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The King's Concubine

Written by Anne O'Brien

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The
KING'S
CONCUBINE



ANNE
O'BRIEN



MIRA

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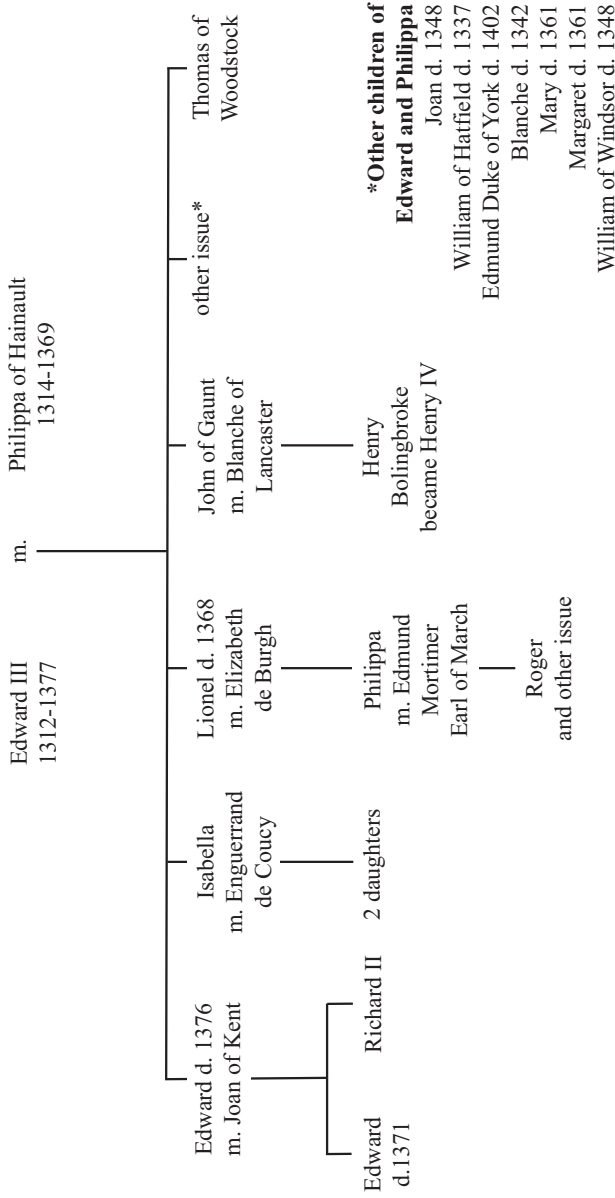


Royal Palaces & Alice's Manors

-  ROYAL PALACES
-  ALICE'S MANORS
-  ROYAL FORESTS



Descendants of Edward III (simplified)



For George, who managed to live comfortably for
a year with both me and Alice Perrers.

As ever, with love and thanks.

‘There was...in England a shameless woman and wanton harlot called Ales Peres, of base kindred... being neither beautiful nor fair, she knew how to cover these defects with her flattering tongue...’

—*A historical relation of certain passages about the end of King Edward the Third and of his death*

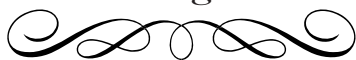
‘It is not fitting that all the keys should hang from the belt of one woman.’

—*The Bishop of Rochester*

‘...no one dared to go against her...’

—*Thomas Walsingham, a monk of St Albans*

Prologue



'TODAY you will be my Lady of the Sun,' King Edward says as he approaches to settle me into my chariot. 'My Queen of Ceremonies.'

And not before time.

I don't say the words, of course—I am, after all, a woman of percipience—but I think them. I have waited too many years for this acclaim. Twelve years as Edward's whore.

'Thank you, my lord,' I murmur, curtsying deeply, my smile as sweet as honey.

I sit, a cloak of shimmering gold tissue spread around me, to show a lining of scarlet taffeta. My gown is red, lined with white silk and edged in ermine: Edward's colours, royal fur fit for a Queen. Over all glitters a myriad of precious stones refracting the light—rubies as red as blood, sapphires dark and mysterious, strange beryls capable of destroying the power of poison. Everyone knows that I wear Queen Philippa's jewels.

I sit at my ease, alone in my pre-eminence, my hands loose in my bejewelled lap. This is my right.

I look around to see if I might catch sight of the black scowl of the Princess Joan. No sign of her, my sworn enemy. She'll be tucked away in her chamber at Kennington, wishing me ill. Joan the Fair. Joan the Fat! An adversary to be wary of, with the sensitivity and morals of a feral cat in heat.

My gaze slides to Edward as he mounts his stallion and my smile softens. He is tall and strong and good to look on. What a pair we make, he and I. The years have not yet pressed too heavily on him while I am in my prime. An ugly woman, by all accounts, but not without talent.

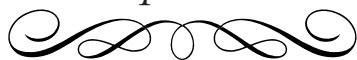
I am Alice. Royal Concubine. Edward's beloved Lady of the Sun.

Ah...!

I blink as a swooping pigeon smashes the scene in my mind, flinging reality back at me with cruel exactitude. Sitting in my orchard, far from Court and my King, I am forced to accept the truth. How low have I fallen. I am caged in impotent loneliness, like Edward's long-dead lion, powerless, isolated, stripped of everything I had made for myself.

I am nothing. Alice Perrers is no more.

Chapter One



WHERE do I start? It's difficult to know. My beginnings as I recall them were not moments marked by joy or happiness. So I will start with what I do recall. My very first memory.

I was a child, still far too young to have much understanding of who or what I was, kneeling with the sisters in the great Abbey church of St Mary's in the town of Barking. It was the eighth day of December and the air so cold it hurt my lungs. The stone paving was rough beneath my knees but even then I knew better than to shuffle. The statue on its plinth in the Lady Chapel was clothed in a new blue gown, her veil and wimple made from costly silk that glowed startlingly white in the dark shadows. The nuns sang the office of Compline and round the feet of the statue a pool of candles had been

lit. The light flickered over the deep blue folds so that the figure appeared to move, to breathe.

'Who is she?' I asked, voice too loud. I was still very ignorant.

Sister Goda, novice mistress when there were novices to teach, hushed me. 'The Blessed Virgin.'

'What is she called?'

'She is the Blessed Virgin Mary.'

'Is this a special day?'

'It is the feast of the Immaculate Conception. Now, hush!'

It meant nothing to me then but I fell in love with her. The Blessed Mary's face was fair, her eyes down-cast, but there was a little smile on her painted lips and her hands were raised as if to beckon me forward. But what took my eye was the crown of stars that had been placed for the occasion on her brow. The gold gleamed in the candlelight, the jewels reflected the flames in their depths. And I was dazzled. After the service, when the nuns had filed out, I stood before her, my feet small in the shimmer of candles.

'Come away, Alice.' Sister Goda took my arm, not gently.

I was stubborn and planted my feet.

'Come on!'

'Why does she wear a crown of stars?' I asked.

'Because she is the Queen of Heaven. Now will you...?'

The sharp slap on my arm made me obey, yet still I reached up, although I was too small to touch it, and smiled.

'I would like a crown like that.'

My second memory followed fast on my first. Despite the late hour, Sister Goda, small and frail but with a strong right arm, struck my hand with a leather strap until my skin was red and blistered. Punishment for the sin of vanity and covetousness, she hissed. Who was I to look at a crown and desire it for myself? Who was I to approach the Blessed Virgin, the Queen of Heaven? I was of less importance than the pigeons that found their way into the high reaches of the chancel. I would not eat for the whole of the next day. I would rise and go to bed with an empty belly. I would learn humility. And as my belly growled and my hand stung, I learned, and not for the last time, that it was not in the nature of women to get what they desired.

'You are a bad child,' Sister Goda stated unequivocally.

I lay awake until the Abbey bell summoned us at two of the clock for Matins. I did not weep. I think I must have accepted her judgement on me, or was too young to understand its implications.

And my third memory?

Ah, vanity! Sister Goda failed to beat it out of me. She eyed me dispassionately over some misdemeanour that I cannot now recall.

'What a trial you are to me, girl! And most probably a bastard, born out of holy wedlock. An ugly one at that. Though you are undoubtedly a creature of God's creation, I see no redeeming features in you.'

So I was ugly and a bastard. I wasn't sure which was

the worse of the two, to my twelve-year-old mind. Was I ugly? Plain, Sister Goda might have said if there was any charity in her, but ugly was another world. Forbidden as we were the ownership of a looking glass in the Abbey—such an item was far too venal and precious to be owned by a nun—which of the sisters had never peered into a bowl of still water to catch an image? Or sought a distorted reflection in one of the polished silver ewers used in the Abbey church? I did the same and saw what Sister Goda saw.

That night I looked into my basin of icy water before my candle was doused. The reflection shimmered, but it was enough. My hair, close cut against my skull, to deter lice as much as vanity, was dark and coarse and straight. My eyes were as dark as sloes, like empty holes eaten in wool by the moth. As for the rest—my cheeks were hollow, my nose prominent, my mouth large. It was one thing to be told that I was ugly; quite another to see it for myself. Even accepting the rippling flaws in the reflection, I had no beauty. I was old enough and female enough to understand, and be hurt by it. Horrified by my heavy brows, black as smudges of charcoal, I dropped my candle into the water, obliterating the image.

Lonely in the dark in my cold, narrow cell, the walls pressing in on me in my solitary existence, I wept. The dark, and being alone, frightened me—then as now.

The rest of my young days merged into a grey lumpen pottage of misery and resentment, stirred and salted by Sister Goda's admonitions.

'You were late again for Matins, Alice. Don't think I didn't see you slinking into the church like the sly child you are!' Yes, I was late.

'Alice, your veil is a disgrace in the sight of God. Have you dragged it across the floor?' No, I had not, but against every good intention my veil collected burrs and fingerprints and ash from the hearth.

'Why can you not remember the simplest of texts, Alice? Your mind is as empty as a beggar's purse.' No, not empty, but engaged with something of more moment. Perhaps the soft fur of the Abbey cat as it curled against my feet in a patch of sunlight.

'Alice, why do you persist in this ungodly slouch?' My growing limbs were ignorant of elegance.

'A vocation is given to us by God as a blessing,' Mother Sybil, our Abbess, admonished the sinners in her care from her seat of authority every morning in Chapter House. 'A vocation is a blessing that allows us to worship God through prayer, and through good works to the poor in our midst. We must honour our vocation and submit to the Rules of St Benedict, our most revered founder.'

Mother Abbess was quick with a scourge against those who did not submit. I remember its sting well. And that of her tongue. I felt the lash of both when, determined to be on my knees at Sister Goda's side *before* the bell for

Compline was silenced, I failed to shut away the Abbey's red chickens against the predations of the fox. The result next morning for the hens was bloody. So was the skin on my back, in righteous punishment, Mother Abbess informed me as she wielded the strap that hung from her girdle. It did not seem to me to be fair that by observing one rule I had broken another. Having not yet learnt the wisdom of concealing my thoughts, I said so. Mother Sybil's arm rose and fell with even more weight.

I was set to collect up the poor ravaged bodies. Not that the flesh went to waste. The nuns ate chicken with their bread at noon the following day as they listened to the reading of the parable of the good Samaritan. My plate saw nothing but bread, and that a day old. Why should I benefit from my sins?

A vocation? God most assuredly had not blessed me with a vocation, if that meant to accept, obey and be grateful for my lot in life. And yet I knew no other life, neither would I. When I reached my fifteenth year, so I was informed by Sister Goda, I would take my vows and, no longer a novice, be clothed as a nun. I would be a nun for ever until God called me to the heavenly comfort of His bosom—or to answer for my sins in some dire place of heat and torment. From my fifteenth year I would not speak, except for an hour after the noon meal when I would be allowed to converse on serious matters. Which seemed to me little better than perpetual silence.

Silent for the rest of my life, except for the singing of the offices.

Holy Mother, save me! Was this all I could hope for? It was not my choice to take the veil. How could I bear it? It was beyond my understanding that any woman would choose this life enclosed behind walls, the windows shuttered, the doors locked. Why would any woman choose this degree of imprisonment rather than taste the freedom of life outside?

To my mind there was only one door that might open for me. To offer me an escape.

'Who is my father?' I asked Sister Goda. If I had a father, surely he would not be deaf to my entreaties.

'God in Heaven is your Father.' Sister Goda's flat response dared me to pursue the matter as she turned the page of a psalter. 'Now, if you will pay attention, my child, we have here a passage to study...'

'But who is my father *here*—out *there*?' I gestured towards the window that allowed the noise of the town to encroach, its inhabitants gathering vociferously for market.

The novice mistress looked at me, faintly puzzled. 'I don't know, Alice, and that's the truth.' She clicked her tongue against her teeth. 'They said when you were brought here there was a purse of gold coins.' She shook her head, her veil hanging as limp as a shroud around her seamed face. 'But it's not important.' She shuffled across the room to search in the depths of a coffer for some dusty manuscript.

But it was important. A purse of gold? Suddenly it was very important. I knew nothing other than that I was Alice. Alice—with no family, no dowry. Unlike

more fortunate sisters, no one came to visit me at Easter or Christmas. No one brought me gifts. When I took the veil, there would be no one to hold a celebration for me to mark my elevation. Even my habit would be passed down to me from some dead nun who, if fate smiled on me, resembled me in height and girth; if not, my new garment would enclose me in a vast pavilion of cloth, or exhibit my ankles to the world.

Resentment bloomed at the enormity of it. The question beat against my mind: Who is my father? What have I done to deserve to be so thoroughly abandoned? It hurt my heart.

'Who brought me here, Sister Goda?' I persisted.

'I don't recall. How would I?' Sister Goda was brusque. 'You were left in the Abbey porch, I believe. Sister Agnes brought you in—but she's been dead these last five years. As far as I know, there is no trace of your parentage. It was not uncommon for unwanted infants to be abandoned at a church door, what with the plague... Although it was always said that...'

'What was said?'

Sister Goda looked down at the old parchment. 'Sister Agnes always said it was not what it seemed...'

'*What* wasn't?'

Sister Goda clapped her hands sharply, her gaze once more narrowing on my face. 'She was very old and not always clear in her head. Mother Abbess says you're most likely the child of some labourer—a maker of tiles—got on a whore of a tavern without the blessing of marriage.'

Now—enough of this! Set your mind on higher things. Let us repeat the *Paternoster*.’

So I *was* a bastard.

As I duly mouthed the words of the *Paternoster*, my mind remained fixed on my parentage, or lack of it, and what Sister Agnes might or might not have said about it. I was just one of many unwanted infants and should be grateful that I had not been left to die.

But it did not quite ring true. If I was the child of a tavern whore, why had I been taken in and given teaching? Why was I not set to work as one of the *conversa*, the lay sisters, employed to undertake the heavy toil on the Abbey’s lands or in the kitchens and bakehouse? True, I was clothed in the most worn garments, passed down from the sick and the dead, I was treated with no care or affection, yet I was taught to read and even to write, however poorly I attended to the lessons.

It was meant that I would become a nun. Not a lay sister.

‘Sister Goda—’ I tried again.

‘I have nothing to tell you,’ she snapped. There *is* nothing to tell! You will learn this text!’ Her cane cracked across my knuckles but without any real force. Perhaps she had already decided I was a lost cause, her impatience increasingly replaced by indifference. ‘And you will stay here until you do! Why do you resist? What else is there for you? Thank God on your knees every day that you are not forced to find your bread in the gutters of London. And by what means I can only

guess!' Her voice fell to a harsh whisper. 'Do you want to be a whore? A fallen woman?'

I lifted a shoulder in what was undoubtedly vulgar insolence. 'I am not made to be a nun,' I replied with misguided courage.

'What choice do you have? Where else would you go? Who would take you in?'

I had no answer. But as Sister Goda's cane thwacked once more like a thunderclap on the wooden desk, indignation burned hot in my mind, firing the only thought that remained to me. *If you do not help yourself, Alice, no one else will.*

Even then I had a sharp precocity. Product, no doubt, of a wily labourer who tumbled a sluttish tavern whore after a surfeit of sour ale.