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The Queen's Lady

Written by Barbara Kyle

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The QUEEN'S
LADY

BARBARA
KYLE



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Part One

May Day

May 1517–June 1522



May Day

She would remember this forever after as the night she watched two men die, one at peace and one in terror. But now, seven years old and lost, Honor Larke knew only that she was out alone on a May Day night gone mad. She wedged herself into the shadows of a tavern doorway and prayed that the looters had not seen her. They were ransacking a house across the street, their torches flaring, and it seemed to Honor as though devils in a play had swarmed from the stage and hell blazed right before her.

She was trapped.

She could not go back to Cheapside. The London apprentices were rioting there. Their annual day of carousing had boiled into violence against the rich foreigners, especially the Italians, called Lombards, and Honor's chest still burned from tearing through a Cheapside mob pitching rocks at a goldsmith's shop while the women inside screamed in a strange tongue. But she could not go forward either, for thieves exploiting the night's chaos had joined some apprentices to lay waste this side street.

They were heaving booty out to their accomplices from windows in the three-storied merchant's house across from her. Bolts of silk billowed down in ribbons of crimson and jade. Wooden chests smashed onto the cobblestones, spilling papers and coins. A dozen thieves were scooping the spoils into sacks. One of them, a toothless old man squatting in the middle of the street, hummed as he picked through a scatter of Venetian silver spoons. A thief with a torch hustled by Honor's hiding place, and she gagged on the acrid smoke of the blazing tarred rags. She clamped her hand on her mouth to cover the sound.

"Will, catch this," a man called from a window. He tossed out a garnet-studded casket. "Careful. It'll fetch enough to buy a bishop's whore."

Above him, a voice crowed from the top floor. "I found me one!"

The knots of foraging men looked up. Under a gable, a hefty young apprentice stood at a smashed-out loading door. "Found me a Lombard!" he sang out. "Scribbling at his desk, he was!" He tugged a quill pen from his hair and waved it like a trophy. He darted inside, and for a moment the opening was empty, lit by the garish torchlight from within. Then a man was pushed into view. White-haired, he was dressed in a long, black gown. He stood still and quiet, his hands behind him. The boy took a fistful of the man's hair and jerked his head back, and the man twisted slightly, revealing a scarlet cord trussing his wrists.

Gaping up, Honor crammed herself against the tavern door until its latch gouged her shoulder.

"Can't see him," a man in the street grouched.

The boy under the gable shoved the man, forcing him to step up onto the sill where he swayed unsteadily.

"No finery on him," the man below scoffed. "Where's his Lombard silks and jewels?"

"Hold on." The boy began draping necklaces over the head of his hostage and layering brightly coloured scarves around his neck. "There. Now he's a Turk."

This brought laughter from below. The boy giggled and

piled on more trinkets. His sleeve snagged on one of the chains around the man's neck. Annoyed, the boy yanked free his sleeve, and the man scuffled forward to balance himself. His foot stubbed against an iron latch, and he fell. He plunged down, his gown rippling through the air. His body thudded onto the cobbles. He lay motionless. Silence, like a shroud cast out after him, settled over the watchers.

The toothless old man whined, "That's done it." He began raking in his bright spoons. "That boy'll hang, and the mayor's men'll be after us all."

"Shut your face," the boy snapped. "He's just a God-rotting Lombard." But within moments he and the others inside had sifted out into the street, joining the men who stood around the body. "Stupid old fart," the boy said. "If he'd just stood still . . ." He gave the body a savage kick.

Honor gasped. The boy caught the sound and wheeled. He squinted across at the murky tavern entrance. Honor wormed down the door, the back of her dress snagging on the rough wood. She squatted in the corner, heart pounding.

The boy motioned to a man with a torch. Together, they stalked to the tavern doorway. "Well, lookit here," the boy brayed over his shoulder. "A little spy." His grip burned Honor's wrist as he yanked her out. "Where'd you spring from, goblin?"

Though trembling, she dug in her heels. The boy grabbed her under the armpits, lifted her in the air and shook her roughly. "Speak up!" he said. She flinched at the blast of breath that stank of sour ale. He shook her again. "Be you English or a God-cursed foreigner?"

She didn't know how to answer. She wasn't sure what a foreigner was. Under the vise of his hands, her ribs felt on fire.

"Please, sir, I've only come to fetch home Ralph."

"And who the devil be Ralph?"

"My father's servant."

"A foreigner?"

"Aw, leave it," a man by the body called, preparing to leave.

Another said, "Gilbey's right. Mayor's men'll be coming. I'm off, too."

The boy set Honor down so harshly she staggered for balance. Wordlessly, men and boys gathered up their booty, leaving behind small piles of litter, and scuttled into the alleys. Their torchlight evaporated. Under the hiding moon the street went dark and cold. Papers fluttered. The faint, far-away bursts of shouts and shattering glass rolled over the rooftops then died in the air above Honor and the body. She looked across the street at it. It lay sprawled amongst the refuse, a black mound.

There was a moan. Honor's heart tightened. The sound had come from the body.

"Per favore . . . qualcuno . . . O! Per pietà!"

Honor stood still, afraid, unsure. She heard a scabbling on the cobbles. A dog was snuffling through the litter. It moved to the body and circled it.

The man did not move. "*Va! Va via!*" he gasped.

The dog seemed to sense his helplessness. It thrust its muzzle into the open neck of his gown.

"Per pietà-à-à!"

Without thinking, Honor sprang from the doorway. She snatched up a pewter goblet and hurled it. It struck the dog's hind leg. The dog yelped. She seized a pot and pitched it as well. The dog turned and bolted up the street.

"Who is there?" the man cried.

Honor came closer, cautiously, and stood over him. The moon sailed out from the cover of clouds, washing him with a cold, white light. Now she could see him clearly. He lay on his back on top of his bound arms. At his throat the scarves and necklaces were twined in a bright tangle. He did not move. His eyes were closed. His moans had stopped. Had he died? she wondered.

His eyelids sprang open. For a moment, man and child stared at one another.

"Thank you," he whispered. "The dog . . ." He stopped to cough.

"Do you hurt?" Honor asked.

A small smile tugged at his lips. "No hurt. Back is broken. Feel nothing . . ." His voice trailed. "*Muoro*. I am dying . . ."

If he's dying, she thought, how can he smile? But she realized what she must do. "Sir, I'll fetch a priest."

"No! No need!"

The sudden fierceness of his voice surprised her. She did not want to disobey him, but everyone knew that God would not allow a soul into heaven if it was filthy with unconfessed sin. "Sir," she said, marveling at his ignorance, "you must be shriven." She did not want him to burn in hell's fires forever.

"No," he insisted, faintly now. "Confession . . . priests . . . prayers to God . . . no good . . ."

She drew back. He was speaking blasphemy. Even a child knew that. But she noticed blood seeping from the corner of his mouth, dripping onto the cobbles like ink. Maybe dying is making him mad, she thought. Otherwise, how can he smile so? "Sir," she asked softly, "are you not afraid to die? And all alone?"

"You came to help me," he whispered. "When there was no one else, you came. What should I fear when I have *uno àngelo*—an angel—beside me?"

Honor stiffened at the sound of footsteps. The moon was masked again by clouds and she could not see far, but she could hear the low voices of men, their words indistinct.

The dying man heard them too. His body jerked once in a spasm. "Inside . . . my gown," he rasped. "*Piccolo àngelo* . . . take it." He was spitting blood. "Take it! Now!"

Honor kneeled and reached into his gown. She withdrew a slim book slightly larger than a man's hand.

"I wrote it," he said, his eyes glinting as if with joy, "for you."

"For me?" she asked, beguiled, though his comment made no sense, strangers as they were. She could not even read.

"But never . . . never show it to a priest!" He coughed. Honor winced as the warm mist of blood sprayed her hands. "You understand? Never . . . to a priest!"

"A secret?" she whispered.

Again, his lips formed a serene smile. "*Si, piccolo àngelo. A secret . . .*"

Blood bubbled out of his mouth. His head lolled. His dead eyes stared at her, wide open. But Honor felt no horror. Despite the violence done to him, his life had closed so peacefully.

"Somewhere 'round here . . ." It was a man's voice. Two dark forms were turning the corner of the ransacked house. Honor stuffed the book deep inside her wide sleeve and crouched. Looking across the body, she watched the men approach. They were kicking at the litter.

"You sure there was a purse on him?" one man muttered.

"I saw it at his belt," the other insisted. "When he fell."

"Well, find him and cut it. And let's be off."

"And his rings? Cut his rings, too?"

"Cut off his poxy balls, if you want, but get the purse."

The second man finally saw the body and shot out a finger. "There!"

They both hurried forward. A few paces from the body the second man stopped abruptly and held out his arm to stop the other. "Jesus, it's that sneaking girl."

Both men whipped out knives. They stepped toward her.

Honor jumped up, ready to bolt.

From behind her a thick arm swept around her waist and snatched her. Her body was jackknifed, facedown, and she could see only the heels of her abductor's boots. He bounded up the street, and she gasped for air, pinned against his thigh. She was joggled half a block before the man carrying her swung into an alley and halted. He hoisted her up roughly, his hands encircling her rib cage. Fierce with fear, she swung her fists at him with eyes closed, but he held her away easily.

"What do you think you're up to?" he cried.

Her eyes popped open. "Ralph!"

She threw her arms around his neck and pressed her face against the stubble of his cheek. "Oh, Ralph," she gulped,

"they were smashing the houses! And they pushed the foreigner man out the window, and he fell, all broken! And those robbers were going to kill me, and—"

"Hush, little mistress, I've got you now." He cupped one beefy hand around the back of her head and hugged her with the other. "You be safe now. Hush." He began walking quickly.

She held tight, drinking in the familiar smell of his battered leather jerkin and feeling safe, indeed, in his embrace. Ralph Pepperton, at nineteen, was over six feet tall and built like a tree trunk. Honor had been told by her nurse, Margaret—with no little pride—that Ralph had never lost a fight. On Lady Day, when he had vaulted the neighbor's garden wall to visit the pretty scullery maid there, a brawl with two of that household's retainers had ensued, and the servants on both sides had bet money on Ralph. "An ox on two feet," Honor's father had called Ralph that day, and beamed as he pocketed his own winnings.

Ralph was heading up the dark alley, making for the glow of torches on the broad thoroughfare of Cheapside. "What a night," he growled, kicking through the garbage of dung and bones. "May Day's for fun, right enough, but this time the 'prentices have gone too far. They've burst Newgate jail and loosed the prisoners. And now they're off to fire the houses on Lombard Street. I watched some hound a Frenchman up the belfry of St. Mary's like a rat before they dragged him down and set on him."

He talked on as if to soothe her, though his voice was tight with indignation. "I grant the 'prentices have some cause to hate the strangers, but Sweet Jesu, there be some mighty sins committed this night. And they'll pay for it, sure as there's eel pie at Lent. But never fear, little mistress," he murmured, "you be safe with me."

She hugged him with all her might, but when he squeezed her in return she flinched, still tender from the apprentice's rough handling. Ralph stopped. Beneath a window where a candle flickered he pried her away from his neck and quickly examined her muddy face and arms. His voice was harsh

with an anger she had never heard from him. "Whatever in God's good creation lured you out?" he said. "On this cursed night of all nights."

She pouted in silence and he hoisted her up as if to shake an answer from her.

"Stop that, Ralph Pepperton! I won't be shaken anymore!" Tears sprang to her eyes. "Let me go!"

Tenderly, he set her again in the crook of his arm. But his scowl remained firm. "Well?"

She glared at him, her arms folded over her chest. "I came out for *you*! And I don't see why you should be angry when I only came to save you."

"Save me?" he blustered.

"Yes. Master Ellsworth said he'd skin you alive if he found you'd left the house." Ellsworth was her father's chamberlain. After curfew, she had seen him prowling the house for absent servants, thwacking his stick ominously against his shin. "He was in a terrible fume. And I knew you'd left. I heard you at the kitchen door this afternoon, telling the baker's 'prentice you'd meet him later at the sign of the Ploughman's Rest."

"Do you mean you wriggled out of your bed, away from old Margaret, and came out to the Ploughman's . . . for *me*?"

"Yes. But I got lost." She bit her lip, remembering the fearful hours of wandering, then the mob, the flames, and the white-haired man falling to his death. "Oh, Ralph . . ." she said, fighting back tears, "it was only because of Master Ellsworth with his stick . . ."

Ralph's scowl had already softened, although he kept his voice stern. "Master Ellsworth and his stick be my lookout, mistress." He took her chin in his calloused hand and grinned. "But it be a kind little heart—and a brave one—that prompted you to do it."

She smiled back, loving him.

"Now," he said, stepping away from the wall, "we've got to get you back a-bed before Margaret wakes herself with her own snoring and finds you gone." He shook his head and

whistled through his teeth. "Maybe dunk you in a bucket first, for I swear you're more mud than maid."

She followed his gaze toward Cheapside where bright torchlight was now spilling partway down the alley. She could hear shouting there, too.

Ralph looked back over his shoulder, then frowned as if rejecting that route. "The alleys will be crawling with lousels," he muttered. He looked forward again at Cheapside and set his jaw. Hugging Honor in one arm, he unsheathed his dagger and strode up toward the light. Just before they reached the wide street he ducked into the shadows and halted. Honor twisted in his arms to look.

Two bands were squared off like small armies on a battlefield. One, a mob of twenty-odd apprentices—young men from about fourteen to twenty—was jeering at the other, a city delegation. Above the street, half-open shutters revealed candles, and nightcaps, and frightened faces.

The delegation was made up of three mounted aldermen—ineffectual-looking despite their fine velvets—who lurked behind a dozen foot-soldiers with pikes. In front of the soldiers, two more officials sat on horseback: a grizzled Sergeant of the Guard who wore half-armor, and a dark-haired man of middle age, unarmed and plainly dressed. The Sergeant's sword and steel breastplate glinted above the mob's torches.

"I warn you again," the Sergeant barked to the mob, "you are breaking the law."

"Pissing curfew," an apprentice yelled. "That's no real law."

Fuming, the Sergeant jerked a thumb at the simply dressed man beside him. "I'll take my instruction on the law from the Undersheriff here, Master Thomas More, not from rabble. Now, quit this place! Or end your days as gallows fruit."

A young man hefting a bloodied cudgel at the front of the mob strode up to the Sergeant's stallion. "And what about our grievance, then? What about the foreigners? There be

hundreds of the buggers, snatching the crusts from our mouths.”

“Aye,” another bleated from the ranks. “And a God-cursed lender from Mantua bled my master with interest of fifteen percent.”

“They infect the city with plague and palsy,” the young man beside the stallion cried back to his mates. “Burn their kennels down, I say!”

The apprentices stamped. Torches bobbed.

The Sergeant swung up his sword above the young man’s head. The air sighed with the sudden movement. “Sodden bastards,” he shouted. “Quit this place!”

Thomas More’s voice broke through. “Whoa, there!” His brown mare was dancing sideways. He jiggled awkwardly at the reins, but the animal, apparently ignoring him, cut between the young man and the Sergeant, forcing them apart.

“Pardon me, Sergeant,” More cried helplessly over his shoulder. “My horse is but green-broke.”

The mare capered forward through the no-man’s-land between the two camps, seemingly out of More’s control. It veered into the front rank of apprentices, and several had to stagger backwards out of its way.

“You there. Jamie Oates,” cried More. “Grab a-hold, boy.”

A yellow-haired fifteen-year-old dashed out of the mob and grappled the bridle near the horse’s bit. It settled instantly and stood still.

“I’m obliged to you, Jamie,” More said, displaying relief. The boy beamed up and respectfully touched his cap.

More dismounted, turned, and shrugged a final apology. Then, before the bewildered eyes of both groups, he led his suddenly calm horse to a water trough at the mouth of the alley and allowed it to drink.

Honor craned her neck to see as she and Ralph watched from the shadows.

Above the horse’s slurping Jamie let go a jittery giggle with a nod at the aldermen. “Master More, you’ll have that mare pissing in their lordships’ path.”

Nervous laughter rippled through the mob. The Sergeant,

the soldiers, and the aldermen kept a stony silence. Thomas More smiled indulgently at the boy. Then he eased himself up to stand on the rim of the trough. From this narrow platform he could be seen by all. "Young Jamie Oates here knows you can't keep a horse from pissing when it must," he called out with wry good humour. "Jamie, you're a quick, smart lad," he went on, still loud enough for all to hear. "You're apprenticed to Addison, are you not?"

"Aye, sir. Master Addison. Finest smith in Thames Street," the boy answered proudly.

More smiled. "Jamie's a credit to his master. He'll make a fine ironsmith himself one day." He paused for a moment while Jamie preened beside his friends.

"And when that day comes, Jamie," More continued courteously, "when you have apprentices of your own, what will you ask of them in return for the care you've given them? For their bed and board and instruction in a good trade, what's a fair return? Will you expect loyalty and diligence? Or faithlessness and insurrection?"

The boy's grin vanished.

A voice from the back of the mob shouted, "What good be his trade if foreigners take all the work?"

"Aye," cried another. "And you lawmen let them fleece us." Complaints rumbled.

More listened patiently, then held up his hands to ask for silence. "Jamie knows what kind of law I dispense. His master came before my court last month when a Flemish smelter claimed Addison had not paid him for a wagonload of iron. Jamie came to my court and gave testimony. Jamie, tell the men here what verdict I gave."

All eyes went to Jamie who was looking intently at the ground as if in search of a lost penny. More waited, his arms folded across his chest, his gray eyes gently fixed on the boy.

Jamie answered petulantly like an unwilling pupil. "Master More gave the victory to my master."

"And . . . ?" More coaxed.

"And he ordered the Fleming to pay my barge fare back to the workshop."

“And . . . ?”

Jamie’s face reddened. “And ordered him to . . . to stand me and my master a pot of ale at the Golden Dog.”

Waves of laughter broke out at the confession.

In the alley Ralph let out a snort of amusement. Honor had by this time wriggled out of his arms and clambered up onto his shoulder to get a better view, and she laughed as well, uncertain about what exactly had happened, but aware that, with nothing but his calm voice and words, Master More had made the rioters laugh and the soldiers smile. Even the fierce-looking Sergeant had lowered his sword.

“That lawyer’s wind has cooled them,” Ralph chuckled. He winced as Honor steadied herself with a handful of his hair, then he clasped her dangling ankles and whispered with a grin, “And if that mare of his be only green-broke, as he claims, then I’m the Duchess of Buckingham.”

“My friends,” More called out, suddenly earnest. “The Apostle urges obedience to authority. And I would not be in error if I told you that by raising arms tonight against the foreigners you have raised arms against God, and so endangered your immortal souls.”

Several apprentices crossed themselves.

“God has lent His office here on earth to the King,” More explained. “The foreigners dwell here with the King’s goodwill. So when you rise against the foreigners, you rise against the King. And when you rise against the King,”—he pointed heavenward—“what are you doing but rising against God?”

He let this heavy question hang in the air. Honor had a sudden vision of the young King Henry, the eighth of that name, kneeling before a jeweled altar and forlornly praying for his erring subjects, his head bowed under the weight of his jeweled crown.

When More spoke again his voice was gentle, reasonable. “Now, let us suppose that the King is merciful with all of you tonight. Let us say he does no more than banish you from the realm.”

Again he paused to let the full horror of such a sentence take hold.

"I ask you this: what country, after the disrespect for law that you have shown, would give you safe harbor? France? Flanders? Spain?" His eyebrows lifted in rhetorical expectation of an answer. "Say that some place *will* take you. Think now. In any land but England, it is you who would be called foreigners."

Several faces frowned at the dismaying paradox.

"Would you then want to find yourselves in a nation of such barbarity that the people would not allow you even a roof over your heads?" His voice rose to a crescendo of indignation. "A land where they whetted their knives against your throats, and spurned you like dogs?"

Honor looked over the top of Ralph's head at the subdued apprentices. They scratched their chins and glanced at one another, some ashamed, some bewildered. Again, she marveled at how Master More had worked such an astonishing change on them.

But the young man with the bloodied cudgel was unmoved. "Enough words," he shouted. He snatched up a large stone, and with a cry of, "God curse all poxy foreigners!" he pitched it. It struck the Sergeant's forehead. The Sergeant reeled back in his saddle, groping at the reins, blood trickling from the gash.

Both sides froze.

From a window a woman's voice shrilled, "You'll not murder the King's men!" She and her neighbors began pelting down a shower of boots and bones upon the apprentices. The Sergeant bellowed, "Down with them!" and led his men in a charge. Cudgels flew, splitting lips and noses. Thomas More, dismayed, stepped down and backed away.

Ralph's arm swung around Honor again. He toppled her over his shoulder like a bundle of cloth, edged around the fracas, and ran off down Cheapside.

By the time Ralph pushed through the gate of Christopher Larke's townhouse Honor was half asleep in his arms. Ralph hurried across the courtyard, and Honor stirred as he hushed the yapping dogs and headed for the kitchen door. There, under a hanging lantern, Ralph stopped to catch his breath. He lifted his face to let the breeze cool his sweat-dampened hair and shirt.

Honor winced at a pain in her side. She found its source, a hard corner of the little book inside her sleeve. She pulled the book out. Under the lamplight its blue leather cover swirled with gilt-tooled leaves and petals. The leather was spattered with dried droplets of blood. She looked up at Ralph. "The foreigner man gave me this," she whispered.

The book was fastened with two small brass clasps. She pried them up. Leaves of creamy, thick vellum fluttered, then settled open at the title page. Honor's eyes drifted below the incomprehensible letters to a drawing. It was a single, startlingly beautiful painting of a flower—a winding stem with toothed, oval leaves of spring green, and a blossom of four, joined petals. The petals burst out in glorious blue, a gay sky blue, bright and bold.

"Speedwell," Ralph whispered, smiling at the wildflower.

Honor's fingers traced over the elegant characters of the title as if she might absorb their meaning by touch. What mysteries did such a beautiful book have to tell? she wondered. "*Never show it to a priest!*" the foreign man had warned, and then he had smiled, though he knew he was dying. Did his book hold some secret that had made him smile like that? Her eyes were drawn back to the flower, so fresh and lifelike beneath her stare. "Speedwell," she repeated softly, and the blossom seemed almost to nod, as if trembling under her breath.

"Peppers," Honor declared suddenly, looking Ralph in the eye, "I'm going to learn to read."

He frowned. "Reading be for priests and clerks, not for ladies, mistress." He clamped her nose between his knuckles and whispered with mock anger, "And what's this 'Peppers,'

if you please? That name was only for your lady mother to use, God rest her soul. Not wild little wenches like you." Honor squirmed, trying to pry her nose out from his grip, and she giggled when he finally pretended that she had beaten him and won free.

The kitchen door burst open. Honor's stout nurse, Margaret, gasped. "You're here!" She was disheveled and bleary-eyed. "Oh, little mistress, we've been looking everywhere. It's your father. Struck with the Sweat, he is."

Her voice came high and frightened as she crossed herself. "Blessed Jesu, Ralph, the master lies a-dying!"

Honor's father was writhing on his bed.

She stood near the doorway of the darkened chamber, Margaret on one side of her, Ralph on the other. Ralph tightly held her hand. Servants huddled along the walls. Some held apron corners or cloths to their noses to block the reek of putrid sweat.

Honor knew about the sweating sickness. It had killed her only other close relatives, two uncles. It frequently struck London in spring, and everyone dreaded it for the appalling swiftness of the death it usually brought. "Merry at dinner, dead at supper," she'd often heard the servants murmur. But they had meant the sweating sickness in other people's houses. Now, it was here, in hers.

On the pillow, her father's face was a stranger's face. His fair hair was dark with sweat. Red blotches mottled his cheeks. His eyes, which she had seen shed tears only when he laughed too hard, were seeping a milky discharge. He was moaning softly.

A priest she had never seen before stood by the bed. It was clear he was a muscular young man, but his broad back was to her and she could not see his face. On the table beside him a single candle guttered, and its light glinted in a crescent along the top of his bald crown, shaved to create his priest's tonsure. Below it, a fringe of black hair hung raggedly

over his ears. The hem of his threadbare black cassock was crusted with mud. His scuffed boots had dropped clumps of horse dung onto the floor rushes.

“Who is he?” Ralph whispered to Margaret.

“Name’s Father Bastwick,” she whispered back. “The priest’s new curate at Nettlecombe. Dog-poor, as you can see. He just rode in, out of the night,” she said, wringing her hands. “He’s been badgering the master for the corpse present.”

Honor understood the fear in Margaret’s voice. When Honor’s mother had died ten months before at their manor of Nettlecombe in Somerset, the old parish priest had requested the embroidered coffin cloth for his mortuary fee—the “corpse present”—as was his right. Unreasonable in grief, her father had refused. The priest denounced him from the pulpit. Her father had remained stubborn, and the feud had festered all these months.

The young priest at the bedside suddenly said angrily, “By all the laws of custom and decree, you owe this debt to Holy Church.”

Honor’s fingers tightened into a ball inside Ralph’s hand.

Larke’s gaze wandered, unfocused. “Father,” he said through labored breaths, “never mind . . . all that. I ask you only . . . hear my confession. Prepare me . . . to meet my God.”

“I marvel at your blasphemous intransigence, man,” the priest replied. “The amount is a trifle to you. The sapphire ring you wear would more than suffice. Pay the mortuary now. It is a surety against absolution of your sins.”

“Never!” Larke cried with sudden violence. “No more grasping priests. You’re vultures, all. Get out!” Sapped by his outburst, his head lolled on the sweat-stained pillow.

“Never?” Bastwick’s voice was steel. “Never, Master Larke, is a very long time.”

He snatched up the candle with a vehemence that made the flame shrink and twist as if in terror. He strode to the middle of the room and raised the candle high in his outstretched arm. He plucked the silver crucifix from his chest. Drawing its chain over his head, he thrust it up also so that his arms formed a V above his head. The servants sucked in

horrified breath. They recognized the stance for excommunication.

"By the authority of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost," Bastwick intoned, "and of our Lady St. Mary, God's Mother in heaven, and of all the other virgins, and St. Michael and all the angels, and St. Peter and all the apostles, and St. Stephen and all the martyrs, and of all the holy saints of heaven, we accurse thee."

The servants dropped to their knees, crossing themselves.

"We ban and depart thee from all good deeds and prayers of Holy Church, and of all these saints, and damn thee unto the pain of hell."

"No!" Larke bolted upright.

"We curse thee by the authority of the court of Rome, within and without, sleeping or walking, going or sitting, standing or riding, lying above earth or under earth, speaking and crying and drinking, in wood, in water, in field, in town."

"No!" Larke was thrashing his way out of the sheets. He thudded onto the floor. He crawled towards Bastwick, whimpering. Honor lurched to go to him, but Ralph held her back. She thought his grip would crush her hand.

The V of Bastwick's outstretched arms glinted at either end with flame and silver. "Accurse him Father and Son and Holy Ghost. Accurse him, angels and archangels and all the nine orders of heaven. Accurse him, patriarchs and prophets and apostles and all God's holy disciples, and all holy innocents, martyrs, confessors, virgins, monks, canons, and priests. Let him have no mass or matins, nor none other good prayers that be done in Holy Church."

Grunting across the floor, Larke reached Bastwick's feet. "No! I beg you . . ." Sobs choked him.

"Let the pains of hell be his mead with Judas that betrayed our Lord Jesus Christ. And let him be cast forever out of the book of life." Bastwick threw down the candle, extinguishing it, and spat on the ground beside Larke to complete the anathema. "Fiat. Fiat. Amen."

Larke moaned and clawed at the hem of the priest's cas-

sock. Honor could not bear it. She broke free and ran to her father's bowed back and threw herself on it, her arms around his neck.

Larke's head snapped up. "The demons!" he screamed, delirious. "The demons are on me!" He clawed at the weight on his back to rid himself of the devils, and threw Honor to the floor. Gasping, she caught his eyes—yellow, bloodshot, wild with terror—and she saw he did not know her. He let out a harrowing yelp and grappled Bastwick's legs, weeping. His weeping turned to convulsive choking. He gasped. Breath would not come. His fingers clawed at his throat. Blood engorged his face. His mouth opened and closed in wordless horror. His fingers petrified into a sudden rigor and he fell to the floor, dead.

Bastwick looked down at the body. He bent over and lifted the lifeless hand. He pried off the sapphire ring, then said to the dead man, as if sealing a bargain agreeable to both parties, "This jewel, as I told you, will suffice." He closed his fist around the ring, turned, and walked toward the door.

Margaret ran forward and snatched up Honor and clutched her to her bosom. "Blessed Jesu, little mistress, what's to become of you now?"

Bastwick whirled around. "Who's this child?" he demanded.

"The master's only babe, Father," Margaret wailed. "And what's to become of her now?"

Bastwick did not answer. But he fixed his stare on Honor as if discovering a thing he had been searching for. She stared back, straight into the brilliant, black eyes that bored into hers.

Jerome Bastwick studied the sapphire ring on his finger and shut out the morning tavern voices around him. Outside the tavern, the city streets were uncharacteristically quiet; the night's rioting had been quelled by the Earl of Surrey who had marched troops into the city in the early hours. But

Bastwick did not concern himself with the lull outside nor the voices inside that murmured over the night's events. He was absorbed by the ring. He twisted it on his finger, entranced by its beauty as pale sunlight from the window struck various hues of purple fire over the jewel's facets.

A yapping whippet bitch scabbled past him. Bastwick lifted his head to reality: to the half-dozen men in the loft cursing over a cockfight; to the reek of the floor rushes, spongily matted with ale dregs and spittle, and rank with decaying fish and dog urine; to the scratch of fingernails against stubble coming from his broken-toothed companion across the table. Over the breakfast remains of beef and bread, Sir Guy Tyrell was considering the bargain Bastwick had just proposed. A dangerous bargain, but one that held sweet promise for them both.

"You're sure there's no boy?" Tyrell asked skeptically. Using the tip of the dagger that served as his eating knife, he picked a fragment of beef from between his chipped, yellow teeth. "No heir to spring up later and mar all?"

Bastwick shook his head confidently. "I assure you, the girl is sole heiress."

"And you really can hoodwink those poxy clerks at the Court of Wards? Confound 'em with papers in your Latin mumbo jumbo? The stewards too? It's a risk . . ." Tyrell broke off, his face darkening with mistrust over this area of expertise so far beyond his illiterate understanding. He lowered his voice, but his whisper was spiked with a threat. "Remember, priest, it's cheating the King you're talking of."

"*We* are talking of," Bastwick corrected him steadily.

The admonition brought bright red smudges of anger high on Tyrell's cheeks. "Aye," he snarled, "I mark my own hazard right clearly in this business. I mark which one of us will swing from the King's gibbet if we're found out. Not you. They can't hang a precious priest, can they?" With a sudden motion of menace he lifted his dagger and pressed its tip to the hollow of Bastwick's throat. Bastwick held his breath.

"But I swear to you now, man," Tyrell said, "blab of this to

anyone, ever, and before I hang I'll have you praying and whimpering for such a tidy end."

Bastwick remained calm. He had known the cash-starved Tyrell for barely twenty-four hours; the day before, they had struck up a conversation in a Westminster corridor as each waited with the milling gentlemen who came daily to pick up any crumb of patronage that fell from the table of Cardinal Wolsey. Both had left empty-handed, and they parted. But though the acquaintance was slight, Bastwick prided himself on his swift judgment of men. And when the scheme came to him, he was certain this chance of quick cash—the revenues of an heiress's estates, to which a guardian was entitled—was one Tyrell could not resist.

"You say true, sir, about the risk—*my* risk—in managing the clerks, and the estate stewards," Bastwick said sternly. "You cannot do without me."

Tyrell's eyes hardened. He held the blade rigid at Bastwick's throat.

Bastwick did not flinch. His eyes locked with Tyrell's. "Therefore, my lord," he went on, "you must guarantee me the benefice."

Tyrell held the right to appoint a priest to a benefice in the west country parish where he was lord. The thought of it made Bastwick's heart race with joy despite Tyrell's dagger. His own benefice! With fat tithes, and rents from the glebe lands he would control! It was far beyond anything he could hope for from the miserly vicar of Nettlecombe. The old vicar lived high and dined with the Bishop, while he, Bastwick, scraped by on a pittance as his curate. He deserved better. He silently cursed his peasant background for keeping him in such servility. Still, he reminded himself, the abbot who had seen promise enough in him to educate him had schooled him well in what was possible: the Church was the one institution that cared more for a man's ability than his blood. Had not the great Cardinal Wolsey himself risen from his father's base butcher's shop? The cardinal—so rich, they said, he had fragrant imported herbs strewn over his palace floors twice a day. The cardinal—Chancellor of the

realm, the second most powerful man in England, right hand to the King.

"Alright, priest," Tyrell growled, drawing back his dagger and sheathing it. "Profit's good. And we share the risk. We are agreed."

Bastwick relaxed. He noticed again the light dancing over the jewel on his finger. Yes, he thought jubilantly, a man of ability needs only the will to plant his foot firmly on the steps that will lead him up to glory.

The Larke household stumbled through the day following the master's death. Honor sat close to Ralph beside the laid-out body of her father and tried to listen to what Master Ellsworth was telling her, but his words were all a jumble to her. He spoke of her father's estates, of the King's Court of Wards at Westminster, of gentlemen who would soon be bidding there for her wardship. She understood little of it. In the hushed bedchamber that smelled of death, she hung onto Ralph's hand.

That evening, as she and Ralph crossed the courtyard to join the mourning household already at vespers in the family chapel, horsemen clattered through the gate. Honor saw Father Bastwick riding at the head of the band. He pointed to her. "That's the girl," he said.

The broken-toothed lord beside him ordered one of his men to seize her. The henchman dismounted.

Honor darted behind Ralph. Shielding her, Ralph called to Bastwick, "What's this about, Father?"

"Let her go. This is Sir Guy Tyrell. The girl is his ward now."

"What? Can the Court of Wards have judged so soon?"

"Do you question the King's justice, man?" Bastwick asked witheringly.

"Not I, Father," said Ralph. "If this *be* the King's justice."

"Ha," the lord snorted, "all will be legal enough once I marry her to my boy, eh, priest?"

Honor, pressing close to Ralph, could feel his muscles

tense. He stepped backwards, pushing her back as well. He looked at the priest, "And what reward be in this unholy bargain for you, Father?"

Honor saw the priest's black eyes flash at Ralph with anger.

"I tire of this fellow's prating," Tyrell growled. He signaled to his other men. They dismounted and stalked toward Ralph.

Ralph fought, but he could not prevail over four men. They soon had him on his knees, his nose bleeding, his arms trussed.

The henchman did not find Honor easy to subdue. She kicked and bit and screamed for help. Bastwick glanced furtively around the empty courtyard. He jumped from his horse, pulled a knife from his boot, and strode over to Ralph. He lifted Ralph's head by the hair and held the knife at his throat. Ralph sucked in a breath. "Come tamely, girl," Bastwick said, "or that breath will be his last."

Honor stopped struggling. Quietly, she stepped forward. The henchman hoisted her up onto the gelding brought for her.

"We should take the fellow, too," Bastwick said to Tyrell. "I believe there's a bond between them that might serve us."

Tyrell nodded, understanding. As his men pushed Ralph toward the gelding, Tyrell warned him, "Any trouble from you, we'll carve a finger off her."

So the two prisoners rode together out through Larke's gates, each as the other's reluctant jailer. Behind her, Honor heard the servants in the chapel singing prayers. And in the house, lying forgotten under the pillow on her bed, was the foreigner's little book.

The party passed under the city walls at Newgate where apprentices were being hanged in pairs. They reached the Great Western Road, and soon they had left London—and the King's justice—far behind.