmly down on my own ring-free hands. Erasmus’ nickname for Father when he first saw him on the King’s business had stuck. I laughed a tinkling girlish laugh, which sounded forced to my ears. Elizabeth didn’t seem to hear its falseness, but she wasn’t in a mood to laugh. She was looking gentler than usual, playing absent-mindedly with her spoon in the ruins of the dish of beef that (with more than her usual birdlike appetite) she had demolished. She just smiled.

‘I don’t think so – he can dance, though, did you know? – but he says he wants to practise medicine soon. He’s trying to join the College of Physicians.’

‘And does he have a family?’ I asked. Holding my breath.

Perhaps it was a mistake to ask the question direct. Remembering to look modestly down at my hands again, I found they weren’t where I’d left them. My fingers were



plucking at my brooch. To cover my embarrassment, I took the whole thing off and put it down on the table.

She shook her head, and a little smile appeared on her face, like a fisherman's look as he starts playing the fish he knows is hooked at the end of his line. She bit her lip, then looked up at me, with her demurest public look. 'He said he would love to see the new house. He said he'd come and visit us.'

I waited. I'd gone too far. I wasn't going to ask when. I concentrated on the sunlight in the garden.

The silence unsettled her. 'He was asking after you, actually,' she went on, unwilling to let go, and under the flirtatious eyelashes sweeping her cheeks I could sense anxious, watchful eyes. 'That was when he said he'd come and see us.'

'Oh,' I replied, feeling my heart secretly leap, and suddenly confident too that I could get off the hook of her questions. I shrugged, almost beginning to enjoy the game. 'I doubt we'd have anything to say to each other any more, now that we've finished with school... though,' (and here I smiled noncommittally) 'of course I'd like to hear about his travels.'

'Oh no,' she answered. 'He was particularly interested in you. I was telling him how you'd become a medical miracle and practically a doctor yourself. I told him how you'd cured Father's fever by reading Galen. He liked that.'

I did cure Father once, a few years ago. And I did consult Galen. *De differentiis februm*, the book was called; on the difference between fevers. It was when Father came back exhausted and hot and sweating and fitting from one of his diplomatic trips to France, and none of the doctors who came to the house could do anything for him. They all loved it when I pronounced that he had what Galen called tertian fever. But the truth is I couldn't appreciate Galen – what they called heroic doctoring, with

lots of recommendations to purge and bleed your patient and show off in your diagnosis – it seemed like hot air to me. All I did was quietly give him a simple draught of willow-bark infusion that I'd bought on Bucklersbury. One of the apothecaries told me it would cool his blood. It did – he was up and about again within a day. I couldn't tell any of them how easy it was, though; they'd have thought me simple-minded. It was easier to let them go on believing in Galen's three-day fever.

'He said you were the one who got him interested in medicine in the first place. He said it was all because you used to go walking in Bucklersbury talking to the herbalists,' Elizabeth went on, and I was aware of her eyes on my face again, 'and how he'd love to see you again. And then he said, "It would have to be on a Thursday, of course." But he was laughing, so perhaps he didn't mean anything by it.'

Another silence.

I pushed my platter gently back.

'Well, it would always be good to see John again. I miss the old days in London, when it was easy for so many people to call by. Don't you?' I said finally, looking round for the brooch I'd put down and displaying so little interest in the idea of a visit from John that I could see her secret curiosity, over whatever it was, finally wane.

But of course I could think of nothing else afterwards. And I'd woken up this morning earlier than usual and full of hope – because today was Thursday.

It happened more awkwardly than I could possibly have imagined. When we finally saw a likely-looking wherry crawling down the edge of the river, we all poured out of the wicket gate like an overenthusiastic welcoming committee and rushed to the landing stage to freeze our spontaneous selves at the water's edge.