

You loved your last book...but what
are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, **Love**reading will help you find new
books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

The Virgin's Lover

Written by Philippa Gregory

Published by HarperCollins

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to **Love**reading.
Please print off and read at your leisure.



Autumn 1558

All the bells in Norfolk were ringing for Elizabeth, pounding the peal into Amy's head, first the treble bell screaming out like a mad woman, and then the whole agonising, jangling sob till the great bell boomed a warning that the whole discordant carillon was about to shriek out again. She pulled the pillow over her head to shut out the sound, and yet still it went on, until the rooks abandoned their nests and went streaming into the skies, tossing and turning in the wind like a banner of ill omen, and the bats left the belfry like a plume of black smoke as if to say that the world was upside down now, and day should be forever night.

Amy did not need to ask what the racket was for; she already knew. At last, poor sick Queen Mary had died, and Princess Elizabeth was the uncontested heir. Praise be. Everyone in England should rejoice. The Protestant princess had come to the throne and would be England's queen. All over the country people would be ringing bells for joy, striking kegs of ale, dancing in the streets, and throwing open prison doors. The English had their Elizabeth at last, and the fear-filled days of Mary Tudor could be forgotten. Everyone in England was celebrating.

Everyone but Amy.

The peals, pounding Amy into wakefulness, did not bring her

to joy. Amy, alone in all of England, did not celebrate Elizabeth's upward leap to the throne. The chimes did not even sound on key to her. They sounded like the beat of jealousy, the scream of rage, the sobbing shout of a deserted woman.

'God strike her dead,' she swore into her pillow as her head rang with the pound of Elizabeth's bells. 'God strike her down in her youth and her pride and her beauty. God blast her looks, and thin her hair, and rot her teeth, and let her die lonely and alone. Lonely and alone, like me.'



Amy had no word from her absent husband: she did not expect one. Another day went by and then it was a week. Amy guessed that he would have ridden at breakneck pace to Hatfield Palace from London at the first news that Queen Mary was dead. He would have been the first, as he had planned, the very first to kneel before the princess and tell her she was queen.

Amy guessed that Elizabeth would already have a speech prepared, some practised pose to strike, and for his part Robert would already have his reward in mind. Perhaps even now he was celebrating his own rise to greatness as the princess celebrated hers. Amy, walking down to the river to fetch in the cows for milking because the lad was sick and they were short-handed at Stanfield Hall, her family's farm, stopped to stare at the brown leaves unravelling from an oak tree and whirling like a snowstorm; southwest to Hatfield where her husband had blown, like the wind itself, to Elizabeth.

She knew that she should be glad that a queen had come to the throne who would favour him. She knew she should be glad for her family, whose wealth and position would rise with Robert's. She knew that she should be glad to be Lady Dudley once more: restored to her lands, given a place at court, perhaps even made a countess.

But she was not. She would rather have had him at her side as an attainted traitor, with her in the drudgery of the day and in the warm silence of the night; anything rather than ennobled as the handsome favourite at another woman's court. She knew from this that she was a jealous wife; and jealousy was a sin in the eyes of God.

She put her head down and trudged on to the meadows where the cows grazed on the thin grass, churning up sepia earth and flints beneath their clumsy hooves.

— How could we end up like this? — she whispered to the stormy sky piling up a brooding castle of clouds over Norfolk. — Since I love him so much, and since he loves me? Since there is no-one for us but each other? How could he leave me to struggle here, and dash off to her? How could it start so well, in such wealth and glory as it did, and end in hardship and loneliness like this? —



One Year Earlier: Summer 1557

In his dream he saw once again the rough floorboards of the empty room, the sandstone mantelpiece over the big fireplace with their names carved into it, and the leaded window, set high in the stone wall. By dragging the big refectory table over to the window, climbing up, and craning their necks to look downward, the five young men could see the green below where their father came slowly out to the scaffold and mounted the steps.

He was accompanied by a priest of the newly restored Roman Catholic church, he had repented of his sins and recanted his principles. He had begged for forgiveness and slavishly apologised. He had thrown away all fidelity for the chance of forgiveness, and by the anxious turning of his head as he searched the faces of the small crowd, he was hoping for the arrival of his pardon at this late, this theatrical moment.

He had every reason to hope. The new monarch was a Tudor and the Tudors knew the power of appearances. She was devout, and surely would not reject a contrite heart. But more than anything else; she was a woman, a soft-hearted, thick-headed woman. She would never have the courage to take the decision to execute such a great man, she would never have the stamina to hold to her decision.

— Stand up, Father, — Robert urged him silently. — The pardon

must come at any moment; don't lower yourself by looking for it. —

The door behind Robert opened, and a gaoler came in and laughed raucously to see the five young men up at the window, shading their eyes against the brilliant midsummer sun. 'Don't jump,' he said. 'Don't rob the axeman, bonny lads. It'll be you five next, and the pretty maid.'

'I will remember you for this, after our pardons have come, and we are released,' Robert promised him, and turned his attention back to the green. The gaoler checked the thick bars on the window and saw that the men had nothing that could break the glass, and then went out, still chuckling, and locked the door.

Below on the scaffold, the priest stepped up to the condemned man, and read him prayers from his Latin bible. Robert noticed how the wind caught the rich vestments and made them billow like the sails of an invading Armada. Abruptly, the priest finished, held up a crucifix for the man to kiss, and stepped back.

Robert found he was suddenly cold, chilled to ice by the glass of the window where he was resting his forehead and the palms of his hands, as if the warmth of his body was bleeding out of him, sucked out by the scene below. On the scaffold, his father knelt humbly before the block. The axeman stepped forward and tied the blindfold over his eyes, he spoke to him. The prisoner turned his bound head to reply. Then, dreadfully, it seemed as if that movement had disoriented him. He had taken his hands from the executioner's block, and he could not find it again. He started to feel for it, hands outstretched. The executioner had turned to pick up his axe, and when he turned back, his prisoner was near to falling, scrabbling about.

Alarmed, the hooded executioner shouted at the struggling prisoner, and the prisoner plucked at the bandage over his eyes, calling that he was not ready, that he could not find the block, that the axe must wait for him.

'Be still!' Robert hollered, hammering against the thick glass of the window. 'Father, be still! For God's sake, be still!'

'Not yet!' cried the little figure on the green to the axeman behind him. 'I can't find the block! I am not ready! I am not prepared! Not yet! Not yet!'

He was crawling in the straw, one hand outstretched before him, trying to find the block, the other hand plucking at the tight bandage over his head. 'Don't touch me! She will pardon me! I'm not ready!' he screamed, and was still screaming, as the axeman swung his blade and the axe thudded into the exposed neck. A gout of blood spurted upward, and the man was thrown to one side with the blow.

'Father!' Robert shouted. 'My father!'

The blood was pumping from the wound but the man still scrambled like a dying pig in the straw, still trying to get to his feet with boots that could get no purchase, still searching blindly for the block, with hands that were growing numb. The executioner, cursing his own inaccuracy, raised the great axe again.

'Father!' Robert cried out in agony as the axe came down. 'Father!'

'Robert? My lord?' A hand was gently shaking him. He opened his eyes and there was Amy before him, her brown hair plaited for sleep, her brown eyes wide, solidly real in the candlelight of the bedroom.

'Good God! What a nightmare! What a dream. God keep me from it. God keep me from it!'

'Was it the same dream?' she asked. 'The dream of your father's death?'

He could not even bear that she should mention it. 'Just a dream,' he said shortly, trying to recover his wits. 'Just a terrible dream.'

'But the same dream?' she persisted.

He shrugged. 'It's hardly surprising that it should come back to me. Do we have some ale?'

Amy threw back the covers and rose from the bed, pulling her nightgown around her shoulders. But she was not to be diverted.

‘It’s an omen,’ she said flatly, as she poured him a mug of ale. ‘Shall I heat this up?’

‘I’ll take it cold,’ he said.

She passed him the mug and he drank it down, feeling his night sweat cooling on his naked back, ashamed of his own terror.

‘It’s a warning,’ she said.

He tried to find a careless smile, but the horror of his father’s death, and all the failure and sadness that had ridden at his heels since that black day, was too much for him. ‘Don’t,’ he said simply.

‘You should not go tomorrow.’

Robert took a draught of ale, burying his face in the mug to avoid her accusing gaze.

‘A bad dream like that is a warning. You should not sail with King Philip.’

‘We’ve been through this a thousand times. You know I have to go.’

‘Not now! Not after you dreamed of your father’s death. What else could it mean but a warning to you: not to overreach yourself? He died a traitor’s death after trying to put his son on the throne of England. Now you ride out in your pride once more.’

He tried to smile. ‘Not much pride,’ he said. ‘All I have is my horse and my brother. I could not even raise my own battalion.’

‘Your father himself is warning you from beyond the grave.’

Wearily, he shook his head. ‘Amy, this is too painful. Don’t cite him to me. You don’t know what he was like. He would have wanted me to restore the Dudleys. He would never have discouraged me in anything I wanted to do. He always wanted us to rise. Be a good wife to me, Amy-love. Don’t you discourage me – he would not.’

‘You be a good husband,’ she retorted. ‘And don’t leave me. Where am I to go when you have sailed for the Netherlands? What is to become of me?’

‘You will go to the Philippses, at Chichester, as we agreed,’ he said steadily. ‘And if the campaign goes on, and I don’t come home soon – you will go home, to your stepmother’s at Stanfield Hall.’

‘I want to go home to my own house at Syderstone,’ she said. ‘I want us to make a house together. I want to live with you as your wife.’

Even after two years of shame he still had to grit his teeth to refuse her. ‘You know the Crown has taken Syderstone. You know there’s no money. You know we can’t.’

‘We could ask my stepmother to rent Syderstone from the Crown for us,’ she said stubbornly. ‘We could work the land. You know I would work. I’m not afraid of working hard. You know we could rise by hard work, not by some gamble for a foreign king. Not by going into danger for no certain reward!’

‘I know you would work,’ Robert acknowledged. ‘I know you would rise at dawn and be in the fields before the sun. But I don’t want my wife to work like a peasant on the land. I was born for greater things than that, and I promised your father greater things for you. I don’t want half a dozen acres and a cow, I want half of England.’

‘They will think you have left me because you are tired of me,’ she said reproachfully. ‘Anyone would think so. You have only just come home to me and you are leaving me again.’

‘I have been home with you for two years!’ he exclaimed. ‘Two years!’ Then he checked himself, trying to take the irritation from his voice. ‘Amy, forgive me, but it is no life for me. These months have been like a lifetime. With my name attainted by treason I can own nothing in my own right, I cannot trade or sell or buy. Everything my family had was seized by the Crown – I know! – and everything you had too: your father’s legacy, your mother’s fortune. Everything that you had has been lost by me. I have to get it back for you. I have to get it back for us.’

‘I don’t want it at this price,’ she said flatly. ‘You always say that

you are doing this for us, but it is not what I want, it's no good for me. I want you at home with me, I don't care if we have nothing. I don't care if we have to live with my stepmother and depend on her charity. I don't care for anything but that we are together and you are safe at last.'

'Amy, I cannot live on that woman's charity. It is a shoe which pinches me every day. When you married me, I was the son of the greatest man in England. It was his plan, and mine, that my brother would be king and Jane Grey would be queen, and we came within inches of achieving that. I would have been of the royal family of England. I expected that, I rode out to fight for it. I would have laid down my life for it. And why not? We had as great a claim to the throne as the Tudors, who had done the self-same thing only three generations before. The Dudleys could have been the next royal family of England. Even though we failed and were defeated . . .'

'And humbled,' she supplemented.

'And humbled to dust,' he agreed. 'Yet I am still a Dudley. I was born for greatness, and I have to claim it. I was born to serve my family and my country. You don't want a little farmer on a hundred acres. You don't want a man who sits at home all day in the cinders.'

'But I do,' she insisted. 'What you don't see, Robert, is that to be a little farmer on a hundred acres is to make a better England – and in a better way – than any courtier struggling for his own power at court.'

He almost laughed. 'Perhaps to you. But I have never been such a man. Not even defeat, not even fear of death itself, could make me into such a man. I was born and bred to be one of the great men in the land, if not the greatest. I was brought up alongside the children of the king as their equal – I cannot moulder in a damp field in Norfolk. I have to clear my name, I have to be noticed by King Philip, I have to be restored by Queen Mary. I have to rise.'

'You will be killed in battle, and then what?'

Robert blinked. ‘Sweetheart, this is to curse me, on our last night together. I will sail tomorrow, whatever you say. Don’t ill-wish me.’

‘You have had a dream!’ Amy climbed on the bed and took the empty mug from him, and put it down, holding his hands in hers, as if she were teaching a child. ‘My lord, it is a warning. I am warning you. You should not go.’

‘I have to go,’ he said flatly. ‘I would rather be dead and my name cleared by my death, than live like this, an undischarged traitor from a disgraced family, in Mary’s England.’

‘Why? Would you rather have Elizabeth’s England?’ She hissed the treasonous challenge in a whisper.

‘With all my heart,’ he answered truthfully.

Abruptly, she released his hands and, without another word, blew out the candle, pulled the covers over her shoulders and turned her back to him. The two of them lay sleepless, wide-eyed in the darkness.

‘It will never happen,’ Amy stated. ‘She will never have the throne. The queen could conceive another child tomorrow, Philip of Spain’s son, a boy who would be Emperor of Spain and King of England, and she will be a princess that no-one wants, married off to a foreign prince and forgotten.’

‘Or she might not,’ he replied. ‘Mary might die without issue and then my princess is Queen of England, and she will not forget me.’



In the morning, she would not speak to him. They breakfasted in the tap room in silence and then Amy went back upstairs to their room in the inn to pack the last of Robert’s clothes in his bag. Robert called up the stairs that he would see her down at the quay-side, and went out into the noise and the bustle of the streets.

The village of Dover was in chaos as King Philip of Spain's expedition made ready to set sail to the Netherlands. Produce-sellers with every sort of food and wares bawled their prices into the hubbub. Wise women screeched the value of charms and amulets for departing soldiers. Pedlars showed trays of trinkets for farewell gifts, barbers and tooth-drawers were working on the side of the street, men having their head shaved almost bare for fear of lice. A couple of priests had even set up makeshift confessionals to shrive men who feared going to their deaths with sins on their consciences, and dozens of whores mingled with the crowds of soldiers, screeching with laughter and promising all sorts of quick pleasures.

Women crowded to the quayside to say goodbye to their husbands and lovers, carts and cannon were hauled perilously up the sides and stowed in the little ships, horses jibbed and fought on the gangplanks, with swearing lumpers pushing them from behind, the grooms pulling them from before. As Robert came out of the door of his inn, his young brother caught him by the arm.

'Henry! Well met!' Robert cried, enveloping the nineteen-year-old youth in a great bear hug. 'I was wondering how we would ever find each other. I expected you here last night.'

'I was delayed. Ambrose would not let me go until he had my horse re-shod. You know what he's like. He suddenly became a most authoritative older brother and I had to swear to keep safe, and to keep you out of danger as well.'

Robert laughed. 'I wish you well with that.'

'I got here this morning and I have been looking for you all over.' Henry stepped back and scrutinised his older brother's dark good looks. He was still only twenty-three and was strikingly handsome but the spoiled gloss of a rich youth had been burned off him by suffering. He was lean now, he had the look of a man to be reckoned with. He grinned at Henry and the hardness in his face melted

in the warmth of his loving smile. 'Good God! I am glad to see you, lad! What an adventure we shall have!'

'The court has arrived already,' Henry told him. 'King Philip is on board his ship, and the queen is here, and the princess.'

'Elizabeth? Is she here? Did you speak to her?'

'They're on the new ship, the *Philip and Mary*,' Henry said. 'The queen looking very sour.'

Dudley laughed. 'Elizabeth will be merry then?'

'Happy as a haymaker at her sister's distress,' Henry replied cheerfully. 'Is it true, d'you know, that she is King Philip's lover?'

'Not her,' Dudley said with the certainty of a childhood playmate. 'But she'll keep him dancing to her tune because he guarantees her safety. Half the Privy Council would have her beheaded tomorrow if it were not for the king's favour. She's no lovesick fool. She'll use him, not be had by him. She's a formidable girl. I'd so like to see her if we can.'

'She always had a tender heart for you,' Henry grinned. 'Shall you eclipse the king himself?'

'Not while I have nothing to offer her,' Robert said. 'She's a calculating wench, God bless her. Are they ready to load us?'

'My horse is already aboard,' Henry said. 'I was coming for yours.'

'I'll walk him down with you,' Robert said. The two men went through the stone archway to where the horse was stabled in the yard at the back of the inn.

'When did you last see her? The princess?' Henry asked his brother.

'When I was in my pomp and she in hers,' Robert smiled ruefully. 'It must have been the last Christmas at court. When King Edward was failing, and Father was king in everything but name alone. She was the Protestant princess and the favourite sister. We were twins in the smugness of our triumph and Mary was nowhere to be seen. D'you remember?'

Henry frowned. 'Dimly. You know I was never very good at the shifts in favour.'

‘You would have learned,’ Robert said drily. ‘In a family such as ours was then, you would have had to.’

‘I remember she was imprisoned for treason in the Tower, while we were still in there,’ Henry recalled.

‘I was glad when I learned she was free,’ Robert said. ‘Elizabeth always had the luck of the devil.’

The big black horse whinnied at the sight of Robert and Robert went forward and stroked his soft nose. ‘Come on then, my lovely,’ he said softly. ‘Come on, First Step.’

‘What d’you call him?’ Henry inquired.

‘First Step,’ Robert said. ‘When we were released from the Tower and I came home to Amy and found myself a pauper in her step-mother’s house, the woman told me that I could neither buy nor borrow a horse to ride on.’

Henry gave a low whistle. ‘I thought they kept a good house at Stanfield?’

‘Not for a son-in-law who had just come home an undischarged traitor,’ Robert said ruefully. ‘I had no choice but to walk in my riding boots to a horse fair, and I won him in a bet. I called him First Step. He is my first step back to my rightful place.’

‘And this expedition will be our next step,’ Henry said gleefully.

Robert nodded. ‘If we can rise in King Philip’s favour we can be returned to court,’ he said. ‘Anything will be forgiven the man who holds the Netherlands for Spain.’

‘Dudley! A Dudley!’ Henry shouted the family battle cry, and opened the door to the loosebox.

The two of them led the nervous horse down the cobbled street to the quayside, and waited behind the other men leading their horses on board. The little waves lapped at the jetty and First Step flared his nostrils and shifted uneasily. When it was his turn to go up the gangplank he put his forefeet on the bridge and then froze in fear.

One of the lumpers came behind with a whip raised to strike.

‘Stay your hand!’ Robert rapped out, loud above the noise.

‘I tell you, he won’t go on without,’ the man swore.

Robert turned his back on the horse, dropped the reins and went ahead of him, into the darkness of the hold. The horse fretted, shifting from one foot to another, his ears flickering forward and back, his head up, looking for Robert. From the belly of the ship came Robert’s whistle and the horse turned his ears forward and went trustingly in.

Robert came out, having petted and tethered his horse, and saw Amy with his bags on the quayside. ‘All loaded and shipshape,’ he said cheerfully to her. He took her cold little hand and pressed it to his lips. ‘Forgive me,’ he said quietly. ‘I was disturbed by my dream last night, and it made me short-tempered. Let us have no more wrangling, but part as friends.’

The tears welled up in her brown eyes. ‘Oh, Robert, please don’t go,’ she breathed.

‘Now, Amy,’ he said firmly. ‘You know that I have to go. And when I am gone I shall send you all my pay and I expect you to invest it wisely, and look about for a farm for us to buy. We must rise, my wife, and I am counting on you to mind our fortune and help us rise.’

She tried to smile. ‘You know I’ll never fail you. But it’s just . . .’

‘The royal barge!’ Henry exclaimed as every man along the quayside pulled off his hat and bowed his head.

‘Excuse us,’ Robert said swiftly to Amy, and he and Henry went up to the deck of the King of Spain’s ship so that he could look down on the royal barge as it came by. The queen was seated in the stern of the barge, under the canopy of state, but the twenty-two year-old Princess Elizabeth, radiant in the Tudor colours of green and white, was standing in the prow like a bold figurehead where everyone could see her, smiling and waving her hand at the people.

The oarsmen held the barge steady, the ships were side by side,

the two brothers looked down from the waist of the warship to the barge that rode lower in the water beside them.

Elizabeth looked up. 'A Dudley!' Her voice rang out clearly and her smile gleamed up at Robert.

He bowed his head. 'Princess!' He looked towards the queen, who did not acknowledge him. 'Your Majesty.'

Coldly, she raised her hand. She was draped in ropes of pearls, she had diamonds in her ears and a hood encrusted with emeralds, but her eyes were dull with grief, and the lines around her mouth made her look as if she had forgotten how to smile.

Elizabeth stepped forward to the side rail of the royal barge. 'Are you off to war, Robert?' she called up to the ship. 'Are you to be a hero?'

'I hope so!' he shouted back clearly. 'I hope to serve the queen in her husband's dominions and win her gracious favour again.'

Elizabeth's eyes danced. 'I am sure she has no more loyal soldier than you!' She was nearly laughing aloud.

'And no sweeter subject than you!' he returned.

She gritted her teeth so that she did not burst out. He could see her struggling to control herself.

'And are you well, Princess?' he called more softly. She knew what he meant: — Are you in good health? — For he knew that when she was frightened she contracted a dropsy that swelled her fingers and ankles and forced her to her bed. — And are you safe? — For there she was, beside the queen in the royal barge, when proximity to the throne always meant proximity to the block, and her only ally on the Privy Council, King Philip, was sailing away to war. And most of all: — Are you waiting, as I am waiting, for better times, and praying they come soon? —

'I am well,' she shouted back. 'As ever. Constant. And you?'

He grinned down at her. 'Constant too.'

They needed to say no more. 'God bless you and keep you, Robert Dudley,' she said.

‘And you, Princess.’ — And God speed you to your own again that I may come to mine — was his unspoken reply. By the cheeky gleam in her eyes he knew that she knew what he was thinking. They had always known exactly what the other was thinking.