

The House of Allerbrook

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Part One

THE RELUCTANT MAID OF
HONOUR
1535-1540



CHAPTER ONE
New Gowns For Court
1535

Allerbrook House is a charming and unusual manorhouse in the Exmoor district of Somerset. The charm lies in the pleasant proportions, in the three gables looking out from the slate roof, echoed by the smaller, matching gable over the porch, and the two wings stretching back toward the hillside that sweeps up to the moorland ridge above.

In front, the land drops away gently, but to the west there is a steep plunge into the wooded combe where the Allerbrook River flows noisily down from its moorland source toward the village of Clicket in the valley, a mile or so away.

There is no other house of its type actually on Exmoor. It has other uncommon features, too. These include the beautiful Tudor roses (these days they are painted red and white just as they were originally) carved into the panels and

window seats of the great hall, and the striking portrait of Jane Allerbrook which hangs upstairs in the east wing.

The portrait is signed "*Spenlove*" and is the only known work by this artist. Jane looks as though she is in her early forties. She is sturdily built, clear skinned and firm of feature—not a great beauty, but, like the house, possessed of charm. She is dressed in the Elizabethan style, though without excess, her ruff and farthingale modest in size. Her hair, still brown, is gathered under a silver net. Her gown is of tawny damask, open in front to reveal a cream damask kirtle, and her brown eyes are gentle and smiling.

But the painter knew his business and recorded his sitter's face in detail. There is a guarded look in those smiling eyes, as though their owner has secrets to keep, and there are little lines of worry around them, too. Well, Jane in her forties already knew the meaning of trouble.

Her original name was Jane Sweetwater. The household didn't adopt the name of Allerbrook until the 1540s. She was sixteen years of age on that day in 1535, when the family was preparing to send her elder sister, Sybil, to court to serve Queen Anne Boleyn as a maid of honour, and with only a week to go before Sybil's departure and a celebration dinner planned for the very next day, there was much anxiety in the household, because the new gowns that had been made for her had not yet been delivered.

"Eleanor," said Jane Sweetwater to her sister-in-law, "Madame La Plage is coming. I've just seen her from the parlour window."

"Thank God," said Eleanor, brushing back the strand of hair that had escaped from her coif. "I know she sent word that she'd come without fail today, but I was beginning to

think that Sybil would have to attend her celebration dinner in one of her old gowns.”

She wiped her forehead, which was damp. The March day was chilly enough, but she had been pulling extra benches around the table in the great hall, and the whole house seemed to be full of the steam from the kitchen. Preparations were under way for the feast tomorrow, when notable guests would gather to congratulate Sybil on her appointment to court, a great honour for the daughter of a Somerset yeoman.

Now everything that could possibly be prepared in advance was being so prepared, with much rolling and whisking and chopping by energetic maidservants, and pots and cauldrons simmering over a lively fire.

“Let me help you,” said Jane contritely, looking at her harassed sister-in-law. “I should have come down before. I was doing some mending. Where are we going to seat people?”

“There’ll be Sir William Carew and Lady Joan just here...and Master Thomas Stone and Mary Stone had better go opposite and they’ll want their daughter, Dorothy, beside them, I expect. Then there’s Ralph Palmer. He’ll probably have his father with him. Now, they’re family, though I’ve never got the relationship clear...”

“Distant cousins. I’ve never quite worked it out myself,” Jane remarked.

“Well, we’ll seat them on that side,” said Eleanor, pointing. “Then there’s the Lanyons from Lynmouth...”

“They’re distant relations, too,” Jane said.

“Yes. All from Francis’s side. I’m almost relieved that my own family can’t come, but my father’s not in good health.... If I put Owen and Katherine Lanyon *here*, they can talk to the Carews and the Stones quite easily and...”

Outside in the courtyard, dogs were barking and geese had begun a noisy cackling.

“That’s surely Madame La Plage at last,” said Jane. “I’d better go and tell Sybil.”

“I bring my most sincere regrets for the delay,” Madame La Plage said, leading her laden pack mule into the yard and descending from her pony into the midst of the cackling geese and barking dogs, just as Eleanor hastened out to greet her. “But I will do any needful adjustments *immédiatement*.”

Madame La Plage affected a French name and a French accent, but she was actually a local woman who had married one Will Beach of Porlock, a few miles west of the port of Minehead. After his death she had taken over his tailoring and dressmaking business. However, since Anne Boleyn, who’d spent many years in France, had captivated King Henry VIII, French food and styles of dress were in fashion. Mistress Beach had therefore moved herself and her business to Minehead and, with an appropriate accent, made a new start as Madame La Plage.

Most of her customers knew perfectly well that she was no more French than they were, but her work was good and she had prospered, acquiring clientele not only in Minehead but in the nearby port of Dunster, at the mouth of the River Avill, and even in Dunster Castle itself. Later she had become known more widely, even as far as Dulverton, in the very centre of the moor, and other places deep in the moorland, such as Allerbrook House, the home of the Sweetwater family, and the village of Clicket, which belonged to them.

The commission to make Sybil’s new gowns was a very good one, and she had worried because she had been too busy hitherto to ride the fourteen miles (as the crow flew;

ponies had to take a longer route) from Minehead. She dismounted now with a flustered air, flapping her cloak at the livestock. "I...go away, you brute...cease flapping your wings! Be quiet, you noisy barking *animals!* Mistress Sweetwater, can you not...?"

Eleanor seized the two dogs by their respective collars and said "Shoo!" loudly to the geese just as two grooms appeared from the stable to take charge of pony and mule and unload the hampers. She sighed a little as she did so. Eleanor's family in Dorset were dignified folk who lived in an elegant manor-house, and she was often pained by the way her husband's home had never quite shaken off its humble farming history.

Only a few generations ago it had been a simple farm, rented from a local landowner. Nowadays the Sweetwaters owned it as well as other land and had a family tomb in the church of St. Anne's in Clicket, and neither Eleanor nor her husband's two sisters had ever been asked to help spread muck on the fields or make black pudding from pig's blood and innards or go out at harvest time to stock corn behind the reapers.

But the old atmosphere still lingered. The front windows of the otherwise beautiful house overlooked a farmyard surrounded by a confused array of stables, byres, poultry houses and sheds, and infested by aggressive geese, led by a gander with such a savage peck that even the huge black tomcat, Claws, who kept the mice in order, was terrified of him.

Peggy Ames, the chief cook and housekeeper, came out in her stained working apron, brandishing a rolling pin and laughing all over her plain, cheery face, to help chase the geese away, and Madame La Plage, along with her hampers, was taken into the hall. Eleanor sent Jane to call her sister, and offered refreshments which Madame said she would

welcome after her long ride. The wind had been chilly, she said. She kept her mind on her business, though, and while sipping wine, began to talk of Sybil and the new gowns.

“You will like the tawny especially, I think. It will look charming over the pale yellow kirtle. It is ideal for a girl with fair hair. Ah, she is such a pretty girl, your sister-in-law Sybil. The fashion now is all for dark ladies, of course, but such blond hair is rare, above all with brown eyes.”

“Sybil is pretty enough,” conceded Eleanor, just a little sourly. Her own hair was mousy and her eyes an indeterminate grey. She had never been handsome. Her dowry had got her safely married and Francis had grown fond of her, but she didn’t have the looks to turn anyone’s head, and she knew it. Sybil, at court, would probably have every young man in sight dedicating sonnets to her. One could only hope that she would behave herself. “She’s a little greedy, I fear,” Eleanor said. “She eats too much cream. I have warned her that she will grow fat, but she takes no notice.”

“Perhaps her brother Master Francis should tell her, and maybe she will take notice of him. He is not here just now?”

“No, he’s out exercising his horse and riding round the farms. He takes good care of his estate,” Eleanor said.

Madame La Plage beamed. “Ah, his horse! He is known for his love of fine horses. He has good taste in all ways, has he not? I hope he will approve my work. Well, Mistress Sweetwater, shall we call Mistress Sybil and fit the gowns? Where is she? Most young ladies come running when new clothes are delivered!”

She and Eleanor both turned as a door opened at the end of the hall, but it was only Jane, on her own.

“Where has Sybil got to? I asked you to fetch her,” said Eleanor.

“She’s in her bedchamber,” said Jane, sounding puzzled. “She seems upset about something.”

“She’s been very quiet for a while now,” Eleanor said. “Can she be nervous about going to court? It’s not like Sybil to be nervous. She isn’t ill, is she?”

“I don’t think so,” said Jane. “But I think she has been crying.”

“Well,” said Madame La Plage, “let us see what pretty new gowns can do for her, shall we?”

“May I come, too?” asked Jane.

“Yes, of course.” Eleanor had dutifully tried to love and be a mother to both her husband’s young sisters, but she had never quite managed to become really fond of Sybil. Sturdy brown-haired kindhearted Jane, on the other hand, who always had a smile in her eyes, was easy to love. Sybil was affectionate enough, but she was careless. If you sent her to fetch something from another room, she’d probably bring you the wrong thing or get distracted on the way and forget her errand altogether. Now she had apparently found a new way of being difficult. What on earth was she crying about? “We’ll all go,” said Eleanor. “Come along.”

They found Sybil reading on the window seat in her chamber. She put down her book of poems when they entered, slipped from the seat and curtsied politely to the older women. Her little pointed face was very pale, however, and her eyes were certainly red. She looked at the hampers, which Jane and Madame La Plage were carrying between them, as though they were instruments of torture, or possibly execution.

“Now, why this sad face?” said Eleanor briskly. “Come. It’s an adventure, to be going to court to wait on the queen of England! Jane will help you off with what you’re wearing

and we will see how these fit. Madame, shall we start with the tawny gown?"

"Has the young lady no tirewoman?" Madame La Plage enquired. "Surely, at court..."

"Yes, we have found a maid for her, but she lives in Taunton. We shall pass through Taunton on the way to London and the woman will join us there. We live simply here at Allerbrook, and assist each other instead of employing tiring maids," said Eleanor with regret. She had had a maid in Dorset, but Francis had seen no need for one here. He had a parsimonious streak, except when it came to buying the fine horses he so loved.

"I'll help you," said Jane, going to her sister.

"No. No, I can do it myself," said Sybil.

At Allerbrook they mostly wore clothes of simple design except on feast days. Sybil's light yellow gown was loose and comfortable and she could draw it over her head without aid. Slowly, and it seemed with reluctance, she pulled it off and removed her kirtle and undergarments, leaving only her stays.

"Stays, too," said Madame La Plage. "New stays are included in the price and I have them here. You must have strong new stays to wear under the gowns I have made for you."

Miserably Sybil removed her stays, as well.

"But...that is not the result of too much cream!" gasped Madame La Plage.

Jane said, "Oh, Sybil, *Sybil!*"

Eleanor said, "Oh, my God!" and then clapped her hands to her mouth and burst into tears.

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