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Katherine of Aragon: The True Queen

Written by Alison Weir

Published by Headline Review

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Katherine of Aragon: The True Queen

ALISON WEIR


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First published in Great Britain in 2016 by HEADLINE REVIEW
An imprint of HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP

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Cataloguing in Publication Data is available from the British Library

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Hardback 978 1 4722 2747 8
Trade paperback 978 1 4722 2748 5

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HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP
An Hachette UK Company
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

www.headline.co.uk
www.hachette.co.uk

PART ONE: THE PRINCESS FROM SPAIN

Chapter 1: 1501

The coast of England was closer now. Standing at the balustrade of the deck, high above the stern of the ship, with tendrils of red-gold hair whipping about her face, Catalina could see green and brown hills and the spires of churches, with houses huddled together beside them; and, at a dizzying distance below, between the land and the rolling vessel, the grey, churning sea. How different it all looked from La Coruna, with its warm blue waters and its mighty Tower of Hercules, or the dramatic wide sweep of the bay of Laredo! Everything was going to be different from now on.

Her maid-of-honour and dear friend, Maria de Salinas, was standing beside her.

‘It cannot be long now till we come into port,’ Catalina said. ‘When I think how many years I have dreamed of coming to England, I cannot quite believe I am nearly there. I thank God that you are with me, Maria. I would not want to face this alone.’ There was no one else to whom she would have admitted that.

‘And I am glad of your Highness being with me,’ Maria replied. She was two years older than Catalina, and they had been friends all their lives. It was typical of Maria to have pulled off her cap and let her rippling long night-black hair blow free in the wind. She was almost dancing with anticipation, her large eyes luminous as she gazed at the land ahead. Catalina reminded herself that Maria was also going into the unknown. It was expected that she and the other young ladies in attendance on their Infanta would be found well-born husbands

in England. But where Katherine was facing the future with a certain trepidation, Maria could barely contain her excitement.

‘Soon I will come face-to-face with Prince Arthur,’ Catalina said. She had been told countless times that her betrothed was a golden prince, beautiful and graceful with many excellent qualities, and that the English people hailed him as their great hope for the future. ‘I pray that I may please him.’ *And that all will be well.*

‘Judging by his letters, he is as eager to meet your Highness as you are to see him. You are lucky to have a husband who loves you.’ Maria smiled encouragingly – and not a little enviously.

‘But how can he love me when he has never met me?’ Catalina asked, voicing a concern she had kept to herself for a long time. ‘Was he that much taken by my portrait?’ Master Miguel, her mother’s court painter, had taken an excellent likeness.

‘He could hardly have failed!’ Maria said. ‘You are so pretty.’

‘He is just fifteen!’ Catalina retorted. ‘He is nearly a year younger than I am. I think he has been told what to write, just as I was. And’ – she bit her lip – ‘I fear he is young for his years. Remember how my coming was postponed for a year until he was ready to be married, and then it was postponed again?’ That had been a strange business, veiled in secrecy. Not even to Maria would Catalina confide her secret suspicions that all might not be quite well with Arthur - and that some dreadful deed had finally made possible her coming to England. It was as if saying them out loud would confirm them. ‘At least it gave me time to learn French!’ she said brightly. King Henry’s Queen and his mother, the Lady Margaret, had specially requested it, as they spoke no Spanish or Latin. And they had urged that Katherine cultivate a taste for wine, as the water in England was

undrinkable. She had duly complied. She had expected many such requests and instructions to prepare her for her life in England, but there had been just one more, one that had immeasurably troubled her.

‘King Henry wants me to forget Spain,’ Catalina revealed. ‘He thinks I will be happier by not remembering it. Dr de Puebla wrote that to the King my father.’ Dr de Puebla was Spain’s resident ambassador in England, and it was he who had negotiated her marriage.

‘King Henry means well, I am sure, Highness,’ Maria soothed.

‘I can *never* forget my homeland,’ Catalina declared, tears welling as visions of the land of her birth came to mind, ‘but I am determined to be a good Englishwoman.’ She blinked the tears away.

‘We must make ready,’ she said. And then, mimicking her duenna, ‘I must always remember that, as soon as I set foot on English soil, I am longer the Infanta Catalina but the Lady Katherine, Princess of Wales!’ Catalina had been told that her name must be anglicised to please her husband’s future subjects, for one day, when King Henry died and Prince Arthur succeeded to the throne, she would be queen of England.

Maria laughed – Katherine had Dona Elvira to the life! Catalina smiled, but as she went ahead of Maria down the steep stairs to the stern-castle, where she and the ladies of her suite had been allocated cabins, she was dutifully resolving to think of herself as Katherine from now on.

The cabins were cramped and creaking, with barely room for a feather bed, and they were unpleasantly stuffy after four days at sea. Mercifully it had been a smooth crossing, unlike the earlier one from La Coruna. It was hard to believe that she had set out on her wedding journey all of six weeks ago, excited at the thought that the long-awaited new life was about to begin,

yet grief-stricken at leaving her own country and the mother she loved and revered.

Four days in raging, storm-tossed seas had made homesickness pale into insignificance beside the fear of drowning and the constant irregular buffeting of the waves. Katherine and her ladies had been horribly, disgustingly sick. All those hours she had intended to devote to improving her English had been spent lying prone, clinging to her wooden cot as the ship bucked and dipped, and praying in terror for the tempest to stop. Her greatest fear had been that the storm had been sent by God as punishment for the great sin that had made her marriage possible, and that they would all be drowned. But God, it had seemed, was reserving His vengeance for another day. Never would Katherine forget the relief she had felt when the ship's master had managed by a miracle to dock at Laredo; and she had been full of devout thanks for the four weeks' respite there while they were forced to wait for the seas to calm. She had hated boarding the ship again, dreaded entrusting herself once more to the unpredictable temper of the waters of the Bay of Biscay and the English Channel. Mercifully they had been calm, but she had still been horribly seasick.

Katherine and Maria found Dona Elvira in the largest cabin, which Katherine herself occupied. Her duenna came of an old and respected Castilian family, and was devoted to Queen Isabella and determined to do her duty by Isabella's daughter. In the absence of Katherine's mother, Dona Elvira's word was now law in the Infanta's household. She was a stern, proud woman in her late fifties, with a disdainful eye and a sharp tongue, too vigilant for comfort – and too old to remember what it was to be young and bursting with life! And yet, for all her strictness and rigid outlook on life, the Queen trusted her implicitly, and had told Katherine that she must do so too.

Katherine watched as Dona Elvira heaved her bulk around the narrow spaces of the cabin and cast a critical eye over the four gowns laid across the bed and the travelling chest, gowns of red and gold damask, woven silk, velvet of the costliest black, cloth of gold. Queen Isabella had commanded that her daughter go to England dressed as befitted a future queen, and had paid for a sumptuous trousseau that reflected the glory and majesty of Spain. The chests that lay in the ship's hold were packed with more sumptuous gowns, undergarments edged with fine blackwork lace, hoods of velvet edged with billiments of gold, silver or pearls. There were night robes bordered with lace for summer and fur for winter, cloth stockings and lined kirtles, as well as the stiff, decorous Spanish farthingales that belled out the skirts of Katherine's gowns. Also packed in locked and weighty coffer was the gold and silver plate that was to form part of her dowry, and her jewellery. She had exclaimed in amazement when her mother had shown her the intricate bejewelled necklaces, the ornate collars, the gold chains, the crucifixes and the brooches that had been provided for her.

Then Queen Isabella had laid across her daughter's outstretched hands a beautifully embroidered christening robe. 'For your children,' she had said. 'I pray that God blesses you with many fine sons. I hope you will be the source of all kinds of happiness in England.' Katherine felt like weeping at the memory.

'This one,' the duenna said, pointing to the damask, 'if your Highness approves.'

'Of course,' Katherine agreed. Her mother had instructed that she must trust Dona Elvira's judgement in all things.

She stood patiently while three of her maids – Maria de Salazar and twin sisters called Isabel and Blanche de Vargas - stripped her to her farthingale and chemise, dressed her in a kirtle and the rich gown, laced up the back and tied on the wide

hanging sleeves. Dona Elvira herself placed around Katherine's neck the heavy gold collar adorned with gem-encrusted Ks and pomegranates, the Princess's personal badge.

'The pomegranate stands for fertility,' Queen Isabella had said. 'Your first duty to Prince Arthur will be to bear him sons.'

Katherine was ten when the collar was made, and ensuring the royal succession had been far in the future. But now she wished she knew more about the process of getting sons. Her mother and her duenna had told her that it was a wife's duty to submit to the will of her husband in all things, and that children were born at his pleasure. Her mother, with many references to Scripture, had told her a little about how children were begotten, but there was still much mystery surrounding the whole business. Isabella's obvious embarrassment and the euphemisms she had used had left Katherine confused, and showed that decent people did not like to talk about such things. And yet, in a few weeks, she would be married, and know the whole truth.

Dona Elvira lifted up a length of the finest white lawn, exquisitely hemmed.

'Her Majesty's command was that your Highness be veiled in public until you are married,' she reminded her charge, as she combed Katherine's long hair and arranged the veil over her golden head. And so it was that, when the Princess emerged on the main deck to see sailors leaping across to the busy quayside to fling stout ropes around the bollards there and secure the ship in dock, her view of Plymouth, the crowds gathered to welcome her, and the banners gaily flapping in the breeze, was a misty one, glimpsed through the folds of her veil.

Once the gangplank was in place, her train began disembarking, led in stately fashion by the hero of Granada, the Count de Cabra, who commanded her escort. There followed Katherine's first chamberlain, Don Pedro Manrique, who was

Dona Elvira's husband, the second chamberlain, Juan de Diero, Katherine's chaplain, Alessandro Geraldini, three bishops and a bevy of ladies, maids, gentlemen and servants, all tricked out in their finest clothes and liveries. Never let it be said that the Spanish Sovereigns, their Most Catholic Majesties King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, had sent their daughter lacking in any way into England!

Katherine came last, escorted by Dona Elvira, whose bulk was resplendent in yards green damask and black velvet, her grey hair covered by a voluminous hood. After waiting all her life – or so it seemed - for this moment, Katherine could hardly believe that it had arrived. She carried herself with conscious dignity and pride, aware that she was representing her parents and Spain, the greatest power in Christendom. Ahead of her swelled the sound of cheering voices, and when she stepped on land, even though she felt a little giddy after four days in motion on the sea, she knew a sense of triumph tempered with awe. This was the kingdom of which she would one day be queen. God send that she would be worthy of it, and of the unknown Prince, her husband.

The Mayor of Plymouth and his brethren, resplendent in their furred scarlet robes, were waiting to receive her, bowing low.

‘Welcome, your Highness!’ the Mayor boomed. ‘Welcome to England!’

‘I thank you, good sirs,’ Katherine replied, inclining her head. She had practised the words on board ship. Her English was not very good, and it was heavily accented, but she was determined to master it.

The people were roaring their approval. Some were gaping and pointing at the dark-skinned Moorish servants in her Spanish retinue, but most were jostling each other to gain a better sight of their new Princess. Katherine felt humbled to be

the focus of such wild excitement, even though she knew that her father considered the King of England lucky to have a Spanish bride for his son.

‘They could not have received your Highness with greater joy had you been the Saviour of the world!’ exclaimed one of Katherine’s gentlemen. Dona Elvira frowned. Men were not supposed to address the Princess familiarly. But even the stern duenna was gratified by her charge’s reception.

‘His Grace the King sends his greetings, my lady,’ the Mayor said. ‘He looks forward to welcoming you himself in London, with Prince Arthur. But for now, at your pleasure, a great feast awaits your Highness.’

Katherine was feeling a little disorientated; the ground was still tilting disconcertingly. But she must not let that detract from the good impression she meant to make. ‘Please thank the Mayor for me,’ she said to Don Pedro Manrique, who spoke some English. ‘I will be honoured to be his guest.’

Behind her there were shouts as the crew unloaded her possessions from the ship. The Count de Cabra was watching anxiously as the coffers containing the hundred thousand crowns that were the first instalment of Katherine’s dowry were brought ashore. It was his responsibility to guard them at all times.

The Mayor, beaming and puffed up with pride, took an obvious pleasure in escorting Katherine on foot through the celebrating, cheering crowds to the feast. Her first impressions of Plymouth and its inhabitants were startling. In Spain she had been used to seeing stone facades on houses built around patios, but here there were streets crammed with stout, half-timbered houses, some – the more prosperous - with glittering diamond-shaped panes in the windows, and most with roofs of thatch above upper storeys that overhung the narrow, crowded, thoroughfares. The smell of fish pervaded everywhere in this

bustling port. She stared as women openly greeted the homecoming sailors with kisses on the mouth – and in public too! That would never be tolerated in Spain, where ladies led almost cloistered lives and thought themselves fortunate to be allowed glimpses of the world from their balconies.

In a fine mansion called Palace House, the nobles and worthies of Devon were assembled, standing respectfully behind long tables laden with a hearty display of food. Everyone bowed low as Katherine and her entourage entered the hall, then a trumpet sounded and grace was said.

She could eat little. She was still feeling a little nauseated, the food looked and tasted strange, and it was difficult trying gracefully to convey it from the plate to her mouth when the constricting veil kept getting in the way. She felt uncomfortable partaking of a meal with strange gentlemen watching her, for the privacy of young girls of high birth was closely guarded in Spain. But clearly this was how they did things in England, and she must accustom herself to it. So she smiled, and responded to everyone's compliments through her chamberlain, and did her very best to be courteous and friendly, remembering how her mother exerted herself to set people of all ranks at their ease. And when the time came for Katherine to bid the good folk of Plymouth farewell, she knew that they had warmed to her for her own sake, and not just because of who she was.

Her most pressing need now was to give thanks for her safe arrival in England. As she left Palace House, she asked if she might go to some holy place. The Mayor willingly led her to a church dedicated to St Andrew, where the rotund and rather excited little priest celebrated Mass for her. She knelt, filled with exultation, thanking God for His goodness to her, and praying that His wrath might not be visited upon her for the secret sin committed by others to her advantage, and that she

might do as well in the rest of England as she had done in Plymouth.

Outside the horse litter was waiting, with the lords of Devon mounted beside it, ready to escort Katherine's train to Exeter, where they were to lay that night. Katherine would have liked to stay in Plymouth and rest, but the Mayor had given Dona Elvira a letter from Dr de Puebla, saying that the King of England was eager to see her, and that he had been kept waiting long enough, so she must press eastwards to London with all speed. As she climbed into the litter and seated herself comfortably on its embroidered silk cushions, Dona Elvira, whose English was good, commanded that the curtains be closed, for Spanish etiquette demanded that none should look on the face of the royal bride until she was wed.

Katherine could not sleep. The weather vane on the spire of St Mary Magnus next door to Exeter's Deanery kept creaking, and she had sent a servant to complain. But that was not the only thing keeping her awake. After two days in this alien land, she had found herself crying into her pillow, filled with an overwhelming longing to be at home in Spain, and to see her mother. And when she thought of how Queen Isabella must herself be feeling, now that the last of her children had gone from her, she wept even more. '*Madre, madre!*' she sobbed.

For as long as she could remember, her mother had been the guiding presence in her life, even though Isabella had often been preoccupied with state affairs and with war. For many centuries Spain had been occupied by the Moors, who were cruel and savage infidels and in league with the Devil. They had haunted Katherine's childhood nightmares, terrifying her as much as *El Roba-Chicos*, the man who was said to carry children off in his sack.

Katherine had imbibed with her nurse's milk the story of

how, for hundreds of years, the rulers of the Christian kingdoms of the Spanish peninsula had fought bravely against the Moors, gradually reconquering their land, inch by inch. She had been told of the great rejoicing when her father, the King of Aragon, and her mother, the Queen of Castile, had married and united Spain under their joint rule. Both had been zealous in ridding the land of the Moors, and in 1492 the last infidel kingdom, Granada, had fallen to the victorious Sovereigns.

Katherine had been six then, but she remembered as clear as day riding across the River Vega with her parents, her brother Juan and her sisters, and looking ahead in awe to see King Ferdinand's great silver cross set up on the watch tower of the Alhambra palace, and the royal standard being hoisted beside it. That was the signal for the royal procession to enter the city. She would never forget the shouts of 'For King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella!' resounding from hundreds of triumphant onlookers, or her father and mother falling to their knees to thank God for vouchsafing this magnificent victory.

They had all been together then, the royal siblings. Sad Isabella, in her widow's black, mourning Alfonso of Portugal, her husband of just seven months, cruelly dead after a fall from his horse; Juan, Prince of Asturias, the cherished heir to the throne – 'my angel', as their mother called him; tempestuous Juana, the beauty of the family, passionate and longing to be a bride; placid Maria; and Katherine, the youngest of them all. Those had been the happy years. After the conquest of Granada, Katherine and her sisters had lived in the Alhambra. For the children, the old fortress had been a magical place, and they had loved exploring the old palaces with their colourful tiles and strange Moorish decorations, the pavilions, the arched patios, and the water gardens with their pools and cool, splashing fountains, where once the caliphs had kept their harem. The views of the Sierra Nevada Mountains from the

Generalife Palace, where the sultans had once retreated in summer, were breathtaking.

The Christian princesses had rarely left their sunny home, except for the great occasions of state at which their presence was required, nor had Katherine wanted to. She wept afresh when she remembered those long, spacious days in the Alhambra when the future seemed so far ahead and she had been contented to play in its courtyards or apply herself to her studies. How sad it was not to know how happy you were until it was too late.

Her mother, believing that princesses benefitted from a good education, had appointed the pious Alessandro Geraldini as Katherine's tutor. He had taught her to read and write, instructed her in Latin and the ancient classics, and given her devotional books to improve her mind and teach her virtue. Now he had come to England as her chaplain. From her duenna she had learned needlework and dancing, lacemaking, and the intricacies of Spanish blackwork embroidery. It would be committing the sin of pride to say that she was good at it, but it could not be denied that she had mastered the skill well.

That year when she turned seven had been an exciting one. Not long after the fall of Granada, Cristobal Colon had returned to Spain to report that he had discovered a new world across the Atlantic Ocean. Queen Isabella had financed his voyage, and it was to the Spanish court that he brought the gold and the natives he had captured on his voyage. The dark-skinned savages were outlandishly dressed, but they looked terrified and ill, poor heathen creatures. Katherine had preferred the beautiful birds and plants that Colon showed her, his eyes afire at the prospect of many more voyages to come. Her tutor impressed on her how important Cristobal Colon's discovery was, for now that the Turks controlled the eastern Mediterranean, it was vital to find new trade routes with the

East. One day, Father Alessandro told her, with a faraway look in his eyes, he hoped to visit this wonderful new world and see it for himself.

It had been inevitable that Katherine's older sisters would marry and go away before she did. She was ten when Juana had eagerly left for Flanders to marry the Archduke Philip the Handsome, and life had been very quiet after that. The Infanta Isabella had wanted to enter a nunnery and drown her grief in prayer, but King Ferdinand was having none of it, and she was packed off back to Portugal to marry the new King, Manuel, her late husband's cousin. Three years later young Isabella was dead, Maria was married to her widower, and Katherine was all alone.

That was after the great tragedy that had befallen her family. She still grieved for her beautiful, chivalrous brother Juan, who had died four years ago in the flower of his youth and promise, at just twenty-one. Her parents had been inconsolable at the loss of their angel. The delicate Juan had not long been married to the lively young Margaret of Austria, the Archduke Philip's sister, and Katherine had heard gossip that he had died as a result of over-exerting himself in the marriage bed. She had not quite understood what that meant, but she was painfully aware – as was everyone else – that Spain had been left without a male heir, and that Juana was now next in line for the throne. Unstable, unhappy Juana, whose husband was making her life a torment with his infidelities.

Queen Isabella had aged in these years, worn down by worry and grief. Her once-fair skin became puffy and lined, her green-blue eyes dulled by care. Yet to Katherine, her pious mother remained the perfect example of a Christian queen. There were people who said that women should not rule and should not wield dominion over men, but Isabella had proved them wrong. She had governed her kingdom and even led

armies; not even female frailties had stalled her. Katherine had heard that, when campaigning against the Moors, her mother had given birth to Maria and been back in the saddle within days.

It was true that Isabella had had little time to devote to her family, yet she had always loved her children. She had constantly looked to their welfare, and personally supervised their education whenever she could. She was their champion, whereas their wily, self-seeking father, Ferdinand, was more interested in what advantages his children could bring him. Katherine had been brought up to respect and obey her father, but she did not love him in the way she loved her mother. Isabella was everything that Katherine wanted to be, and she had resolved always to emulate her example.

She had been thrilled when, shortly before they bade each other farewell (God, let it not be forever, Katherine now prayed), Isabella had said, 'You, Catalina, are the most like me of all my children. I pray that your life will be happier.' Katherine had felt sure in that instant that it would be, especially with her mother's prayers behind her.

She did not want to think of the moment she had had to say goodbye. It had been postponed so often she had begun to think it might never come. But, inexorably, the day had arrived when she had knelt for the last time for her mother's blessing, been raised by loving arms and folded into one last embrace. And at that memory she wept afresh into her pillow, racked with longing.

The maid-of-honour on duty that night was Francesca de Caceres. She had been asleep on the pallet at the foot of Katherine's bed, her dark locks spread out on the pillow, but now she sat up, rubbing her almond-shaped eyes.

'Highness? What is amiss? Why do you cry?'

Katherine did not like Francesca as much as she did Maria,

but she needed to talk to someone.

‘I think I am a little homesick,’ she sniffed, trying to compose herself. ‘Francesca, are you missing your mother?’

‘Of course, Highness,’ Francesca said. ‘I think we would be unnatural if we did not.’

‘Do you think we will ever see our mothers again?’ Katherine asked.

‘Maybe not for a while, Highness. But Prince Arthur might one day wish to visit Spain, or Queen Isabella may come to England.’

Katherine thought mournfully that neither eventuality was very likely. She could not remember her mother ever leaving Spain. Again, the need to be with Isabella swamped her. If I go on like this I shall go mad, she told herself. Her grandmother had been mad – she could remember visiting the older Queen Isabella at the grim castle of Arevalo, and hearing the old lady say she was being pursued by ghosts. It had been a frightening experience for the young Catalina, one she had never forgotten. And now there were rumours that Juana, who had always been of an excitable temperament, had become a little unbalanced, throwing tantrums and attacking ladies at the Flemish court, just because Philip’s eye had lighted upon them. Dear God, let me not end up that way, Katherine prayed silently.

She made herself dwell on Prince Arthur. All her life she had thought of him as her husband, yet they had not been married by proxy until two years ago, and then again last year, just to make sure that the alliance was watertight. Now King Henry was planning a state reception and wedding of such magnificence as had never been seen in England, even though her parents had urged that he outlay only moderate expense, for they did not want their daughter to be the cause of any loss to her adoptive realm. But the King had insisted, and Katherine guessed why. He had pursued this marriage to seal his

sovereignty, for he was king by right of conquest only, and needed the reflected glory of mighty Spain to legitimise his title. Spending a fortune on celebrations was a small price to pay for recognition by Ferdinand and Isabella.

She knew that her father had worried that the English King was insecure on his throne. Henry had vanquished King Richard at the Battle of Bosworth, yet reports had reached Spain that there remained many kinsfolk of the late monarch to claim or contest the crown, and there had also been pretenders who had tried to unseat Henry. Yet Ferdinand had told Katherine last year that there now remained no doubtful drop of royal blood in England to threaten his throne. She did not like to dwell on what that had meant, and kept trying to put it from her mind. But she could not forget the whispers of what King Henry had done to ensure it...

Again she wondered what Arthur would be like. His portrait showed a youth with pink cheeks, narrow eyes with heavy lower lids, and a pursed rosebud mouth. He seemed so young, so girlish, and so unlike the princely hero people had described. But then portraits often lied. *As did people*, whispered her inner voice.

She would not listen or pay heed. These were night thoughts, and things would look different in the morning. The bells were now mercifully stilled. Francesca was lightly snoring, and Katherine resolved to do the same. She turned over and shut her eyes tightly, trying to think only of pleasant things.

At Dogmersfield Katherine was so cold she could not stop shivering. The upstairs chamber of the Bishop's Palace had a large fire roaring up the chimney, and she had had the table pulled over in front of it so that she could copy out her English sentences, but while the side of her nearest to the fire was warm, the rest of her was chilled to the bone, and when she had

to force herself to get up and use the close stool in the privy at the far corner of the room, her teeth started chattering. The warmth from the hearth did not penetrate the stone walls. Winter was setting in with a purpose now, and she was trying harder than ever not to wish herself back in the warmer climes of Spain. How was she going to endure months of this freezing, bitter weather?

The bedchamber, with its fire stoked high, was only marginally warmer. Maria was preparing her for bed, and had just unlaced her gown when they heard the loud clatter of many hooves on the cobbles below. There was a stir and some commotion, then a man's voice raised in anger echoing from below.

Minutes later Dona Elvira burst into the bedchamber, her normally severe features flushed, her erect figure bristling with rage. She was panting heavily.

'The King is here with Prince Arthur,' she announced, in a hoarse voice. Katherine began to tremble with anticipation, but Dona Elvira did not notice. 'His Majesty is acting outrageously!' she fumed. 'We told him that your Highness had retired for the night, but he said he wished to see you. I said you could see no one, it was not fitting, and he gave me a very evil look, as if I had spirited you away somewhere.'

It was bad enough hearing that the King had been angered, but almost worse to realise that Dona Elvira's judgement was not as rock-sound as Katherine had always believed. It was as if the foundations of her world were suddenly shifting beneath her feet. But it just would not do to offend the King at this first, crucial meeting. Her whole future lay in his hands, and he was all-powerful here, as she of all people had cause to know. What was Dona Elvira thinking of?

'I must go to his Majesty, if he commands it,' she said. 'Maria, please lace up my gown.'