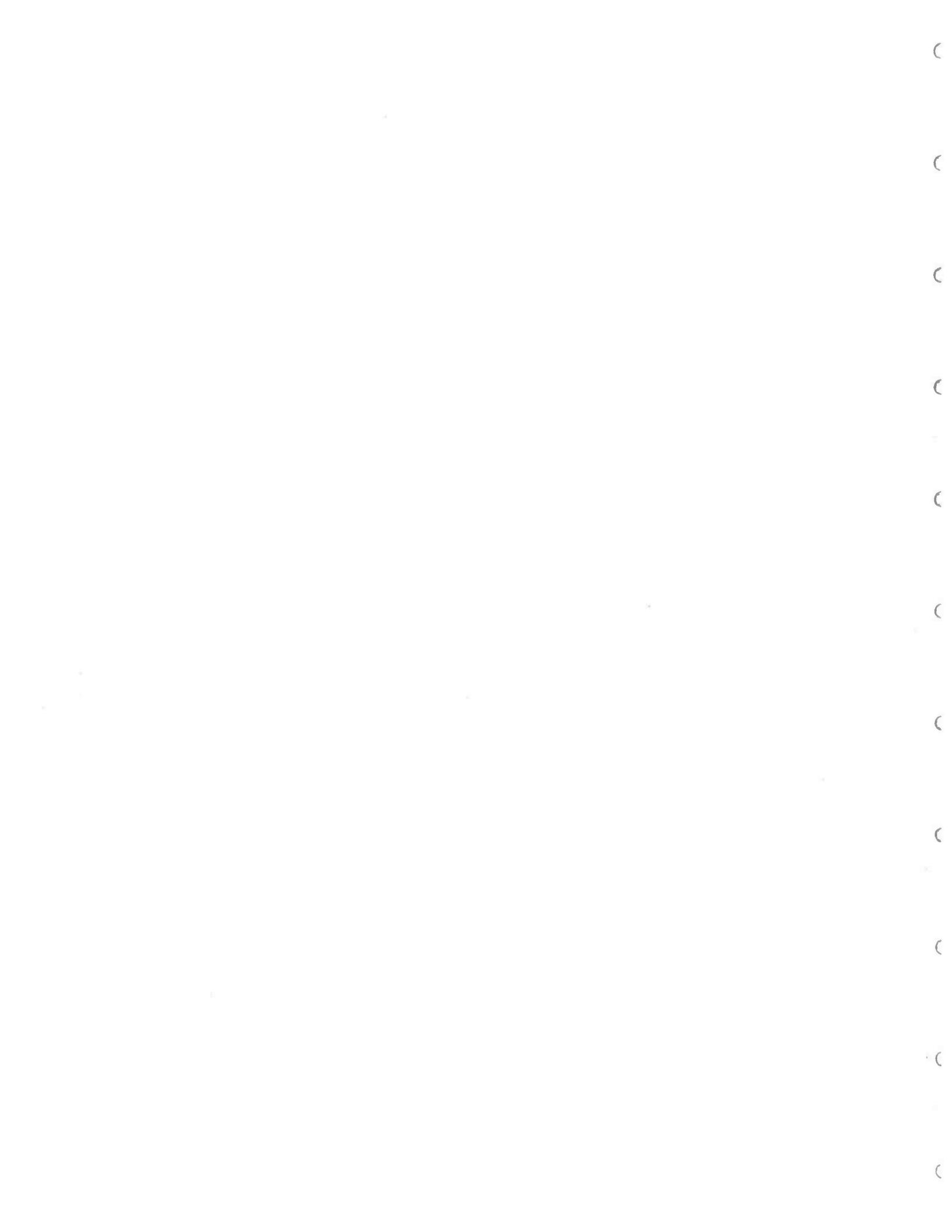


N O G R E A T E R L O V E

**(A short novel, based on a
true event in the lives of
some of our ancestors in the
sixteenth century in England)**

by

Nadine Choate Perkes



DEDICATION TO OUR ENGLISH ANCESTORS

Who were these ancestors of ours,
Through some of England's darkest hours,
On whom the world now glory show'rs
In retrospect?

Where on those shores did they reside?
East Anglia, o'er whom the tide
Of change swept old beliefs aside,
Old creeds shipwrecked?

When latter Middle Ages came
And Wycliffe, Tyndale rose in fame,
Did English bibles lay their claim
To Anglian heart?

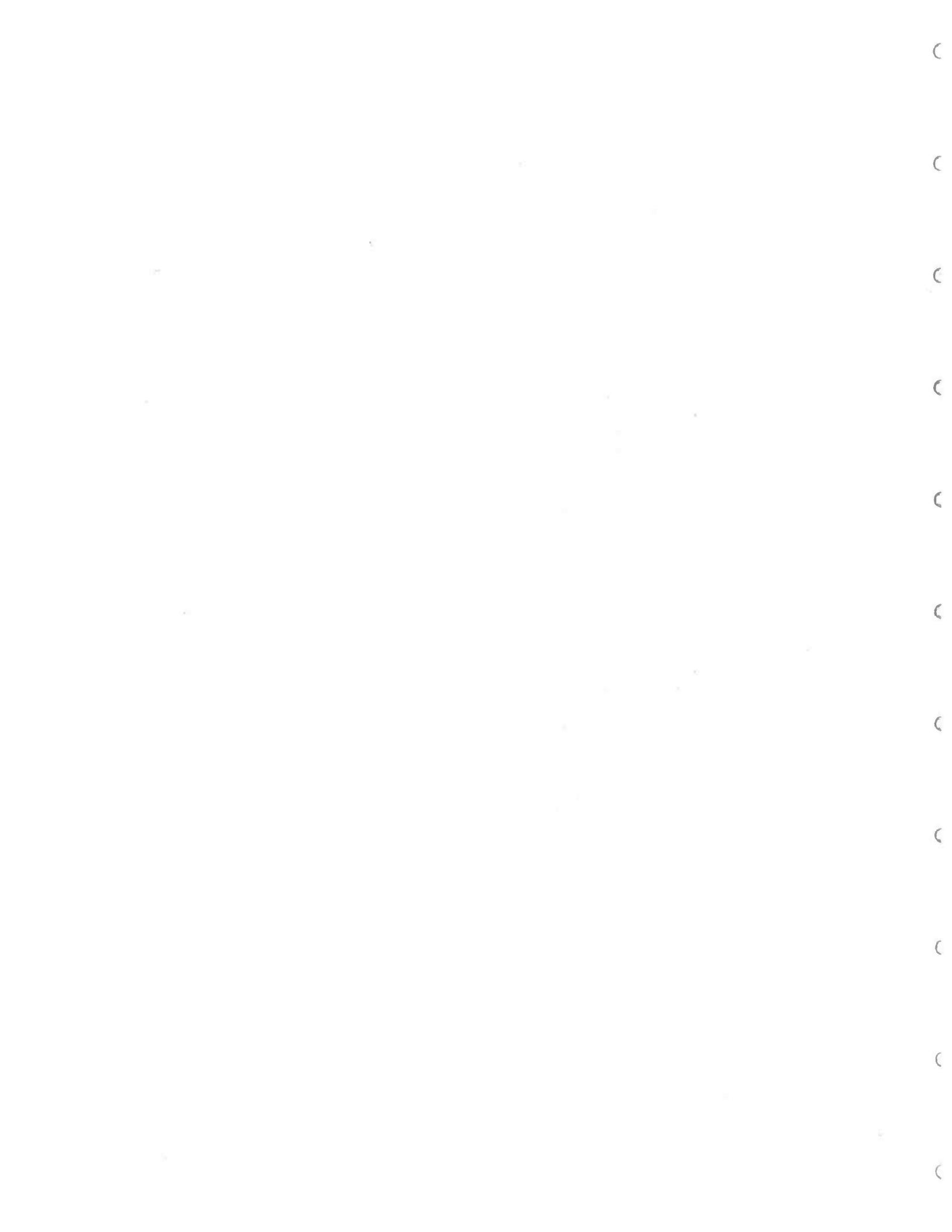
How could their hunger, thirst to know
Truth for themselves not cause to flow
New thoughts of God, religion, so
They'd drift apart?

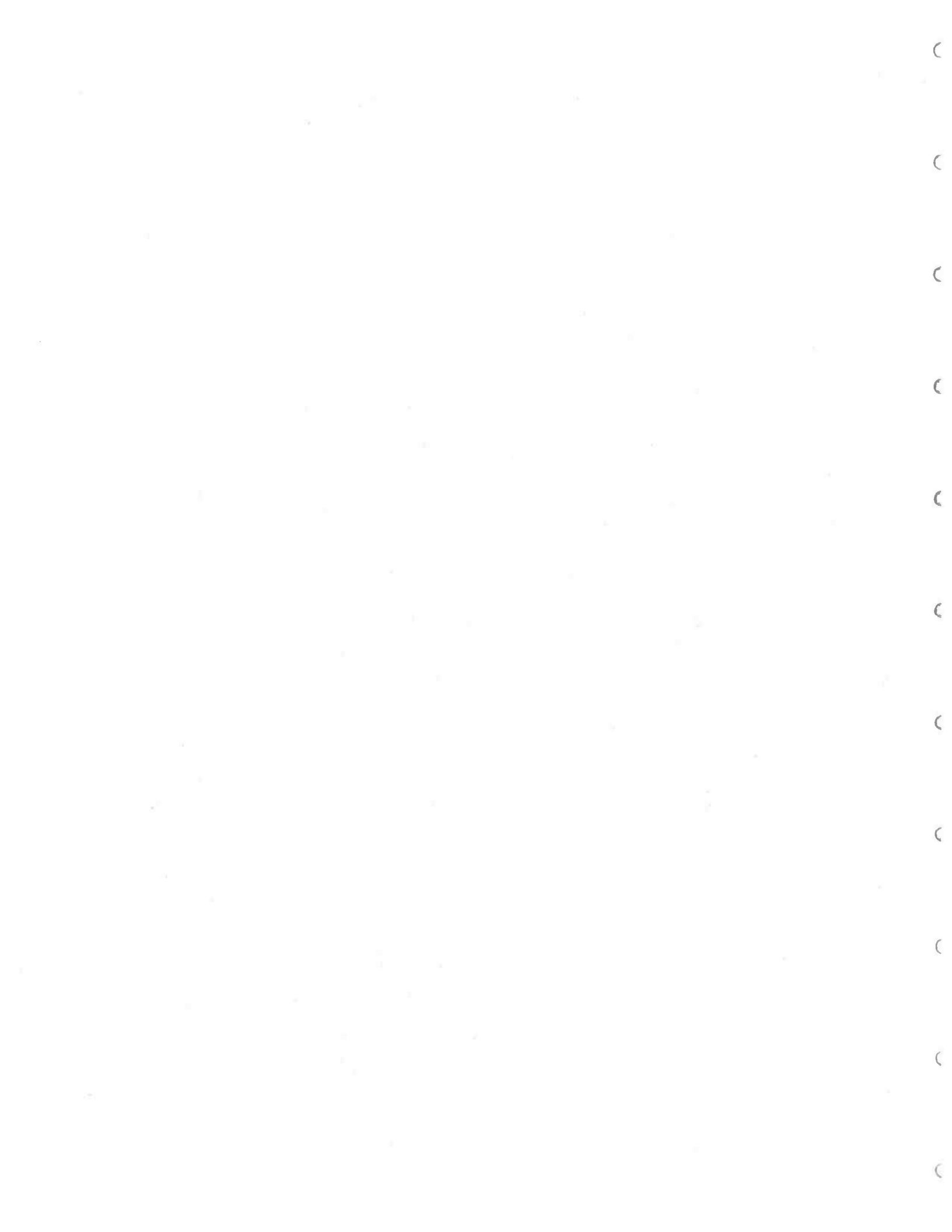
What made them on conviction stand--
Those Englishmen on English land--
No matter the great risk at hand?
They did not care.

Why were they willing thus to die
Without complaint, without a cry,
Without a single heartfelt sigh
Of deep despair?

The answer lies, at least for me,
In this: They knew their destiny
And lived their lives accordingly,
With faith divine.

The challenge is for me and you
To pay respect and honor due
And tell their story for them, too,
Which charge is mine.



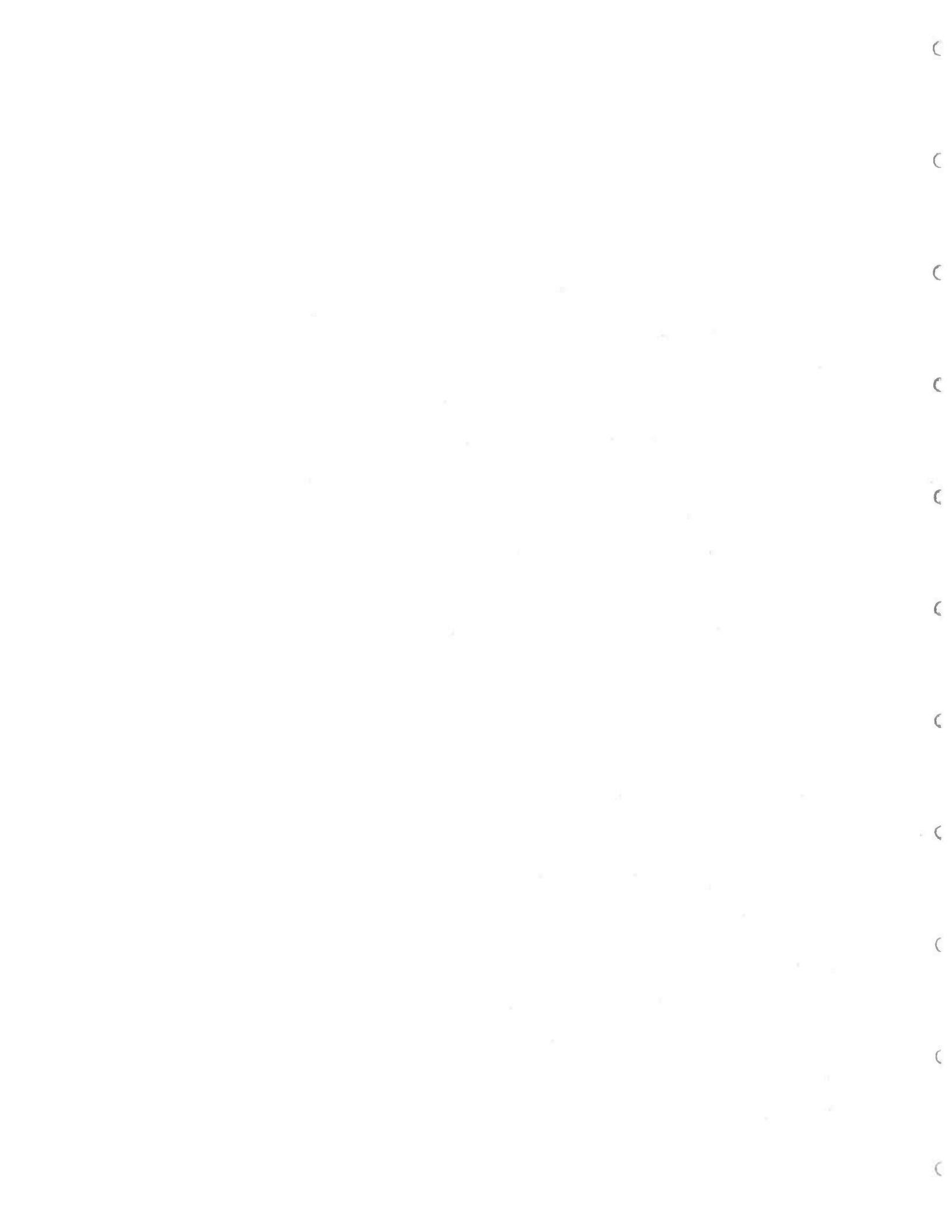


F O R E W O R D

It is necessary for me to differentiate between what is truth and what is fiction in "No Greater Love." Isabel Choate and her children and brother and sister-in-law were real people and twelfth and thirteenth great grandparents of those of us privileged to claim the surname of "Choate" in our ancestral heritage. The maid, Katherine, was also a real person; but she was not married to Isabel's son, Christopher, to our knowledge. The records of Birdbrook's St. Augustine church before the 1600's have not survived, and the Manor and Court Rolls are sketchy. We do have record of John Choate and Thomas Choate on the Lay Subsidy Rolls in 1524, and Thomas Choate's widow, Elizabeth, made a will in 1568.

The arrest at Birdbrook of the Choates and others, forty-one in all, for being "Wycliffites" and brought to the Fleet in London for trial and sentencing, was also real, as is John Stokesley, Bishop of London. This infamous man actually was guilty of burning three hundred non-conformists at the stake and delighted in boasting about it.

King Henry the Eighth, Anne Boleyn, Thomas Crammer, Thomas More, and Hans Holbein are historical figures of that time period. John Rogers, ancestor of my good friend and neighbor, Cathryn McKibbon Nielsen, was living and preaching in London in 1533 and did translate the entire bible into English before

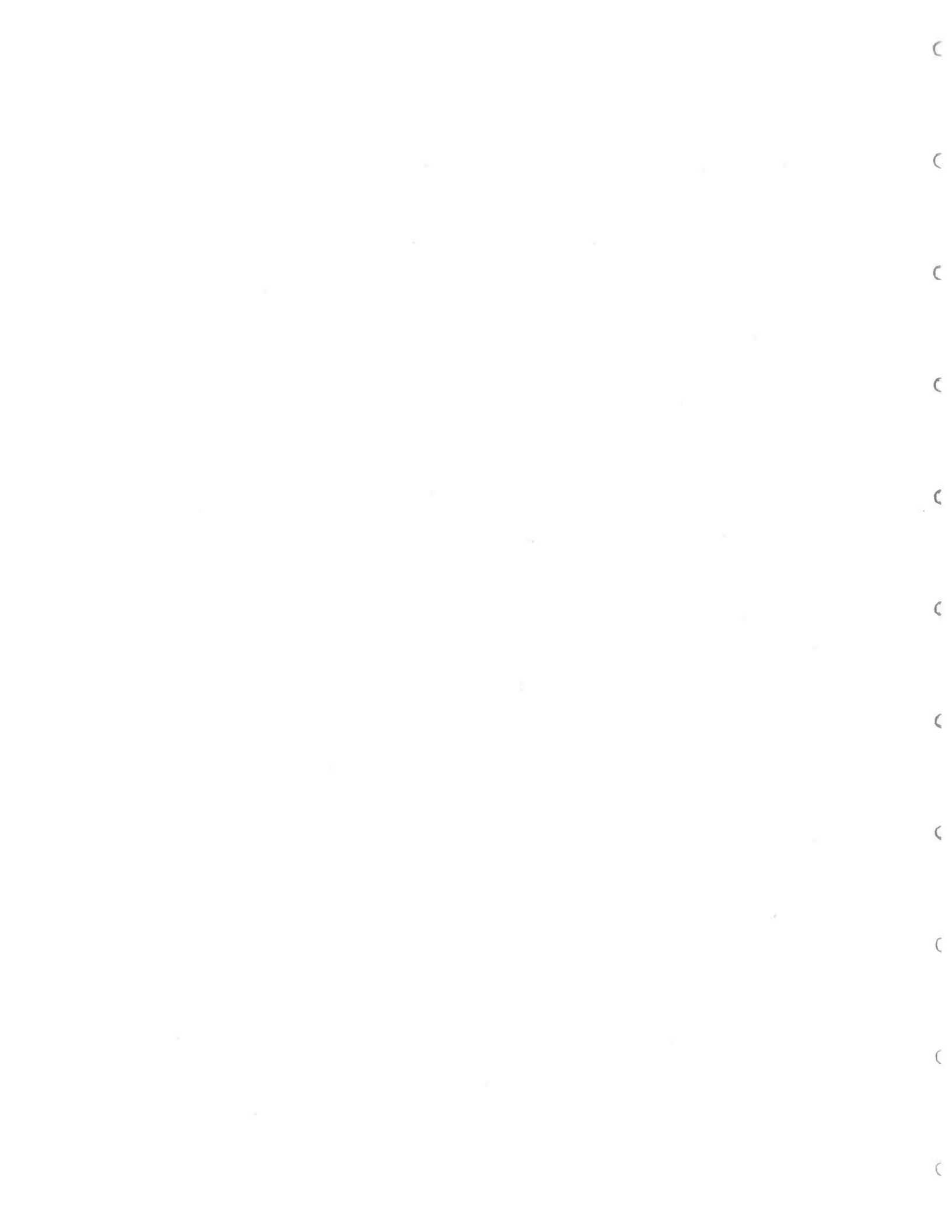


his martyrdom, which took place during the reign of Bloody Mary, Henry the Eighth's daughter by Catherine of Aragon, whom he divorced in order to marry Anne Boleyn.

Eagles-Trudge-Over-the-World, whose real name is unknown, may not have been living as early as 1533; but if not he, someone else had to have been distributing New Testaments printed in English and holding the conventicles for converts to non-conformism in England.

Fleet Prison was indeed a castle and the property of the de Laveland family from the time of the Norman conquest at the Battle of Hastings. Some of the wardens were women who had inherited the property. The "Rules of the Fleet" are taken from a later date, but they are likely similar to those of an earlier time period. The unusual laxity of the Fleet, wherein prisoners were allowed to come and go as they pleased, or as they could afford to, was due to the prison generally housing only those convicted of what we would consider misdemeanors. One member of the nobility was sent there for making a disparaging remark about another nobleman who had influence with the king. The majority of the inmates in the Fleet, however, were debtors.

With few exceptions, "No Greater Love" is the product of my imagination and the result of research in the history of this turbulent time in England, particularly in East Anglia. I have tried to portray all of the characters as my readings have led



me to believe they would think and talk and act. In today's world, it is difficult to understand the dedication of the pioneers of English non-conformism; but to a great extent, this dedication--which modern society would term fanaticism--prepared the way for the freedom of religion we now enjoy.

I have taken the opportunity to scatter throughout the tale, in the form of minor characters, names of ancestors other than Choates. Only members of my family will recognize them and will, I hope, find pleasure in doing so. They will also recognize in the dream of John Choate Sr., related by his son, Christopher, the similarity to one that our grandmother, William Ann (Quarles) Choate, had prior to the birth of our father, Charles Nebeker Choate.

Nadine Choate Perkes



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Although the English histories and encyclopedias I consulted over the two years spent in writing NO GREATER LOVE are too numerous to list, the following were of particular importance:

Clark, Henry William 1869 HISTORY OF ENGLISH NONCONFORMITY FROM WYCLIFFE TO THE CLOSE OF THE 19TH CENTURY
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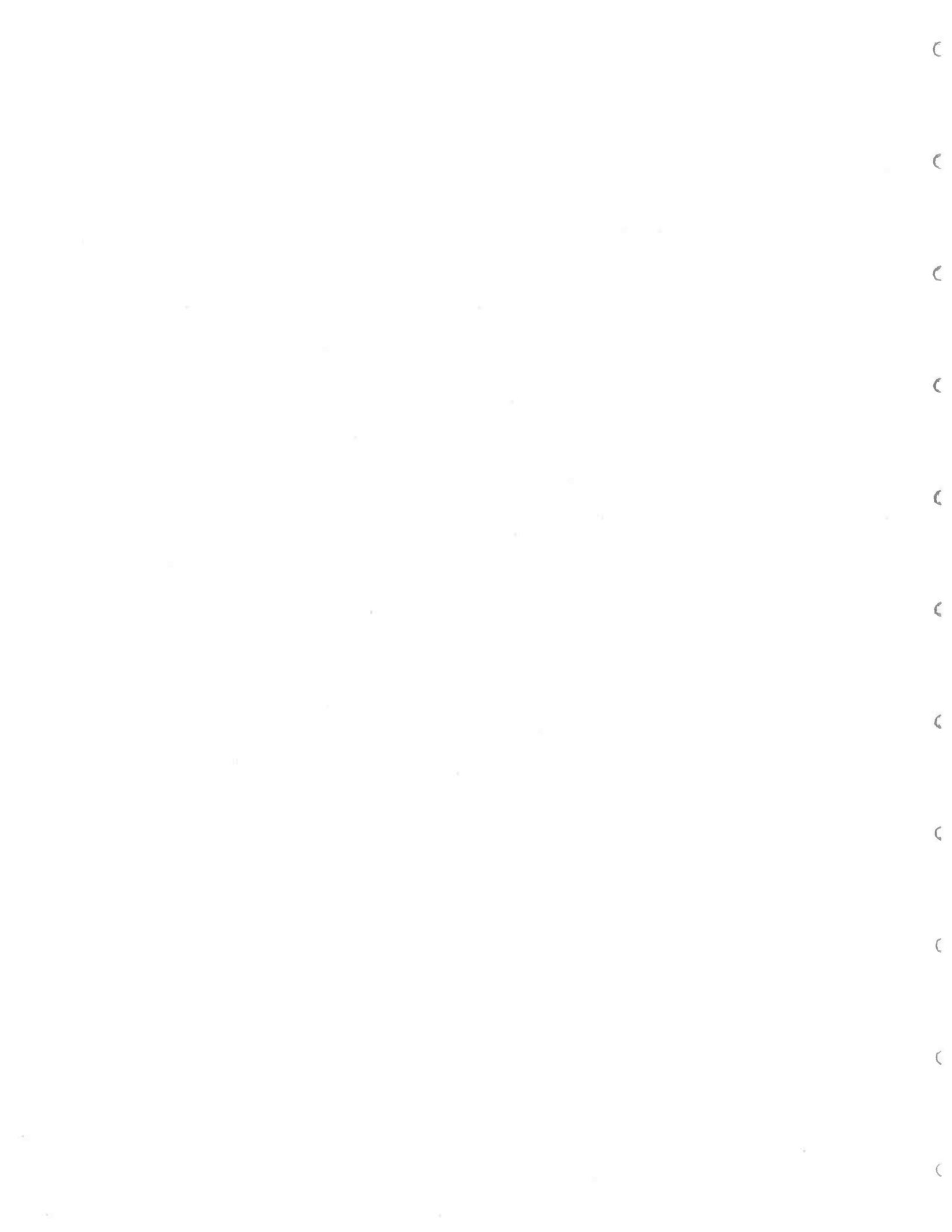
Pelgrave-Moore, Patrick Thomas UNDERSTANDING THE HISTORY AND RECORDS OF NONCONFORMITY Norwich, Eng. Elvery Dowers Pub. 1939

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THE FIRST INTERVIEW- 1 Sept 1533- Boreham, Essex, England

The king stood in front of the open window, lost in thought, for several minutes. He was gazing out beyond the beautiful grounds of New Hall Manor, the home of the Boleyns, toward the forest area. He had spent the entire morning there very happily engaged in his favorite sport of falconry.

Still worrying about the status of his beloved Anne, wondered Thomas Crammer, the young Archbishop of Canterbury, who had been called to the royal bedchamber. Thomas, a brilliant Cambridge scholar, had been given the appointment recently because he had attracted the king's attention by suggesting His Majesty should seek the combined wisdom of the major European universities on the philosophical and legal issues of his proposed divorce of Catherine for her failure to provide a male heir to the throne.

Yet the king's first words, when he finally turned from the window and acknowledged the presence of Thomas in the room, were not of Anne or indeed of anything related to his marital problems.

"Parliament," said His Majesty, "has been in session for more than two years now, after a six-year absence. They have been debating some very serious religious questions, which affect the future of the throne and of England. You are acquainted with these?"

"I believe so, Sire," Thomas replied. "The followers of the so-called reformers, Wycliffe and Tyndale, have engaged in numerous acts of heresy, desecrating churches and monasteries and--"

"Yes, yes," the king impatiently interrupted, "but the real problem is that the annual tithe of the revenues of these institutions, according to my political advisor, Thomas Cromwell, is in excess of £200,000. And the entire sum is paid to the church in Rome. Not one shilling goes to the Royal Treasury! This is monstrous, considering how sadly it has become depleted owing to our successful military campaigns abroad."

The archbishop, puzzled as to what role he was expected to play in all this, asked "Do you wish me to divert part of these revenues so that they may be placed in the Treasury, Sire?"

"Of course not," His Majesty sharply retorted. "I am merely asking for your support for a law shortly to be enacted by Parliament in the January to March session next year. It is to be entitled the 'Conditional Restraint of Annotes.' The objective is to restrain the payment of the 'first fruits' or tithes from the profits of churches and monasteries to Rome."

"I will do what I can, Your Majesty," said Thomas. "But you do understand the difficulties because so many divergent attitudes exist among the clergy about religious matters."

"On all matters, My Good Fellow." The king chuckled. "Where there are ten Englishmen gathered together for discussion, there will always be eleven opinions expressed. Indomitable courage and independence are inherent in the thinking of my subjects--perfect for all enterprises of great daring, but the very devil for consensus."

"But now that we, at least, are agreed," he continued, "let's turn to something of a more personal nature and interest to me. I have in hand answers from the European universities, including this one that comes from Heidelberg." He handed it to the archbishop. "You may peruse it at your leisure. They all lean in favor of my divorcing Catherine and marrying Anne but will not commit themselves to speak out for fear of the repercussions--namely, excommunication by His Holiness the Pope."

King Henry began pacing the floor, obviously exercised by the recollection of the many obstacles which had stood in the path of his desire to be master of his own destiny. The years of frustrating appeals to Rome, and the opposition of his former friend and supporter, Sir Thomas More, had taken their toll on this most independent of all Englishmen.

"Your arguments are sound, Sire," said Thomas. "Perhaps you will have to bypass the authority of the Church and ignore the instructions you have received. I would be very pleased to perform the ceremony uniting you and Mistress Anne."

The king considered this, then said "We may come to that; but now is the time, I believe, for me to create Anne the Marquess of Pembroke and hereafter--to all intents and purposes--treat her openly as if she is the queen. We shall give her the royal title here at New Hall Manor today."

Thus Anne Boleyn became a member of the royal family five months prior to the time she and King Henry the Eighth were married in a secret ceremony the last of January, 1533. And Parliament had not only passed the law of the "Restraint of Annotes," but also the "Restraint of Appeals." This law made mandatory that all future appeals go to English courts rather than to Rome and became the embodiment of the legal principle of the Reformation in England.

ONE

April 1533

"Sure and it'll be daylight soon, Ma'am," said the young maid, Katherine, in her lilting Irish brogue as she gently placed a hand on her mistress's arm. "You'd best be layin' aside your readin' in case the old curate decides to make an early mornin' call."

"Thank you, Katherine," said Isabel, who had been sitting at the rough-hewn kitchen table for the past two hours, deep in study of the book which lay open before her. The candle glow, reflecting on her pleasant features, formed a halo around her wimple, which contrasted with the somberness of her widow's attire. Her golden blond hair and violet-blue eyes gave her a sweet, fragile look which belied her forty-three years.

"Ma'am," urged the maid, a worried look on her face, "please be makin' haste."

Isabel sighed as she reluctantly withdrew her gaze from the beautiful manuscript printing of John Wycliffe and closed the New Testament. She then blew out the candle and hurriedly gathered the candlestick and her precious volume and walked over to the hearth, where Katherine was now preparing their breakfast. She put them in a recessed cupboard above the fireplace. As she replaced the bricks that covered the opening to the cupboard, she glanced down at the hearth. The logs in the

grate were burning low. It was difficult to keep warm in the spacious country kitchen with its high oak-beamed ceiling, she thought, shivering and drawing her heavy wool shawl tightly around her shoulders.

"Want I should fetch more wood for the fireplace, Ma'am?" asked the young woman. "The april air's a mite nippy, and the boys'll be fair frozen comin' in from seein' to the livestock."

"Yes, Dear." Isabel smiled at her pretty maid-companion, aware that her burnished copper curls and merry green eyes attracted the interest of one of the boys--her eldest son, Christopher. "But take the furlined cloak from the scullery and don't try to carry any of those heavy logs."

Katherine agreed. She left the hearth and ducked beneath a low doorway at the side of the room. A moment later, she emerged wearing a dark brown cloak over her gray wool dress and linen apron. Its hood all but covered her cap and the long red ringlets which cascaded over her back and shoulders.

Isabel watched her as she went outside, wondering what future worries were in store for Christopher and Katherine. They were each twenty-one, the same age as she and John when they married in 1511. But things were not as easy as they had been for non-conformists in England. More and more restrictions were being imposed upon them. They were refused permission to marry in parish church by the parish priest, the only recognized authority for performing marriage ceremonies.

The established church not only frowned upon non-conformists' beliefs, but also denied them freedom to worship as they chose. Local priests made their lives miserable--spying on them in their homes, watching them wherever they went, and confiscating their bibles whenever they found them. Lately the situation was worsening. There were rumors of heavy fines and imprisonment, leading to burning at the stake. Isabel was also worried out her younger children: John Jr., age 18; Margaret, age 17; and the twins, William and Robert, age 13.

"I must not let discouragement weaken my faith or that of my family," she said aloud, shaking off her solemn thoughts. "It is important for their sakes to maintain a cheerful disposition during these trying times."

Isabel reached for a long wooden spoon that lay on top of the stone mantel and began to stir the porridge bubbling in one of the large black kettles that was suspended over the open fire. The boys would need a hearty breakfast before going out again to plant their barleycorn.

Springtime in Birdbrook parish! It had been spring twenty-two years ago when John Choate, yeoman farmer, brought her as his young bride from London to Essex County. Daughter of wealthy merchant, Hubbard Quarles, and his wife, Ann--whose childhood and youth were spent in developing her natural artistic abilities under the tutelage of some of the finest painting masters of the age--Isabel was unprepared for the rigors of farm life.

But Birdbrook captured her heart. She fell in love with the charming half-timbered cottage, as well as the surrounding green English countryside. Birds did indeed fill the air with their singing, while a brook rippled and flowed along a shady lane from the farmhouse to the parish church. With her artist eye, she was able to paint, then embroider, the scene on a tapestry for their parlor wall.

Isabel's eyes grew misty as she thought about John and their first meeting. He had come to London to sell his produce and, while there, attended a non-conformist conventicle held by the Wycliffites, the new protestant sect with which he shared some religious convictions. To the same meeting, came Isabel--resplendent in silks and jewels--to find out more about this recent movement causing such a stir among the people. She had come despite the express wish of her parents, who were devout Catholics, that she have nothing to do with non-conformism.

"We have the right to read the holy scriptures in our English language" the tall, handsome young man, dressed in homespun clothing, declared to the congregation. "How can we know the truth if we are not allowed to seek for it in the scriptures? How can we live Christian lives if we cannot study His life in the New Testament?"

John's ideas intrigued Isabel. His sincere, forthright manner won her respect and admiration. When the meeting adjourned and almost all of the others had gone, she remained and visited

with the owner of the home where the conventicle was held and waited while John and another young man engaged in deep discussion on a point of doctrine raised earlier in the evening. At length, their talk over, they came to bid farewell to their host and were introduced to Isabel.

The other young man was flattering in his admiration as he took the hand Isabel offered in greeting to his lips. John, however, seemed to barely glance at her, and his handshake was one of polite indifference. Isabel, who had always enjoyed great popularity, was piqued at his coolness.

"It is unusual," she suggested, "to meet a person as young as yourself who has so profound religious convictions and such comprehensive knowledge of the scriptures. Have you received an education in one of our famous English monasteries?"

"No," replied John, his half-smile giving the impression he was merely indulging her idle curiosity. "Anyone may employ his available time in study and learn whatever he wishes. I have simply used mine in the study of the New Testament, and my convictions have grown from that."

"While I," she angrily retorted, "have no doubt spent all my time in frivolous pursuits, I suppose?"

"My Dear Young Lady," said John, startled at her vehement response to his explanation and noting her heightened color. "I would never presume an insight into your manner of living nor

pass judgment in comparison with myself or another."

Why does he make me feel like a spoiled, foot-stomping child? Isabel wondered. No one has ever caused me to lose my temper and lash out in such a fashion before. I must get my emotions under control if I want to find out more about him and his wonderful ideas--and I do.

Isabel sighed and offered an apology. "Perhaps you have subconsciously judged me by my appearance." Her lovely violet-blue eyes pleaded with him for understanding.

"Perhaps I have," John admitted with a smile so radiant it warmed her heart and caused it to beat faster. "Forgive me for being so pompous. I'm sure your time is spent in a great many worthwhile endeavors."

"The truth is," said Isabel, "I have probably wasted much of it thus far in my life. A great deal of my time is devoted to painting and needlework. I fear I have neglected to pursue the more important things of a spiritual nature. But I do so much desire to learn for myself if that which you spoke of tonight is true. I have many questions about God I want to ask and have answered. When you told of the joy you have experienced reading the scriptures, my soul longed to feel that same joy."

Isabel held out her hands to express this longing, and John took them in his. A thrill of happiness coursed through her being at the contact, and the look in John's eyes told her the

attraction was mutual. In the space of an instant, the two veritable strangers had pledged their troth. Their destinies would be forever linked together.

She invited him to her home to meet her parents and to talk over his views with them. For the two weeks he remained in the city, they read the scriptures together and discussed their meaning. They took long walks along the banks of the Thames, pondering the spiritual questions which had troubled her for so long a time: Where did we come from? Why are we here? Where will we go when we leave this earthlife?

Their flourishing courtship dismayed her parents, who felt John might be a fortune-hunter. When the young couple decided to wed, they obtained her parents' consent only after signing a pre-nuptial agreement relinquishing Isabel's dower right to any of her father's estate. Yet the contract stipulated that any female offspring of their union would inherit in Isabel's place, provided she was allowed to be tutored in the arts and academics--as her mother had been--in London at their home. This clause in the agreement was fulfilled shortly after the death of John when their daughter, Margaret, then twelve years of age, went to live with the Quarles. It had been hard, for they missed her so.

Sounds of laughter interrupted Isabel's reverie as the door burst open and Katherine rushed in, ran over to the hearth, and let a bundle of wood fall down from her apron into the

low-burning embers. Christopher and John, their arms full of logs, followed her. They goodnaturedly scuffled as they tried to prevent each other from entering the cottage.

"There now, tis plain to see, Ma'am," Katherine breathlessly exclaimed to her mistress, who handed her the stirring spoon, "a mere slip of a girl is more than a match for a pair of big strong hooligans darin' her to be first!"

"What do you expect, Katydid?" asked a teasing Christopher, after he managed to break the impasse and precede John to the fireplace, where they were now piling their logs on either side of the grate. "We're a pair of half-starved hooligans whose strength would prevail if only our stomachs were full."

Katherine stopped ladling the porridge into earthenware bowls and with a twinkle in her eye, retorted "Isn't that just like himself? You'd best beware, Master Christopher, that all your teasin' ways may not be your undoing'. This Katydid is not above pourin' suet, instead of honey, over your porridge."

Christopher feigned a shudder at this promised vengeance and, while leaning down to kiss his mother on the forehead, reached out to pull his sweetheart's apron strings. He was not quick enough, however, for she had anticipated his move and turned toward the table carrying two bowls of steaming porridge.

"Where are the twins?" asked Isabel, missing her two youngest children who usually accompanied their older brothers in after

completing their early morning chores.

"Right here," William, one of the young men in question, answered from the doorway. "We would have beaten all three of you but we had to go slow to keep the milk from spilling!"

William and Robert were each very carefully trying to balance a few logs on one shoulder against a large pail of milk on the other. They were greeted with laughter by their older brothers as they helped relieve them of their burdens. Isabel watched, proud of her handsome, hardworking sons, dressed in buckskin vests and leggings over brown homespun shirts and wool hose. They were as tall as their father had been, but had her fair complexion. Their sister, Margaret, was just the opposite. She was petite and had the dark hair and eyes of John Sr.

"It smells good enough to eat in here," said Christopher.

"Come on, lads, let's wash up for breakfast."

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They knelt around the table, joining hands--a custom John and Isabel had begun as newlyweds and continued as their family grew. It had been helpful in bonding them together in love and loyalty. Christopher, the eldest male present, called on John Jr. to lead in family prayer.

"Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name." John's clear young voice petitioned in a form of the Lord's prayer. "Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. We thank Thee for our daily bread and ask Thy forgiveness of our sins as we

forgive others. Help us to be true Christians in Thy kingdom.
in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

While still upon their knees, they heard a pounding at the front door and a loud voice calling "Mistress Choate, open up. I have come in the name of His Holiness, Pope Clement the Seventh, and His Royal Majesty, King Henry the Eighth, Defender of the Faith, to inspect your premises for signs of heresy."

Isabel stared with amazement in the direction of the stentorian voice, feeling also the shock and anger of her two older sons, who knelt on either side of her, by the tightening of their hands on hers. She saw the stunned looks on the faces of the other family members as well. Although her heart was beating so rapidly she thought it might burst, she bowed her head and silently prayed for strength. Father, help us in this our hour of need, she pleaded. The answer came, as it had come before in times of crises, with a calm sweet understanding and peace of mind. She rose and, with quiet dignity, motioned everyone to arise and be seated.

"Katherine," she said, her steady gaze giving the frightened girl the courage she needed, "please go to the door and welcome in our guest."

"Yes, Ma'am," answered the maid. "No, Christopher. You must not keep me from my duty, Tis my task alone to be doin'."

Christopher had started forward, but was stopped as Katherine raised his hand, which still held hers, to her lips and very tenderly kissed it. "There now, love," she murmured as she stepped away from him. Then she walked slowly toward the front of the cottage, pausing momentarily before the door, and--with a toss of her copper curls--flung it open.

"The top o' the mornin' to ye, Sir," she said to the imposing

figure who stood on the doorsill. She attempted to curtsey, but was almost knocked over--not by the old curate of Birdbrook St. Augustine's church, but by the Bishop of London--as he swept past her into the cottage to confront the family.

John Stokesley, Bishop of London, was a tall, spare man. His face was long and narrow, with a high-bridged beak of a nose and small, beady eyes which Isabel felt bored holes through hers. He seemed to her an avenging angel in the black hooded cloak that covered his thin grey hair, wispy strands of which had escaped his close-fitting cap.

"Mistress Choate," he thundered, "we have been advised by your curate that your family is engaged in certain acts and attitudes contrary to those considered proper for members of the Holy Roman Church. And we are further informed you have been engaged in these for a long time."

"Indeed, Sir?" asked Isabel, quietly confident. "My children and I have always tried to conduct ourselves in thought and deed as we have felt our Lord and Savior would want us to do. We are Christians, Sir."

"Do you deny, Madam," the bishop's accusing voice persisted, "that you told the curate you did not deem it necessary to attend mass? And that you said where two or more persons are met together in the Lord's name, there would his spirit be also?"

"No, I do not deny saying that," replied Isabel, as her eyes remained unwavering under his malvolent stare.

"Then I submit, Mistress Choate," his sarcasm becoming more and more pronounced as he continued, "that you have obtained these heretical ideas from some other source than the Latin bible, which is used by the parish priest to explain the doctrine of the Church to ignorant persons such as yourself and your family members. The scriptures are not of private interpretation!"

At this point, Christopher interrupted the bishop and asked "What then, Sir, is the meaning of the words of St. John, who says we must "search the scriptures, for in them ye think ye have eternal life; and they are they which testify of me?" Christopher's voice rang out with the strength and conviction of his beliefs, just as John Sr.'s had those many years ago when he and Isabel met for the first time.

"Why you son of Satan" gasped John Stokesley. "How dare you speak thus to me, the spiritual advisor to the royal family? I have condemned men to the gallows for such impertinence!"

Isabel's face was drained of color as she looked at her son in alarm until Katherine, who was standing in back of her put a comforting hand on her shoulder.

"Perhaps the Reverend Lord Bishop would be hungerin' after a wee bit of breakfast, Ma'am," she suggested.

Willing herself to regain composure, Isabel answered. "Yes, Dear, I am forgetting my manners. I am sorry, Sir. Won't you please be seated and share our meal? Warm porridge with fresh cream and honey will give you strength to go about your day's activities."

The bishop was accustomed to stopping by the homes of church members at mealtimes. He indeed expected, and usually accepted offers to join with them. He eyed the food hungrily for a few moments before frowning and exclaiming "I will not be put off from my mission by an attempt at bribery, Madam! We have come to search, and search we will!"

He turned toward the open front door, where three soldiers were standing, and called for them to come in. "You," he said to one of them, "search the sitting room and parlor." To the others he said "Go upstairs. One of you search the bedchambers to the left, and the other those to the right. I shall cover the kitchen area. We shall look inside, behind, and beneath every cupboard and container in the cottage. Anything you find of a suspicious nature will be brought here for my inspection. Do I make myself clear?"

The soldiers quickly acknowledged their understanding of his instructions and left to begin their searches. The bishop's eyes scanned the room for likely hiding places. "We will be looking for books or tracts or pamphlets," he said, "or other heretical materials that blasphemous Eagles might have been

smuggling to those of you who would make war against God's Holy Roman Church."

He knows about our meetings in the forest with Eagles, Isabel decided, maintaining an outward serenity in spite of her rapid heartbeat. The old curate must have been spying upon us. He must not find my New Testament. She held her breath as he began opening cupboard doors, turning the vessels upside down and scattering their contents as he worked his way around the side of the kitchen towards the hearth.

When he reached the spinning wheel and loom which occupied much of the kitchen space to the left of the fireplace, he picked up the several lengths of woven cloth lying by their side and pulled these apart as he felt for incriminating evidence. As he held one large piece of material in his hand, he glanced across the room at a painted and embroidered tapestry. He saw it pictured a royal personage on the edge of Epping Forest, having a falcon poised for flight upon his shoulder. He could see the remarkable resemblance to his sovereign.

"Humph," he sneered. He turned to Isabel in disgust and warned " You would do well to adorn the parish church with religious hangings rather than try to impress His Majesty by catering to his activities of a worldly nature. This will not save you, even were the king to gain sight of it. You no longer have any influence in that quarter, Madam, since you have chosen to disobey your parents and ally yourself with a non-conformist."

With that angry declaration, the bishop threw the large piece material he was holding at the spinning wheel and loom, causing them to break apart as he continued on his way to the hearth. Isabel and Katherine stared at one another when he came to a stop in front of the recessed cupboard. Was that a corner of one of the bricks jutting out beyond the wall of the fireplace? What could be done to keep him from noticing it and discovering the bible? Isabel looked frantically at Christopher and John, her eyes beseeching them to divert attention from the hearth.

Suddenly, John stood up and seemed to stumble, knocking himself against his young brother sitting next to him and sending Robert's bowl of porridge on to the floor.

"Look what you've done!" cried Robert shaking his fist at his brother. "You broke it, you clumsy ox! Now I'll have to get another bowl."

"John," said Christopher, winking at his brother, "you have become a little awkward lately. You'd better clean up the mess so Katherine won't have to do it."

The bishop had glanced away from the hearth when the accident occurred and stood scornfully eyeing the boys as the maid rose and came over where he had been searching.

"I'd best be fillin' your second bowl, Master Robert, and then carry it to the table for you. You're so out of sorts, you may prove as buttery-fingered as your brother; and we've not that

many bowls to be sparin'."

She quickly pushed the corner of the loose brick in place just as John Stokesley decided to go on with his task. He ignored Katherine as he turned back. She quickly filled another bowl and returned it to Robert.

For an hour or more, the bishop painstakingly searched every nook and cranny in the kitchen and scullery while Isabel and the others looked on. When the soldiers returned, claiming to have found no evidence of an incriminating nature, his frustration was complete.

"You are more clever than I thought, Mistress Choate," he said. "But do not be lulled into complacency because we are going. We will come again and will uncover your secrets and shout your iniquity from the housetops." And with this pronouncement, he stormed out of the cottage, followed by the three soldiers.

The family sat in silence, listening to the sound of horses' hooves becoming more distant. Then everyone began to talk at once about how scared and angry they had felt, although they did manage a laugh at the bishop's expense, recalling John's fortunate "accident."

Robert told John "I didn't realize that you were just trying to take his eyes away from the secret cupboard. I was so mad at you I almost sent your bowl sailing across the room right in the direction of the hearth and the brick Katy moved in place."

Isabel, who had been half-listening to their conversation while staring at the hearth, suddenly came to a decision. She arose and walked over to the hiding place. Removing a few bricks, she reached inside behind the New Testament and drew out a roll of paper. Then she came back and stood before the twins.

"You won't have to do any more chores this morning," she said to them. "I want you to run over to your Uncle Thomas's with this paper. Keep it hidden until you hand it to him. If you meet anyone on the way, tell them I have given you a holiday; but do not say a word about the paper. Tell Thomas to take it to Eagles."

The boys eagerly accepted the assignment and left immediately. When they had gone, Christopher asked "What is written on that paper, Mother?"

"It contains a list of the forty-one non-conformists who live in Birdbrook Parish," she replied. "Thomas will see that it gets to Eagles so he can inform the others of the present danger and call off the conventicle scheduled to be held Tuesday next."

"Why does the bishop want to harass those of who do not share his views?" asked Christopher. "You would think he was holding the old Court of the Star Chamber, which judged people without benefit of a jury trial."

"That is exactly what he is doing, I'm afraid," his mother said.

"He boasts of burning fifty heretics at the stake during his time in office. Four friends on the list: John Girling, John and Richard Chapman and Christopher Ravins have each of them been arrested twice. They are all likely to become martyrs if they are arrested again, and perhaps we will also."

Katherine cried out at this statement and moved instinctively closer to Christopher. He put his arm around her and spoke in a calm voice to his mother. "I should think that their having been arrested and released, they are less likely to be sentenced to be burned at the stake. Of course they may do as Richard Bayfield did two years ago."

"Who was he, and what did he do?" asked Katherine.

"He was a monk at Bury St. Edmund," Christopher replied. "He became converted to non-conformism and, shortly thereafter, fled to the continent. There he engaged in helping print and circulate bibles and other writings to the non-conformists in England."

"But," said Isabel, "he did one thing before he left I find very difficult to understand. He allowed a young boy to be his agent in Colchester. The boy was apprehended and brought to the chancellor, Sir Thomas More, and then laid in the compter, where he died."

Her eyes were wet remembering this tragedy and thinking of her own young sons. But she finally dried her tears and shook her

head as if to rid herself of the memory and said "I'm sorry, children. I didn't mean to alarm you. We will depend on Thomas for counsel and protection. He continues to command the respect in Birdbrook that he and your father shared before John died."

"But Mother," said John, who had remained silent, listening while the others talked, "we can't just stand by and let Uncle Thomas do everything. Chris and I are old enough and strong enough to protect you and Katherine and the twins. There must be something we can do now to prepare for future problems with the bishop or even with the curate."

"The best thing you can do now is to go ahead with the spring planting," Isabel told him. "We will need the fall harvest. In the meantime, Katherine and I had better start cleaning up, for the cottage is a shambles."

THREE

Later that morning, Christopher leaned against the open door of the animal shed, where he had gone to find a strong piece of leather to replace a worn part of Old Joshua's bridle. He looked up at the blue cloudless sky, then over to his horse waiting to be harnassed to the plow, and beyond him to the field where John was planting seed.

There is no aspect of farm life and labor I don't enjoy and gain great satisfaction from, he thought. A farmer provides food and raiment for his family from his own animals and his own garden and fields. He can take pride in plowing straight furrows throughout a long and arduous day's work, feeling the mellow loam running through his fingers while anticipating his future harvest yields. He can thrill in the occasional bumper crop, yet know it won't bring the higher prices of previous years.

I want nothing more from life than this--except to marry my Katy and raise a family--he decided, although the visit from Bishop Stokesley may mean everything will be turned upside-down. If and when trouble comes from that quarter, trying to be a successful farmer will be the least of my concerns.

He left off his musing when Katherine opened the kitchen door and called to him "Would you be mindin' a bit of company while you work to bend your ear a wee time about worritsome things?"

He turned around at the sound of her voice and saw her troubled countenance. "Of course, Sweetheart," he replied, taking her by the hand, "although it'll be rough walking alongside of the plow. Maybe we can talk John into trading places. He can plow the furrows while we plant the seeds."

Katherine agreed, and after the bridle was repaired and Joshua harnassed to the plow, they followed him out to the field and made the exchange with John. Not, however, before John had expressed his opinion that "lovebirds make poor working partners."

Christopher had the opposite point of view, telling his brother "If we don't learn to work in double harness before we are one, we're not likely to be able to after our marriage."

"Sure, and I'm that worried about Ma'am," Katherine said as she walked by his side taking turns seeding the furrows. "That evil old bishop talked to herself in such a terrible way. It was as if the devil himself had come a callin'."

"He may not be the devil, Katy," said Christopher, "but he is surely under his influence. He seems to revel in satanic fire and brimstone."

"Oh, Darlin'!" she cried. "This havin' poor innocent people to be burned at the stake for believin' in the Blessed Savior and readin' about him in the Holy Book is so dreadful. Tis enough to make the angels of heaven weep and wail like the banshees.

We must be findin' how to keep Ma'am safe. I love her so. She's been as much a mother to me as me very own."

Katherine wept as Christopher gathered her in his arms to give comfort for a few moments. Then he lifted her chin and, after looking into her beautiful tear-stained eyes, tenderly kissed each eyelid and her trembling lips.

"Sweetheart, trust me," he said. "I am as sure as I stand here that not only mother, but all the rest of us will be safe from the bishop's fire. I'll tell you why and how I know this when we stop for our mid-day meal that you were nice enough to bring with you. Can you be patient until then?"

"We'll hardly have time to eat, much less time to listen to a story," complained John. "If you two don't stop lollygagging. You'll have to do your courting in the evening after the work is done, Chris; then you can serenade Katy under her bedroom window with your lute and your soulful rendition of "Greensleeves" that everyone's always raving about."

All right, Little Brother," Christopher laughed. "but my tenor is supposed to be lyrical rather then soulful, according to mother. Just wait till you get swept off your feet by a lovely lass like Katy. Come to think of it, didn't I see you making calves eyes at Squire Hall's pretty daughter, Betty, yesterday a week? Better brush up on your own romantic skills by trying to play the lute and practicing serenading Old Joshua. Betty

will have a nice dowry for a wedding in a year or two, seeing she's an only child and the darling of her father and mother."

"Ah, now," muttered John, red-faced and almost stumbling over his feet as he turned to go back to his plowing. "We were just talking about the twin lambs one of her father's ewes had."

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William and Robert were out of breath as they flung open the kitchen door and dashed inside to fall on one of the benches, exhausted. Their mother looked up from her painting.

"Did you boys run all the way from your Uncle Thomas's? You didn't have to race back. I really meant what I said earlier. You are excused from your other chores until it's time to feed the livestock and milk the cow this evening."

"But we had to run or we might have gotten caught by the bishop or his soldiers," said William, with suppressed excitement. "We have been trying to keep out of their way ever since you sent us to Uncle Thomas this morning, and to do that meant running from one hiding place to another. It's a good thing we know so many good ones, isn't it, Robert?"

Robert nodded to his brother, then said "Mother, you wouldn't believe how hard it was to watch what they were doing without them knowing we were there. We hid behind all kinds of bushes and trees and inside a couple of old sheds. But it was great fun fooling the old bishop and his men. They didn't see us, not one time."

"Oh dear," their mother said, "I didn't want you to take any chances. That was a very dangerous game you were playing. Why didn't you go to your uncle's by a roundabout path so you could have avoided them altogether?"

"We would have, Mother," replied William, "except right after we left home, we saw them go into Lewis Giles' cottage. We thought they were going to search there just like here, and we wanted to see how long they would be, so we hid where we could watch when they came out."

"But," Robert interrupted excitedly, "after a few minutes we heard Eleanor and her mother screaming and the bishop and her father and brother shouting. It was such a racket we thought the Giles might be getting whipped by the soldiers."

"Gracious," said Isabel. "How long did the screams and shouts go on? Did you just wait in your hiding place until Bishop Stokesley and his army left? What happened? Were you able to find out?"

"We couldn't let ourselves be seen," William told her. "You had charged us to take the paper to Uncle Thomas, so we just ran over to Roger Tanner's--he's engaged to marry Eleanor, you know--but there wasn't anybody home. We didn't know what else to do then and so we went on to Uncle Thomas's and told him about it."

"And he said he was afraid if anyone went to the Giles, they

would be more likely to harm than help them." Robert looked as if he was not sure this was true. "He thought the screams of the women may have been a result of their having excitable natures."

"But you don't think so," his mother said. "Did you go back to the Giles after you gave Thomas the paper?"

"Yes, we did," answered William, "and it was very peculiar. We had to hide several times on the way because we kept running into the bishop's men. It was maybe two hours or so before we got to the Giles. There weren't any soldiers around their yard, so we hid in the shed until Abraham Giles came out to hitch up his plowhorse."

"And he acted so rude to us," Robert complained, "you would've thought we were part of the old bishop's guard. He wouldn't talk to us, told us to go mind our own business. Boy, I'm never going to play mumbley peg with him again. He's sure not making friends or keeping them that way." Robert frowned. "To think I used to consider him my best friend."

"Perhaps there is something wrong that has influenced him to behave that way," Isabel told her son. "You mustn't be too hasty in your judgment. I'll go over to the Giles tomorrow and see if I can discover what was the matter with Abraham. His mother and I have always been able to straighten out any little difficulties between our children. Now, let's talk about your visit with Thomas. Did he give you a message for me?"

"Yes he did, Mother," William replied. "He was going to see Eagles and deliver the paper to him. He says the meeting that was scheduled will be easy to call off."

"Mother, who is Eagles?" Robert asked. "I know he came to us from Europe, but that's all I know about him. What's his real name?"

"I son't know his real name, Dear," answered his mother. "It has to be kept a secret because of the danger of his being captured and executed. But I can tell you his pseudonym isn't just Eagles. It is Eagles-Trudge-Over-the-World. He literally does that, handing out bibles to all of the non-conformists he meets with, bibles written in their native tongue. He is our hero."

As they sat under a tree eating the food Katherine had brought with her, she reminded Christopher of his promise. "I'll be thankin' you to be relievin' my mind of its worry over Ma'am, Chris Darlin'. If you've a tale to be tellin', let me be hearin' it now before my heart'll be burstin'."

"I'm ready," he said. "The story is about a dream my father had shortly before I was born. In it, he thought he was in a small room where a baby lay sleeping in a cradle by his side. As he sat watching the baby, two men dressed in white entered the room and came to stand by him. He had a warm feeling come over him at the sight of them."

"One of the men asked the other 'What shall the child's name be?' And the other answered 'He shall be called Christopher, for he will be a true follower of Christ."

"Then the two laid their hands upon the baby's head as they pronounced a name and a blessing upon him. The first man said 'Christopher, thy posterity shall be as thy father, Abraham's, as numerous as the sands upon the seashore. The time will come when they, and you, will know and understand the truth of all things. Thou shalt be taught in that day by the Lord Jesus Christ."

"Father was so overcome by hearing this wonderful blessing he knew had been given to his yet unborn son that he sat there for what seemed to him a very long time, pondering the experience. Finally realizing that the men were still standing at his side in the room, he looked more closely at their faces and felt he recognized them."

'Do I know you?' he asked, 'Your faces seem familiar to me.'

"The elder of the two answered 'Yes, our features are familiar because we are ancestors of yours. We lived upon the earth during the ministry of the Savior. We heard Him declare His glad tidings in Galilee and were among the multitude who were fed the loaves and fishes."

"The younger one then spoke 'And we became two of the first members of His church, which was organized after his death and

resurrection by the apostles. Since we were not of the tribe of Judah, we were considered gentiles by them before becoming members. Then we were called to work at the temple in Jerusalem, performing baptisms for the dead."

Father asked them if they were acquainted with the great missionary apostle, Paul, and they said they were and recounted to him the story of his conversion and told how powerful were his sermons to the early church members."

"When father asked them if they would give him a blessing so he might be able to raise his son properly, they consented. The older man picked up a copy of John Wycliffe's translation of the New Testament, which had been lying on a table by the side of the cradle. He told father to hold that sacred book while they laid their hands upon his head."

"Father did as he was told, and they proceeded to bless him. He was to teach me how to live by following the example of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. If he would read and study this book, which contained many of the teachings of Christ, he and his family would be preserved from the devil and his angels."

Christopher stood and took Katherine by the hand to help her to also rise and stated firmly "And that is why, My Darling Katy, I feel we have nothing to fear from John Stokesley."

Katherine was silent for a long time before asking "Chris, is Ma'am knowing well your father's dream?"

"Yes, of course," Christopher replied, "which should give her some peace of mind concerning our future. So come on, Katy, and let's forget all this gloominess. You can go back to your chores in the cottage, and John and I will finish the plowing and planting."

As Katherine walked back, her thoughts were still gloomy. She wondered about the kind of foreboding look her mistress got when she thought no one was paying attention. Ma'am may well be knowin' in her heart that Chris and at least one of his sons would live to be carryin' on the name of Choate, Katy said to herself, but she would be havin' no assurance that herself or the other children would be spared. Oh Chris, My True Love, so strong and confident you are. I pray that yours be the right understandin' of your dear father's dream.

She entered the kitchen to see her mistress engaged in painting in oils a wall hanging, which would be embroidered and sent to her daughter, Margaret, for her eighteenth birthday.

"That is sure to be pleasin' little Meg," she said. "It has a charm and a delicacy like the wee one herself."

"I hope so," said Isabel. "It's a picture of a special spot by the side of the brook where Meg used to love to sit and dream."

"Then may her childhood dreams come true as she gazes on your lovely tapestry," Katherine prayed. "Now, Ma'am, I'd best be turnin' my hands to my tasks or supper will not be forthcomin'."

FOUR

Katherine had gone to the fields with food for the boys in the early afternoon of the following day. Isabel was weeding her flower beds in the front yard of the cottage when she heard the familiar sound of horses' hooves in the distance. She paid little attention at first, then looked up to see a carriage approaching. It was a handsome equipage--shiny black with gold trim on the outside, and upholstered on the inside with royal blue velvet.

"Why it's Father's coach!" she exclaimed, as the carriage drew near enough for her to recognize the Quarles crest emblazoned upon it.

The coachman pulled the four matched greys to a stop before the front gate and quickly climbed down to open the carriage door. A graceful young lady emerged, took the hand he extended, and stepped down. She was beautifully gowned in the current Tudor fashion. Her dress was of pink brocaded silk, under which she wore a farthingale. A high white ruff collar gave the illusion of height to her petite form; and her darker pink velvet cloak, trimmed in ermine, complemented the roses in her cheeks as well as her dark hair and eyes.

"Mama," she cried. "Oh Mama, I've missed you so much." She came rushing into the outstretched arms of her mother, who understood the loneliness she had experienced being away from her family.

for so many years. She had been an only child and had always longed for a sister or brother with whom she could share the memories of childhood and youth. No matter how close she felt to her brother and sister-in-law, Thomas and Elizabeth, there were some very special things they did not have in common.

When Margaret's tears subsided, she explained why she had come to see them. "Grandfather is ill, and Grandmother is worried that his illness is more serious than the doctors have told her. She has convinced him to invite you and the boys to London for a prolonged visit. Actually, I don't think it took much convincing on her part. Grandfather regrets his shabby treatment of you--no, he hasn't used those words, Mama, but I know from what he has told me that he feels that is true--and wants to make amends. He and Grandmother have not seen you for ages."

Since Margaret had gone to live with her grandparents, Isabel's father had not allowed her or her sons to visit, saying that they would only interfere with his granddaughter's education. Isabel was sorry to learn of her father's illness and hoped it would be of short duration; but she desired a reconciliation with all her heart, and she wondered if this would be the means of bringing it about. And could it possibly be that her father had changed his attitude towards non-conformity? that he had forgiven her and John for having divergent religious views?

"Bridley," said Isabel to the coachman, who had been the Quarles family retainer since long before her marriage to John, "take

the horses around the back of the cottage and see to them. You have had a long journey and will be concerned about them. Then come in for refreshment and rest. And thank you for your care of my daughter."

Bridley bowed and assured her that it had been his pleasure; and after expressing his gratitude for her kindness, he led the greys to the animal shed where he unhitched them, rubbed them down, and watered and fed them.

Isabel put her arm around her daughter's waist and said "My Little Meg, you must be very tired and hungry. Let's go inside. I want to hear all about Father and Mother and you--especially you, Dear. But first come inside. You must eat and rest. We'll have our talk later."

They went into the cottage arm in arm. The aroma of the freshly baked loaves of bread, several of which lined the stone mantel of the hearth, greeted them as they entered the kitchen. Isabel seated Margaret at the table on which lay a large loaf of bread and a round of cheese. She cut a thick slice of each and then poured milk from a skin-covered jug into an earthenware mug for her daughter.

"This tastes so good, Mama," Margaret said as she eagerly consumed the simple fare. "I was ravenous. No one bakes bread the way you do. I've missed your good cooking and baking almost as much as I've missed you. And what is that heavenly smell coming from the big kettle?"

"Katherine will be pleased you asked," replied her mother. "I believe it's her famous Irish stew, which she plans to serve for supper. And I can't take credit for the bread, either. She has learned how to do everything I used to do, and I'd be remiss if I didn't confess she does most of them a great deal better than I do at present. Katherine has become indispensable to us, and we have grown very fond of her. I bless the day when she came to Essex County seeking employment after her dear mother passed away and her father lost their home through a foolish wager."

At that moment, the door opened and the young maid came into the room along with Bridley. On seeing Margaret, she ran over and threw her arms around her, exclaiming "Meg, Darlin' Girl!" You are a rare feast for these eyes to gaze upon in all your finery. It's a lovely grown-up lass you've become."

"Now Katy," cried Margaret. "you must have been kissing the old Blarney Stone again. Away with your compliments. You are the one who's lovely, with your beautiful red hair and green eyes. And if I'm not mistaken, there are others who agree with me--Chris for example, who I understand has fallen captive to your Irish charms. Mother's letters to me had more than a few hints of a budding romance between the two of you."

Katherine blushed rosily but didn't deny Margaret's suggestion. "Chris and I have come to an understandin', you might say. Not that I was guilty of castin' lures in his direction, mind you. But you'll be wantin' to visit with your mama. I'll give Bridley

his food so you can go along to talk together until it's time for supper. Tis happy I am to be seein' you again, Meg."

"Me too, Katy," said Margaret. "We'll have a good coze later on, and you can bring me up-to-date on all that is happening in Birdbrook."

"Come now, Meg," said her mother. "Bridley needs to eat, and we need to retire to my bedchamber for our talk and where you can have a little nap before the boys come in from the field."

They sat on the large wooden canopied bed, which dominated the small sparsly furnished room. A carved chest, one chair, and a washing stand--the only pieces of furnitures in it--had been fashioned by John Sr., who loved to work with his hands and had learned how to carve the intricate patterns in wood from his father, who had apprenticed as a cabinetmaker in his youth. The walls were covered with tapestries made by Isabel. They depicted various members of their family engaged in farm and household activities. Isabel's gift for realistically portraying each of them in oils made Margaret stare in amazement.

"Mama, you are so talented. I can't paint nearly so well, even though my tutors have spent hours trying to teach me how. And I have practiced and practiced, using the techniques they have shown me. Perhaps I should have learned from you before I went to London to live. Maybe studying your work will help me to improve mine."

"I'm sure that time and study will do that, Dear, but let's not talk about that now. I want to know more about father's illness. Just how worried is Mother? What does the doctor say, and how can I help both Father and Mother? I know these are a lot of questions, but I want to know every detail."

Margaret answered her mother's questions at length. When Isabel satisfied herself that her father was not on his deathbed as the news of her mother's anxiety had led her to suppose, she turned to questions concerning Margaret's life in London. "Are you happy, Meg? Have you become accustomed to luxurious surroundings and servants to cater to your every wish?"

Margaret was silent for a moment before answering her mother, then said "I am not unhappy. I love Grandfather and Grandmother very much, and I appreciate all they are doing for me. But I fear they may have spoiled me dreadfully, giving me so many material advantages. Do you think I am becoming too worldly? I do enjoy the parties and dances and wearing pretty gowns and jewelry." She fingered her lovely pearl necklace as she looked up, searching her mother's face for understanding.

"No, Dear," replied Isabel, "as long as your heart is not set upon worldly things alone--and I do not believe that it is--you will be all right. You have grown into a mature, intelligent young lady who makes me feel proud to be her mother. Tell me about your studies. What avenues of education are you pursuing, and are they enjoyable?"

"Oh yes. My studies are mostly in the arts, but I have been given a smattering of information in the fields of mathematic and science, just those things that will help me as an artist. I have applied myself, Mama. Grandfather teases me about being 'buried in books' most of the time. I guess I am, though I've learned much from his wonderful friends, well-known people from all areas of society, especially those engaged in the arts. Sir Thomas More, who was Lord Chancellor of England until he resigned last year, is such an interesting person. He lent me a copy of his book 'Utopia' and we had many discussions about it. Oh Mama, to have my views treated with respect by writers, artists and musicians is such a heady experience. Even King Henry, who is a frequent guest, has asked my opinion two or three times about paintings he has acquired."

"And did he share your views? If not, I doubt he would give them much credence. His Majesty is not known for having an open mind on that subject."

"Well, to tell the truth," Margaret giggled, "he thanked me very graciously and told me he would take my opinions under advisement. Anyway, I know I haven't the qualifications to be able to judge paintings that you have. The next time he asks my opinion, I'll tell him he should talk to a real expert--you."

Isabel laughed. "I think you would do better to just change the subject. However, that might be a little difficult since he is the king. But, Meg, even though education in all these areas is

important, I am also interested in your religious education, perhaps more so. Have your views changed after attending the Catholic mass for five, almost six, years?"

"No, Mama, my beliefs haven't changed a bit, except they have probably deepened. I will always remember and treasure your reading to us from the New Testament when we were very young, and then teaching us how to read it ourselves as soon as we were able. I have the copy you gave me when I went to London, and I read in it daily. The teachings of Christ are so much easier to understand than the Latin bible mass. I especially love the account of the Savior's birth. Every time I read it, I feel as if I were there, seeing the great star, hearing the angels sing, standing alongside the shepherds and wise men as they look upon the heavenly Babe in the manger bed."

"That is a favorite of mine, too," said her mother. "Your father and I felt we had a responsibility to each of you children to teach you to become literate and to do so by reading the scriptures. Our convictions had come from our study of them, and we wanted you to have the same opportunity to form your own convictions. Not that we wished your views to always agree with ours--each of us see things differently--but we hoped you would live your lives according to the principles the Lord taught as you came to understand them."

"Do you and Katy and the boys still study the New Testament together every day as we used to do?"

Isabel hesitated. Should she tell Meg about their present fears and problems? She did not want to cause her undue worry, yet knowledge of what had happened to them might be the means of protecting her daughter from the same kind of persecution if the Catholic church authorities in London were to discover she had a copy of the New Testament written in English. The thought of Meg being treated as they had been, or even worse, decided Isabel.

"Meg Dear," she said, "I'm afraid we no longer can enjoy the privilege of openly studying the scriptures or of reading any non-conformist literature. Our meetings with others of like convictions are infrequent and are always held in secret. Our conventicles take place in the forest under the direction of Eagles, whenever he is with us. When he is on the continent, as he quite often is, Uncle Thomas is in charge of them. The curate of Birdbrook drops in unexpectedly to spy on us, usually several times a week. And yesterday John Stokesley, the Bishop of London, brought three soldiers with him to search our premises to find proof of our alleged heresy."

"Bishop Stokesley!" exclaimed Margaret, throwing her arms about her mother. "That awful man was here? Oh Mama, I'm so afraid of him. When he comes to see Grandfather, I always try to find a reason to stay in my room. The way he looks at me makes my skin crawl, and all he talks about is visiting the wrath of God upon the heretics of East Anglia. Mama, he means the non-conformists of Essex, Suffolk and Norfolk, including all of you!"

Isabel withdrew from her daughter's embrace to look into her sweet, trusting eyes. "Perhaps Father has told the bishop we are non-conformists and that we have bibles printed in English. That may have been his reason for paying us a visit." She began to stiffen as another alarming thought came to mind. "Meg, does Father know about your copy of the New Testament?"

"He knows," Margaret replied, "but he hasn't told the bishop or anyone else about it. He and Grandmother are not as devout Catholics as they once were. They were admitted into royal circles because of the great sums of money Grandfather has paid into the Treasury during the reigns of both Henry VII and Henry VIII. And now even His Majesty is losing faith in Catholicism, claiming the Roman church has robbed the Treasury for years until he recently had Parliament pass an act restraining the 'first fruits' or first year's payment of profits to the Pope."

"Then Father's loyalty to the Crown has caused his doubts," said Isabel. "I had so hoped for a sincere change of heart on his part, that we might somehow have reached similar points of view and common spiritual goals."

FIVE

Isabel's worries subsided as she listened to the light-hearted banter of her family, gathered around the table to enjoy Katherine's Irish stew and visit with Margaret. Tonight the family included her brother-in-law, Thomas Choate, and Elizabeth, his wife, who had offered to take care of their farm while she and the children were in London. It was always enjoyable to be in their company. Thomas had a great sense of humor and Elizabeth, though shy, was a sweet-natured and comfortable person.

"Meg," asked Thomas. "why don't you put your education to good use and show your brothers the courtly manners they must adopt just in case His Majesty comes to call while they are visiting their grandparents? I think these rough-hewn lads need a bit of polish to enter society."

"By all means, Uncle Thomas," she replied, a twinkle in her eye. "You never can tell. Grandfather might arrange to have them presented at court."

There were shouts of laughter from everyone, particularly the boys, but she continued "When one meets royalty, one must show respect by bowing or curtseying."

"I know how to curtsey, Meg," said Robert. "Mary Ann Starling showed me how in front of the parish church the other day." He stood up to demonstrate, unaware of the amused look on the face of his sister.

"First you put your right foot in back of you, like this." He lifted his right foot and placed it as far behind him as he could. "Next you spread your arms way out on either side of you." He gave a wide sweep of his arms. "Then you kind of act like you're backing into a really low stool and you almost--but not quite--sit down." He began to execute this maneuver, lost his balance, and sat down with a thud.

Everyone watching his demonstration were now convulsed with laughter, especially his twin, William, who exclaimed "Robert, you feather-brain! Only girls curtsey. Boys bow."

"I'm afraid he's right, Robert," said his sister. "To bow, you make a leg. I'll show you how. Put your right foot out in front like this, pointing your toe. Then with your left arm behind your back--that's right--you place your right arm at your waist with your elbow out--see--and bow deep from the waist. She demonstrated this twice and then had each of the boys follow suit.

"Now, having perfected your bows," suggested Thomas, "it is time to lead the lady of your choice in a country dance. There is plenty of room here to form a circle." He arose and made an elegant leg to his wife, Elizabeth, who immediately stood up and curtseyed.

"Miss Katherine O'Brian," Christopher bowed before her. "May I have the pleasure of your company in this set?"

"I'll be thankin' you, Kind Sir," she replied, "for showin' me,

a poor workin' girl, such condescension." She curtseyed in a deceptively demure manner that was not lost upon Christopher, who lead her into the circle with a flourish and a delighted grin.

John was next, bowing to Isabel, whom he addressed as "My Lady Mother." Then William and Robert approached their sister and, together, executed awkward bows on either side of her.

To everyone's surprise, Bridley, who had eaten earlier because his long service with the Quarles had given him a distaste for servants who did not know their place, came into the room and said he would be pleased to play for their dancing with his recorder. He often entertained the staff in London and always carried his instrument with him when he travelled so that he might keep in practice as well as while away the time.

They had a merry hour or so dancing the stately round dance, or carol, which was popular among the gentle folk of Essex and in other parts of England as well. Having engaged in this activity many times before; and being naturally light on their feet, everything was fine until the younger boys each tried to take his turn with Margaret at the same time. Robert inadvertently stepped on William's foot; and William--believing it to have been deliberate--jabbed Robert in the ribs. A scuffle ensued, but was broken up by their sister, who took each of them by the hand and led them into the middle of the circle, where she then proceeded to show them a new dance.

"If you please, Bridley," she requested, "play a gaillard for us so I may teach these two rascallions the favorite dance of His Majesty."

Bridley obliged with a much livelier tune; and Margaret introduced the boys, one at a time, to the more vivacious steps of the gaillard. It was a dance which necessitated, at intervals, the boy who was partnering her to put one arm around her waist and lift her off the floor. Robert and William took turns in performing the dance with her; and even though less than perfect in their execution of it, had a hilarious time as the others clapped their hands and laugh uproariously at the attempted leaps that were frequent throughout the performance.

After a while, however, Isabel's worries reappeared, and she suggested they bring their merrymaking to a close. "I believe we have had enough amusement for this evening. We shall need our rest for the journey tomorrow, and I'm certain Thomas and Elizabeth will need the same since they are taking over our responsibilities. Thank you, Bridley. You are a splendid musician, but you must have an early night also. I know without your asking that you want to look to the horses again before you retire. Please feel free to do this."

Bridley thanked her for her concern, put away his instrument, and went out the kitchen door. Isabel waited until he had been gone for a few moments, then smiled as she looked at her family now seated again at the table and made a suggestion.

"Since it will be some time before all of us are together again, I thought we might end our evening on a more serious and reflective note. Meg has told me she misses our family scripture study. Don't you think our reading in one of the four gospels before retiring would be a fitting close to our get-together?"

Everyone was enthusiastic and agreed that Thomas should preside over their little study group and choose their text. Isabel had earlier noticed the bulge in his pocket that meant he had his New Testament with him.

"Why don't we read the part of St. Matthew's gospel which includes the Savior's Sermon on the Mount. We can start with the beatitudes, each of us taking turns reading and commenting on one of them. While you are getting your bible, Isabel, perhaps Elizabeth may begin." He handed his book to his wife as Isabel made her way to the hearth.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit," she read in her soft, sweet voice, "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Poor in spirit must mean humble, Thomas. I know that Jesus told us we must become as little children to enter into the kingdom of heaven."

"Very good, My Dear," said her husband. "Humility comes a bit easier to one who is not blessed with too many of this world's goods. I suppose we ought to be grateful that we are humbly-circumstanced."

"That is true," Isabel remarked as she came back with her New

Testament in hand and sat down. "I also believe that kneeling when we pray makes us feel more humble and dependent upon our Father in Heaven."

"Excellent reasoning," said her brother-in-law. "Showing Him the respect and honor due surely betokens humility." Then he turned to Robert, saying "You are next, I believe."

Robert read in his clear young voice "Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted." He looked at his mother with tears in his eyes. "Sometimes I miss Father so very much. I'll never be rid of the pain in my heart whenever I think of him and the fun times we used to have. Whenever anything special happens, I want to tell him about it. And yet, Uncle Thomas, I really know he must be happy in heaven."

"Yes," his uncle agreed, "in spite of the sorrow you feel, you may have peace of mind knowing all is well with him and that he is no doubt aware of what his family is doing to continue along the path he considered so important to follow--that straight and narrow one the Lord said few would follow. John is proud of all of you, I am very sure." He glanced at Isabel, her feelings evident as she smiled through her tears at her young son. "William, it is your turn."

William read "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." He paused a moment, frowning. "I hope that doesn't mean I have to be like Johnson Page. The old curate keeps telling us boys we ought to behave as meek ly as Johnson, and he is the

veriest sissy in Birdbrook."

Christopher, joining in the laughter around the table, commented "The proper meaning of meek is 'teachable' which doesn't mean you have to let yourself be tyrannized by someone like the old curate. If you are willing to learn, then you are meek."

"I guess I am meek, then," said Margaret. "Learning has surely taken up most of my time since I've been away from home. It is my turn to read, Uncle Thomas." She took the New Testament from William. "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled. That beatitude best describes Father and Mother. Their desire to search the scriptures has always been an example to me."

"To all of us, Meg Darlin'," Katherine added as Margaret handed her the book. "Your parents have been the makin' for sure of this colleen. Never would I have learned to read and write, or been able to think for myself about the Blessed Lord if I had not been privy to their fine ways and lovely teachin'. And I'm thinkin' this next beatitude is in a fair way like them with their treatin' of others. 'Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy."

She passed the New Testament to Christopher, who read "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." His eyes met Katherine's. "I hope I will be pure in heart when I leave this earth so I can see Him and talk with him face to face. I have so many questions to ask of Him."

"You will, Love," said his sweetheart. "You're as pure in heart as your sainted father."

Thomas nodded to John, who was seated next to Christopher, as he was handed the bible. He read "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God." He grinned at his sister. "You ought to stay home, Meg, so we'll have you as a peacemaker each time a couple of us lads come to cuffs."

"I think you boys get along as well as any other boys I know," said Isabel. "I wouldn't want you to behave like angels all the time or you would probably be translated as was John the Beloved Apostle, and I'm not ready to have my children taken to heaven yet." The boys grinned widely at her comment. "But it's my turn now." She opened her New Testament to read "Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

"I wonder," she asked, a wistful expression on her face, "what John Stokesley, Bishop of London, thinks about that verse?"

"Or of the two that follow it," said her brother-in-law with a smile. "Blessed are ye when men shall revile you and persecute you, and say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so persecuted they the prophets before you."

"Bishop Stokesley," Margaret pronounced his name with obvious dislike, "undoubtedly thinks he is the one who is persecuted,

having so many heretics wandering about the realm, especially those pesky ones in East Anglia."

"You have yet to learn the real meaning of persecution, I feel certain, Mistress Margaret Choate," said that very person in a voice dripping with venom.

Isabel and the others around the table had been so engrossed in their discussion, they were not aware of the opening of the kitchen door or the entry of the black-cloaked Bishop of London, who stood on the sill staring stonily at Margaret.

"You lying young hypocrite," he continued to rage at her, "you have pretended to worship by participating in the rites of the Holy Roman Church, while you have been filling your mind with the teachings of Satan." He held up her copy of the New Testament.

Margaret's face turned chalky-white as she exclaimed "Bishop Stokesley, you had no right to go into my bedchamber or to take anything from it! I shall report you to His Majesty!"

The bishop threw back his head and, raising his arms to extend both sides of his cloak like the wings of an enormous bird of prey, let out a horrible cackling laugh, which sent chills up and down Isabel's spine. Then he began to pace around the room as if in a trance, chanting unintelligibly and seeming to grow in excitement as he moved, until he suddenly stopped and turned again to face Margaret, his countenance alit with a strange fire.

"You, daughter and granddaughter of devils, will report me to the king on whose behalf I am here in this God-forsaken place? Even were he to listen to your complaints and be influenced by your outward beauty--and he is so easily influenced thusly--and your flattering words, I will not be turned away from doing what I have come here to do. My commission is from a much higher court than the English throne. I am charged with power from God to rid the realm of the vipers King Henry has so long nourished in his bosom. I shall call down fire from heaven to burn the wicked to stubble."

Isabel arose and went to the other side of the table. Throwing her arms around her daughter, she turned toward the bishop and in an unwavering voice, declared "Margaret has committed no crime against the king or against God. You are mad, Sir to suggest that she has."

The bishop's face grew purple with rage, and his voice cracked as he spat out furiously "I shall tell you who is mad, Madam. Your friend Eagles, who has been captured in the forest with the damaging evidence in his possession; and you, together with the rest of the forty-one heretics of Birdbrook, whose names are on this list you concealed from me and then had spirited to that fiend." He unrolled the scroll of paper she had taken from the secret cupboard and sent to Eagles the day before. The bishop then turned to the open doorway and shouted "Guards, enter with your prisoner and take into custody all these heretics who are in this cottage."

A dozen soldiers came into the kitchen, two of them dragging a bound and gagged Bridley, whom they let fall by the hearth. They quickly surrounded the table, seizing the family members who had all arisen, stunned into silence by the bishop's diatribe. Thomas and the boys attempted to defend the women, and a physical struggle ensued; but their efforts could not overcome the superior numbers and weapons of the guards, who tied their hands behind their backs.

"We are free Englishmen and women, Sir," Christopher resolutely proclaimed to the bishop. "We are loyal to the Crown, and we are also true believers in and followers of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." Isabel exchanged glances with Katherine, their fierce pride of mother and sweetheart overshadowing, for the moment, the terror in their hearts.

"You are free no longer," John Stokesley sneered. "You will be taken to the Fleet Prison in London, along with the others who have been arrested this day, and held until I shall have the pleasure of burning you at the stake and scattering your ashes over East Anglia, the hell of fire and brimstone you may have read about in these." He reached onto the table and picked up the New Testaments which Thomas and Isabel had laid down on it.



Their journey from Birdbrook to Fleet Prison in London began in the early hours of the following morning. All forty-one persons named on the list the bishop found on Eagles were arrested as heretics the night before and brought to the front gate of the Choate cottage.

Isabel greeted her friends: Robert Harvie, his wife and son, Thomas, and daughter, Agnes; Richard Bateman and his wife; John Smith and his wife; Thomas Butcher and his wife; Robert Catlin; Christmas and his wife; William Beckwith, his wife and two sons; John Pikas and his wife and William, his brother; Girling and his wife and daughter; Johnson, his wife and son; Mathew's wife, Marion; Thomas Hills and Roger Tanner; Christopher Ravins and his wife and John and Richard Chapman, his servants.

The king's troops, in royal livery and on horseback, were in the charge of a lieutenant. They drew up before the cottage leading old lumbering nags and stared furiously at the prisoners they outnumbered two to one. Surprised to find us without horns and pitchforks, Isabel supposed. But her own curiosity was aroused a little later when their handsome--but stern-faced--young captain arrived on the scene, accompanied by his sergeant-at-arms, a rough and weather-beaten old soldier whose decided limp was noticeable when the two dismounted.

The captain walked over to John Stokesley, who was only a short

distance away from Isabel. He spoke a few words to him, which made the old prelate clap his hands in glee, then stood almost at attention in between his superior and his sergeant. He swept over his charges with a scornful glance, thoroughly disapproving of us, thought Isabel. And his aide also, she decided, noting the sergeant's scowl. But perhaps their attitude will change as we become better acquainted.

Then, as if the young man could read her thoughts, she saw his gaze rested on her and her daughter. Margaret had turned away to talk to Agnes Harvie before the arrival of the two soldiers and began to look around at that moment, sensing something unusual in the atmosphere, to encounter surprised recognition on the face of the captain.

"Miss Quarles?" He appeared taken aback as he stared at her and, in his embarrassment, blurted out "Whatever are you doing here?"

Margaret's complexion and manner underwent a swift change at his harsh words--the former from deep pink to chalk white, and the latter from welcoming smile to frozen civility. "My name is not Quarles, Captain Coffield, it is Choate," she coldly replied. "I am here because John Stokesley has branded me and my family and friends heretics."

"But your grandparents," the captain started to say, when the loud and officious voice of the bishop interrupted him with an announcement to the prisoners about how they were to be taken to London.

"You are to be transported on horseback under the guard of Captain William Coffield," said John Stokesley, "two prisoners to a horse. You should be made to walk every step of the way, but that would be very inconvenient for me. My time is too valuable to be spent waiting for your incarceration."

The bishop had ordered Bridley released to drive the Quarles carriage, which he had commandeered for his own use. He climbed into the coach, followed by one of the soldiers carrying a large hamper full of food confiscated from Isabel's kitchen and pantry.

Isabel and Margaret were to ride together, as were Thomas and Elizabeth and Christopher and Katherine. The other family members were not. John would ride with Roger Tanner, and William and Robert with John and Richard Chapman. The captain sent the lieutenant and sergeant to the center and back of the line to help with the riding arrangements, while he took care of those in the front.

Although the distance they had to travel was scarcely more than fifty miles, it would be an arduous journey with cattle in such poor condition. While the captain was helping Isabel to mount, she asked him how long it would take them to reach London.

His answer was stiffly polite. "We will be on the road for at least three days, Ma'am, with two overnight stops."

When she was seated on the horse, she thanked him for his help and smiled at his brusque "Servant, Ma'am," as he turned away to

assist Margaret, who tried unsuccessfully to shrug off his aid. That young lady's temper was all too evident in her chilly tone of voice as she questioned the captain.

"What are we supposed to do for food and water during our travels, pray Sir?"

"You will be allowed to drink from the fresh water streams our company will cross along the way, Miss Choate." He lifted her on the horse since her struggles to help herself apparently of no avail and added "However, the only food you will have to eat is hard biscuits. It is difficult for us to carry many stores. Most food spoils, even bread gets moldy."

"Lovely," said Margaret, making no attempt to conceal her sarcasm. "You must have made plans to entertain John Stokesley at the stopovers, for you will surely not expect the illustrious bishop to bed on the cold ground."

"No, Miss." His voice was wooden with barely-controlled temper. "There are some well-appointed inns along our travel route so that his Excellency will find the comfort and attention to which he is accustomed. And he has plenty of food--" His voice trailed off as he seemed to suddenly remember where the bishop had gotten his abundant supply of food--"to feast upon as he travels."

Margaret tossed her head angrily and pulled at the reins which the young officer was holding, trying to break free of him; but his hands did not loosen their grip. Her anger increased and her

voice rose in pitch and became somewhat shrill. "And how do you suppose my mother and the other ladies, especially those with poor health, will be able to stand the trip?" She glanced down disgustedly at their horse. "These animals are not fit for them to ride. Exposed to the rain and cold, they may become desperately ill before we arrive at our destination, or may not even survive the journey."

"But perhaps," she continued, her eyes narrowing as she studied his face, "you will be pleased to be spared the trouble of having to burn them at the stake."

Captain Coffield's countenance turned almost purple with rage, and he drew himself up to full height before replying. "I have no intention of remaining here, listening to any more of your insults, Miss Choate." He let go of the reins. "If you and the other ladies had given thought to the consequences of your heretical behavior, you would not find yourselves in this situation." Then issuing a command to one of his soldiers standing nearby to see to their needs, he turned and marched rapidly away toward his lieutenant and sergeant, who had completed their arrangements for the other prisoners.

Isabel regarded the heated exchange between the two young people and put her hand on Margaret's arm to calm her. "Meg, My Dear, I believe that something has happened to prejudice the captain's opinion of us. Let's try to be tolerant of his views and win his approval by our courtesy and kindness."

Margaret said nothing, staring off into space for several minutes, until her mother brought her out of her reverie with the suggestion that she had been well-acquainted with the young officer before.

"Yes," her daughter admitted, "William--Captain Coffield-- is a frequent visitor to Grandfather's home. He and the others of King Henry's court attended teas, suppers and balls there; and William--Captain Coffield--often partnered me in supper dances."

"And you became interested in each other," her mother said. "Is that what is bothering you, Dear?"

"Oh, Mama," cried Margaret, "I'm such a fool, and I'm sorry I'm acting this way. It's just that people like William--Captain Coffield-- make me so mad. For him to think highly of the bishop. Why any reasonably intelligent person ought to be able to see through that old hypocrite."

Isabel gave her daughter a hug. "Remember, you can catch more flies with honey than vinegar. You might try being especially polite to that nice-looking young man and see if he will return the favor."

"Nice-looking?" Margaret asked. "You really think he's nice-looking, Mama? Well, I suppose I thought so once, too. And yet I wonder if I was being overly-impressed by his uniform. There's something about them, you know." She paused a moment. "Still I'm not a silly girl any more, and he doesn't mean a thing to me. I

guess I can swallow my pride and do the pretty to the captain."

When the prisoners were mounted, they were formed into a line, single file, headed by Thomas and Elizabeth. With quiet consensus, Thomas had assumed the mantle of leadership. How like his brother, John, he was, thought Isabel. In both of them was combined the spirit of their Anglo-Saxon forebears as well as the unshakeable faith of the leaders of the Protestant Reformation. How grateful she was that her children could look to him, as an example to follow, the same as they had to their father.

They started out, the soldiers riding two abreast on either side of each prisoner's horse. Their captain, on a magnificent Arabian steed, moved back and forth alongside the train, watching carefully both the prisoners and their guards. That he was a very competent officer with highly disciplined troops was apparent to Isabel. He certainly commanded the respect of his men; and in the case of his sergeant, positioned immediately to the left of Isabel and Margaret, utter devotion to his superior. She was happy he had not heard the angry words between her daughter and the captain.

Their route was similar to the one John and Isabel had travelled in her parents' carriage on their wedding trip from London to Birdbrook. The "Great Essex Road," as it was called, was really no more than a series of bylanes and cowpaths. It was muddy when it rained, and the Quarles carriage had become mired often. But the newlyweds were happy and carefree. For them the journey was

leisurely and fun-filled, with frequent stops to admire picturesque Essex villages and rest in the pleasant parks of the great manor houses. Then there were the comfortable inns where their nights were spent, she remembered. Our love for one another was so strong we thought it would never grow stronger than in those first days of our marriage. But we were mistaken. It is much stronger now, even though we have been separated by death for more than five years.

This first day's trip seemed unending to Isabel, who seldom rode and never before bareback. The horses were slow-moving. The five miles to Sampford, their first stopping place, took them until mid-morning. The sun was high in the sky when they had covered the four miles to Thaxted, where they drank from the Chelmer and ate the meager portions of biscuits doled out to them by their guards.

From the meadowland, Isabel could see the tall spires of the Thaxted Cathedral, the loveliest church in Essex County. It was built of a soft limestone called "clunch stone," she pointed out to Margaret. She wished they could take time to tour the village with its large manor estate, guild hall, windmills and extensive parks and woodlands. But the captain's forbidding countenance made asking for special privileges out of the question. There would be no time for sight-seeing or even for resting. As soon as they had eaten, they remounted and were on their way again.

It rained during the afternoon part of the first day's journey.

When they camped for the night outside of the parish of Great Dunmow, it was still drizzling. Margaret saw the sergeant study her attempts to wring water out of her mother's cloak while she and the other older women sought shelter under an abandoned hut nearby. He had not spoken a word during the entire day, so she was surprised to hear him now.

"It do be a real baingy day, Miss," he said in the delightful song-like dialect of the Essex peasantry, which in its quaint phrasing imitated the sight and sound and feel of those things they wished to describe. "A real baingy day."

"It's that all right," she agreed. "I detect a Northern Essex sound to your voice, Sergeant. What is your name and where do you come from?"

He moved closer to her before answering, his leg dragging a bit as he walked. His smile broadened in proud recollection of his home. "Ebenezer Coggs, Miss, from Coggshall. We's a hut on the squire's farm. Me father and his afore done for the squire's family. Now while I be away, me missus do the cookin' for the squire's lady."

Margaret returned his smile and asked, somewhat mischievously, if he was by any chance a real "Cog'shall Man," knowing that the epithet referred to someone who appeared ridiculous or who did things in an extremely awkward way.

"You mean would I be findin' me ladder do be too short and then

cuttin' the bottom rung offen it to fasten on the top?" He was quick to reply, grinning at Margaret.

"Or," she added, Laughing, "finding yourself with only one taper to set fire to your logs the next morning and striking it the night before to see if it will burn."

As they recounted various Cog'shall stories, they became almost convulsed with laughter, attracting the attention of the entire camp. When she was able to stop giggling, Margaret looked up to see the captain eyeing them from a distance. "I don't think your captain approves of our light-minded conversation, Sergeant. We talk about something of a more sober nature. Tell me how you became lame, or have you always had problems with your leg?"

"No, Miss," he replied. "I wont born to be bumble-footed!"

"How old were you when the accident occurred? Were you wounded in a battle?"

"Well," he looked a bit sheepish, "not soo they so say. But the tale do take a rare betimes tellin', Miss."

"We've the time, Sergeant. I'd really like to hear about it." She leaned forward, arms about her legs and chin on her knees to listen.

"It were the day of the cap'n's manoors, near Black Notley, a whill back, praps two year. We ent et we's dinner nor supper, and the left'nant give me charge to find suthin' fer it. So'jers

be hard put to do wi'out proper food, Miss."

"I understand," she said. "So it becomes your responsibility to search for food. I suppose there were farmhouses with ample food supplies in the vicinity of your field maneuvers?"

"It do be soo, Miss," agreed the sergeant. "I betook meself not a way far, where they be a cottage and, right benext, a likely owd plum tree a bloomin' full o' fruit. But do that did that done," he shook his head sadly as he recalled the experience. "I payed fer gooin' agin me heart. I dint ast the cottage mum the right ta climb her tree, but jest set me mind to rob her and the younguns theys noorishoors."

"Oh, but I'm sure you didn't mean to take all the fruit. Surely the farmer's wife understood your need and was happy to share her bounty with you and the other men."

"Yes, Miss," he continued, his eyes twinkling, "she was that happy to share. When I clumb half way up, she do call out 'They ent nuthin' but owd plums. Theys dried up and bugged.' "And I called back 'I wont take but the owdest and of them but a few."

"And all the while, Coggs you intended to strip the tree, you old reprobate." Captain Coffield had been moving closer to listen to their conversation and now stood next to Margaret. She looked up and smiled a little hesitantly at him, and he responded by sitting down beside her. He told the sergeant not to let him be a hindrance, but to go on with his story.

"Noo, Cap'n Sir," Coggs said. "Do be makin' an end to me tale o' woe by takin' it from here. The young miss wunt but get the right of it then."

"You're doing just fine as long as you stay with the truth."

"Though it be agin me nature, Cap'n," Coggs said with a grin, I'll do me best." He raised his arms above his head to show how he made his ascent up the plum tree. "I took me hold of a branch not half covered wi' some plump uns and tried to swing me leg atop it like mountin' me nag. But of a sudden I was fast cotched up in a mess o' them owd plums on a branch benext, and I no cud be movin' one way or t'other."

"How frightening!" exclaimed Margaret. "I'm sure I would have been screaming my head off about then."

"Bless you fer a nooin' un, Miss," the sergeant chuckled, "if I wunt bellowin' soo ta wake the dead and gone o' Essex."

"I could hear him," interrupted the captain, "and thought he was being attacked by a wild animal. I shouted to the leftenant to take charge of the men and ran toward the sound of his voice."

"That be the right of it, Miss," the sergeant continued. "He cum betimes to save me skin and would a did but fer that branch soo weighty wid owd plums and meself. Of a sudden, the branch give a thun'drous crack 'n cum crashin' doon wi' me, breakin' me leg in two places. And that do be the end o' me tale, Miss." Coggs finished, satisfied with her sympathetic look.

"Not quite," said the captain. "I arrived--my heart in my throat as I watched him fall to the ground. I stood over him lying on the ground so white and still, and I thought he was dead. The cottage woman and her children gathered around, and we stood there just staring at him without saying a word. Then suddenly this tough old bird raised his head and looked at me, winking one puffy eye."⁴¹

"It's a bit of owd Cog'shall, I be thinkin', Cap'n Sir," he said. "I could cheerfully have wrung his neck at that moment, but instead I burst into laughter along with the farmer's wife and her children, and of course Old Coggs here."

The three of them had another laugh at the sergeant's expense, which he took in great stride. She and the captain may have come a little bit closer, thought Margaret, to recapturing their past friendship. At least it was a start.

The rain did not let up during the night. The cold penetrated their cloaks. Isabel and the other women huddled together, and the men did also, each group surrounded by soldiers who slept in sitting positions.

Captain Coffield awakened several times, walking up and down and giving his men instructions, then watching to see they were carried out. Everyone else was so exhausted they hardly stirred during the night, although little moans of discomfort could at times be heard within the women's group.

In the morning, the prisoners arose stiff and sore and even more fatigued than ever. They washed and drank once again from the waters of the Chelmer, had their biscuit meal, and resumed their journey. Isabel, who felt ill from a cold she had developed, was nevertheless aware of a softening in attitude between Margaret and the young captain. After he helped them mount, she heard her daughter speak to him.

"Captain Coffield, thank you and your men for giving up some of your blankets to the women last night. I hope you will not have any ill effects to suffer because of your generosity. And I hope you will forgive me for the rude things I said to you as we were starting out. I know now that you are only doing your duty and have the welfare of us, your prisoners, as a concern always. We appreciate your kindness."

He assured her he and his men were none the worse for sharing their blankets with the women, for they were used to camping out and had built up a resistance to cold and exposure. Isabel was happy to witness their growing friendliness. Perhaps some good would come of all this, and it wouldn't be remembered entirely as a hardship. They would be able to complete their journey and bear up under their privations.

But the second day's travel seemed even more onerous to her. A light-headedness caused by her cold made passing through the villages and hamlets take on a dreamlike quality, although she was aware of a great deal of discomfort. She was thankful to stop for their mid-morning rest at Great Waltham.

Isabel dozed fitfully during the warm early afternoon; and when they had their food and drink at Chelmsford, Margaret and Katherine draped two flat rocks lying upright together with their cloaks for her to lean against.

"Meg Darlin'," said Katherine, when they had made her as comfortable as possible and had walked a little way from the side of the stream where she sat, "I'm that worried about Ma'am. But your fine captain is kindly allowin' us--Chris and myself--to be walkin' in the woods, and I wondered if you'd be needin' me for a bit."

"Of course not, Katy," Margaret assured her, smiling. "Take your walk. It's time you two had a chance to be alone even for awhile to talk and, well, whatever else romantic you've a mind to do."

Her smile widened mischievously, then suddenly became a frown as she remembered what Katherine had said about William, and she declared as her friend started to walk away "He's not my fine captain."

"Ah now," Katherine's merry laughter rang throughout the camp. "If that be true, and I'm not a'tall certain of it, you'd both best be findin' others to be starin' at so longin'ly."

"Katy!" exclaimed Margaret, her face a bright pink. "Do I? And does he? Really? Is it so obvious? Oooh!"

"Meg Darlin'," Katherine answered in soothing words, "tis in love that you are. Don't be tryin' to fight it, lass. Just be savorin' all the joy and wonder of it." Then she hurried away to join Christopher, leaving her friend and would-be sister-in-law watching as they walked hand-in-hand in the direction of the woods.

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"We'll be here awhile," Christopher told her as they made their way amid the giant oak trees. "The captain feels that everyone needs a longer rest than usual after the bad weather yesterday, and I agree. The women especially could use some time to regain their strength before continuing the journey."

"Ma'am will be needin' more rest than the others," Katherine said. And even more than rest, I'm thinkin'. This dreadful cold has fair takin hold of her and will not be easy to be over and done with without some careful nursin'."

"I'm afraid you're right, Sweetheart. I wish she didn't have to go on, but there isn't much we can do to help her get better till we get to London. In the meantime, let's enjoy our time together away from the others. Do you realize how long it's been since we were alone, and I've been able to do this?" He bent his head and kissed her.

"Tis true, Chris Darlin'," she smiled up at him, "and so lovely a day for a walk in the woods with the tall trees reachin' to the heavens and all the spring flowers bloomin' every color of the rainbow. Look! I'm seein' bluebells and primroses and oxlips under that great tree ahead!" She let go of his hand and ran to the tree, where she fell on her knees before a flowerbed filled with riotous color. "Aren't they too beautiful for words?"

"Yes, they are," Christopher replied. "But they are not half as beautiful as my Katydid." He held out his hands, pulling her to her feet and drawing her into his arms to kiss her breathless. "Sweetheart," he sighed, as they broke apart and started walking again. "I want us to be married so that we can live together as man and wife and never have to be apart. I want to take care of you and provide for you and the children we will have."

"I want that, too, Darlin'," she agreed, "more than you know. Tis the dream of me heart to be cookin' and sewin' and cleanin' our own wee little cottage one day, with flowers growin' in the front and the back and a garden full of vegetables and fruits and trees of all kinds."

"And a bountiful harvest of beautiful red-headed and green-eyed colleens the lads will be falling all over themselves to steal away from us when we're middle-aged," said Christopher.

Katherine laughed. "Or tall handsome lads named John, Robert, William, Christopher and Thomas, who'll have to be carryin' big sticks for fightin' off the lasses succumbin' to the charms they have inherited from their darlin' father."

"Tell you what," he agreed, grinning impishly, "we'll just have a half dozen of each, although I'll settle for any number as long as I can have you for their mother."

They kissed lingeringly again; then, with their arms around each other, resumed walking as Christopher began to tell her of his friend, Roger Tanner's problem. "He's not so lucky as I am to be here with you, Katy Love. The bishop arrested him and wouldn't even let him see his fiancee, Eleanor Giles, before he left Birdbrook. He has been riding with John and didn't know till we stopped here at Chelmsford what William and Robert heard when they were hiding out at the Giles the day the bishop first came to call on us. Roger's frantic with worry over the screams and shouting that went on during Bishop Stokesley's visit to Lewis Giles, and he has no way of finding out if Eleanor and her family are all right."

"The poor lad!" exclaimed Katherine. "Tis a bit strange, also, I'm thinkin' that the Giles are non-conformists but were none of them arrested with us. Why would he be leavin' them behind?"

"Probably because their names were not on the list Mother had the boys take to Uncle Thomas. I believe they are rather recent converts to our cause."

"But then how would the old bishop be knowin' about them to be callin' on them the day before he was even findin' the list. Sure and it's a puzzle for the little people to be figurin' out."

Christopher chuckled. "I doubt it had anything to do with the magical powers of the leprechauns, Sweetheart. It is more than likely the old curate of St. Augustine brought them to the bishop's attention. He's turned himself into a lackey for John Stokesley--for profit, I'm sure--and has taken to spying on each family in Birdbrook to discover any behavior that indicates a leaning towards non-conformism."

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Christopher and Katherine weren't the only ones in the woods. Robert, William, and the Chapman brothers had talked the leftenant into taking them with him to spot any deer or other animals roaming there. He was looking for game to give the train a fresh supply of food. As soon as they entered the woods, he told the boys they could wander at will as long as they stayed together, but that he would go on his own to search for game.

This unlookedfor bit of freedom they quickly turned into their opportunity to "play soldier." Using the trees and the overgrown bushes as background, they began to stage a make-believe battle. Unlike the other prisoners, the boys were enjoying their journey

with the king's guard. They found the tales of war and accounts of skirmishes and maneuvers fascinating. They envied the soldiers their splendid uniforms and horses and were awestruck by the magnificent Arabian steed of Captain Coffield.

"I think I'd like to be a member of the guard some day," said Robert, when they sat down to rest after an exhaustive hour of play. "It'd be great to dress in royal livery and carry a sword."

"Me, too," his twin agreed. "Imagine traversing the length and breadth of England, defending the Crown."

"Especially on the kind of horses they ride," Richard Chapman agreed. "I doubt they'd get far on the old nags we're astride. Your horse, Old Joshua, could give them a run for their money if they were given a fifty-pace start."

"You don't have to be more than sixteen to be a guard," said John Chapman. "I know because I asked the lieutenant about it."

"But somebody has to buy your colors." William sounded wistful. "I don't suppose Grandfather would be willing to do that for us."

"Not very likely," said Robert, "since he has been more or less ignoring us all our lives until his recent invitation to come to London. Still, it wouldn't hurt to ask."

"Providing you don't have to spend the rest of your lives in the Fleet or worse--" Richard's comment made each of them reflect for a time on their uncertain future.

"Well, actually," said William, finally breaking their meditative silence, "even if Grandfather were willing to sponsor us, Mother would never consent to our----"

"Shush!" Robert suddenly put his fingers to his lips and then spoke in a whisper "Do you hear that?" He pointed toward a clump of trees, which were surrounded by leafy bushes reaching halfway up their thick trunks.

They remained very still and listened to the rustle of leaves, indicating someone or something was moving among these trees. Their eyes opened wide with wonderment as they saw a beautiful little faun step out from behind one of the trees and gaze at them. Her doe-eyes seemed to innocently accept them as harmless visitors to her forest home. She stood looking at them for what was to them time out of mind; then one of the boys made a movement as if to rise, and she turned and gracefully leapt over one of the leafy bushes and disappeared into a deeper part of the woods.

"Glory be!" William said as soon as he caught his breath and was able to find his voice. "Wasn't she beautiful? It was worth it to come here just to see her. I can hardly wait to tell John and Chris about her."

But as it happened, it was a much longer wait then they anticipated. The leftenant was gone for quite a while. When he came back without having found any game, he heard their story and decided to try his luck again in the direction they said the doe

had disappeared.

But while they waited this time, Robert and Richard Chapman went for a walk, promising the other two they would not stray far and would be back before the leftenant returned. As they were walking, they saw Christopher and Katherine coming toward them.

"Wouldn't you know, Katy," said Christopher, "that it is quite impossible to go anywhere in this world without running into a little brother or two."

"Ah, come on," Robert grinned. "We weren't looking for you and don't want to watch you la-dee-dahing, either. We just decided to go for a walk instead of waiting with nothing to do for the leftenant to finish looking for wild animals. And you won't ever believe what we saw."

"What have you been seein', Master Robert?" asked Katherine.
"Would it be the breathtakin' scenery we've been gazin' upon?"

"Course not," he replied. "That's all right, but we saw a real live deer, and she was about the most beautifulest animal we've ever seen. I bet you didn't look at anything like that."

"I'm afraid he has us there, My Love. Whatever would a courting couple find to look at that would compare to a real live deer, especially the most beautifulest one in the world. Next time I take you for a walk we will concentrate on searching for wild animals. There will be none of this la-dee-dahing any more," he said as they walked with the boys back to William and John.



EIGHT

Isabel awoke some time after they returned to hear Christopher and his uncle talking. The pounding in her head made their words indistinct, as if they were speaking from far off. They were discussing references to marriage in the scriptures; and the others, including Captain Coffield, were gathered around them listening.

"It is difficult, I agree," said Thomas, "to reconcile those two statements of the Lord's. The first 'What God hath joined together, let no man put asunder' infers that marriage is to be forever and divorce cannot nullify."

"Yet," Christopher contended, "His saying 'there is no marriage nor giving in marriage in heaven' gives credence to the final words of the ceremony 'till death do us part'. The thing that's hard to accept is the idea that you and Aunt Elizabeth, Mother and Father, and---" His eyes sought Katherine's-- "other faithful and devoted husbands and wives may not continue in loving relationships beyond the grave."

"I empathize with you, Christopher," said his uncle. "I must admit that living in the hereafter without my dear Elizabeth, even though I hope to become an angel of God if I can live to be worthy of that blessed state, robs heaven of part of its glory for me. Perhaps we do not fully understand these verses of scripture. There are many things that seem to require more

enlightenment. It might be well to leave them in the hands of our all-wise, all-knowing Father in heaven."

In her unreal, fevered state of mind, Isabel tried to ponder their words. She also looked back on the wonderful life which she and John had shared and felt in her heart it would extend into the eternities. And she yearned for Christopher and his sweet Katherine, who had yet to experience earthly union, for she was certain their love was deep and lasting.

Captain Coffield's voice broke into the contemplative silence which followed the discussion. He addressed himself to Christopher. "Are you aware, Sir, that marriages can be performed in Fleet Prison when there is a priest in attendance. If you and the young lady wish, I may be able to arrange for one of our London priests to officiate in a marriage ceremony."

Margaret, whose eyes had not left the captain's face during the discussion, let out a whoop of joy, hugging her brother and her friend, who were also expressing their happy responses to the news. Isabel's weak and hoarse voice tried to join in to tell them how much this meant to her.

"Oh, my dear children, I have worried so long that they would not let you marry." She looked toward the captain, her eyes full of tears. "I cannot thank you enough, Dear Sir, for you have no idea---" Her voice faded away as she fell back against the rocks and lost consciousness, a happy smile giving her pale countenance a peaceful look.

Captain Coffield came forward at once and gently lifted her into his arms. Margaret followed to stand by his side, her concern for her mother sweeping away any remaining unkind feelings she had towards him.

"William!" she exclaimed, "you have to do something!"

"I know, Margaret, and I will. Your mother is too ill to go on any farther." He informed his lieutenant they would stop there for the night, and that while he and the sergeant and the other guards saw to the prisoners, "I shall find a nearby farmhouse where Mistress Choate can stay until she is ready to journey once more."

Christopher had also come forward when his mother collapsed, his face full of anxiety. She was placed in his arms, and the captain mounted his steed and went to seek help. Everyone was concerned and gathered around offering to do what was needed, but they were told that the soldiers would be able to take care of her with Christopher's help. They fashioned a litter from a blanket and two saplings cut down in the nearby woods. John joined Christopher, and they carefully laid their mother upon it. When this was done, Margaret and Katherine brought cloths dipped in water to place on Isabel's fevered brow.

Within the hour, Captain Coffield returned with good news. "I have located a manor house a mile from here," he said. "We are actually resting in the owners' woodlands. They have been kind enough to offer Mistress Choate a room in their household, as

well as letting us use their barn for the bedding down of the rest of us."

There were sighs of relief and murmurs of gratitude from the company, and they began the preparations necessary to move in the direction of the manor house. The captain did not plan to wait for the rest of them, however, and led the way on horseback, allowing Christopher and John to walk and carry the litter so their mother would not be jostled as they went.

They soon arrived at the beautiful tudor mansion of Sir James and Lady Mary Mitchell, a well-to-do couple who looked to be in their early sixties. Sir James was a short stocky, bald-headed man with a ruddy complexion and a round, beaming face. He was a bit shy and had little to say beyond his "How do you do" when he was introduced.

On the other hand, Lady Mary Mitchell was tall and thin to the point of gauntness. Her features were sharp, giving her a rather severe expression, which together with her brusque manner when speaking was a bit off-putting. But her smile in greeting them seemed to transform her countenance, and her evident pleasure at their coming revealed her innately kind disposition.

Talking incessantly, she murmured words of comfort to Isabel, while making acid comments about the deplorable state of her health, which she blamed on the ridiculous starts of certain men of the cloth these days. She took immediate charge of her patient, who had revived somewhat by this time. She soon had her

fed, dosed, and tucked into bed. She also sent her servants to the barn with food and water and blankets for the others.

"It's more than likely," she said to the captain as they stood downstairs in the Great Hall after Isabel had been seen to and was fast asleep in the upper bedchamber where they had carried her, "that your charges will all become ill from exposure and lack of nourishing food."

"I fear that may be so, Lady Mitchell," he agreed, "but I have no choice in the matter of transporting prisoners. It is always the bishop's decision."

"And an absolutely dreadful one, in my estimation. You men!" she exclaimed in disgust as she began to ascend the staircase to look in on Isabel, surprising a chuckle from the normally taciturn young officer.

When Lady Mary was halfway up the stairs, she called for her husband to follow. He obeyed and reached her side to hear her say, in a low-pitched voice so the captain's ear would not pick up their conversation "It is very interesting that the bishop is having prisoners taken to the Fleet, don't you think? I believe that you, My Good Sir, in your capacity of Knight of the realm, might undertake to perform a chivalrous deed for--shall we say--a certain lady-in-distress. indeed I feel you are honor-bound to do so in behalf of the Mitchell family."

"Quite right you are, My Dear," said Sir James, beaming with the

pleasure of carrying out his wife's commission. This errand was one to his liking, quite worthy of his knighthood. "I'll leave for London the very first thing in the morning." They smiled at each other, then laughed heartily at their little conspiracy. It would be the most fun they had experienced in a long, long time.

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Captain Coffield went out of the front door of the manor house just in time to see Margaret coming up the path, escorted by Sergeant Coggs, to visit her mother. He studied her as she came near, looking more beautiful than he had ever seen her before, unaware that his face revealed his loving concern for her.

"Thank you for giving me permission to see Mother," she told him, her brown eyes filled with unshed tears. "I'll not stay long. I just want to find out how she is and see if there is anything I can do to help Lady Mary Mitchell care for her."

"Naturally," said the captain. He spoke in a kindly manner to her. "You are welcome to remain as long as you wish, although you do realize that you must return to the barn to spend the night."

"I understand and I promise to do so," she replied. She went inside the door he held open for her, not looking at him as she did; but once inside, she turned and watched him as he walked toward the barn. She stood there watching him until he went out of her sight, then turned back to make her way up the staircase to her mother's bedchamber.

Isabel lay sleeping while Margaret and Lady Mitchell conversed very quietly. They had taken to each other immediately and were on the friendliest of terms. Margaret had felt so nervous and tense about her mother, but she found these feelings easing as she talked with the older lady. She appreciated her encouraging words.

"Your mother will be all right, Child," said her ladyship. "All she really needs is rest and warmth and proper nourishment. I've given her a dose of my special remedy for colds. It's an herbal mixture which has been among my family recipes for centuries and handed down from the women to their daughters or granddaughters by word of mouth. I was told it by my grandmother."

"I'm so very grateful for all you are doing, Lady Mitchell," Margaret said, the tears she had tried to hold back flowing very freely now. "I've been so anxious about her, wondering if she might have developed consumption. She doesn't have a very strong constitution and has never before been subjected to the kind of exposure and cold she's experienced these last three days."

"There, there, Dear," her hostess put her arms around Margaret, "dry your tears and we'll have a cozy little chat about London. You can tell me what is happening in the royal court these days. I can see by your gown, even in its travel-worn condition, that you have recently come from there. We have not visited with His Majesty in St. James Palace for some time, although he has been to see us on occasion, for he enjoys hunting in our woods."

As a skilled conversationalist, Lady Mitchell drew a great deal of information from her young guest. She and her husband happening to be well-acquainted with the Quarles gave her opportunity to ask many questions and learn about their past relationship with their daughter and her family, the cause of their estrangement, and their hope for reconciliation.

Sir James and Lady Mary Mitchell were sympathetic to the non-conformist views of the prisoners, though they were not--being rather lukewarm to religion in any form--personally allied to their cause. This sweet young girl and her mother intrigued her ladyship, and she was determined to do what she could for them. The idea she had hinted at to her husband earlier had grown into several by this time, and she was anxious to talk them over with him before he left in the morning.

In the meantime, however, she wanted to help Margaret regain her composure so she would be able to present a cheerful countenance when her mother awakened. After her tears had dried, Lady Mary suggested she might like to have a tour of the manor. Margaret quickly agreed and followed her hostess as she led her through the rooms which were full of the Mitchell's many household treasures on display.

Lady Mitchell's running commentary about these--which at times bordered on the hilarious due to her biting references to the foibles and follies of various of her and her husband's ancestors and present relations--delighted Margaret, who joined with

her in laughter which echoed throughout the halls of the manor as she revealed every single one of their idiosyncrasies.

"They try to act like noble men and women, the poor oafs," she declared, "but they haven't a clue as to how to go about it. Their manners are no better than the gutter snipes they make such a show of looking down upon. They affect airs and graces when they come to visit and provide a great deal of amusement for our servants as well as ourselves. Actually, there is not a servant in our employ but who has manners well above theirs and is worth a dozen or more of any one of Sir James relations or of mine. However, his family is much worse than mine, of course."

"When we get to the portrait gallery," she continued, "you'll be able to tell just how badly they represent their class. Most of them could not get a toe into the royal court, even if it were attached to all the wealth in their possession to bribe the king for allowing them to be presented. And the Royal Treasury generally needing all the replenishment it can get, you know how very susceptible he is to bribes these days."

NINE

The downstairs hall, called the "Great Hall," was an enormous room with a lofty ceiling. Its center, where the business of the household, as well as that of the manor and the village, was conducted, was open to the roof timbers. The sides were divided into storeys so that all the bedchambers were located above the two curved staircases, one of which Margaret had climbed up to visit her mother.

She was fascinated by the high fireplace which warmed the hall. It had a chimney which reached beyond the roof. On the hearth were numerous logs and, on either side, andirons on which the logs were laid. There was a fire pan to catch the ashes and a fire-fork to save the logs from rolling out of the fireplace.

As the room was used for dining, it was furnished with several long tables. For seating, there were long benches the servants used and carved stools for the Mitchells and their guests. The tables were covered with a green carpeting, and Margaret wanted to know if they were easier to clean than plain wooden surfaces were. Lady Mitchell didn't know. She said she would have to ask the servants.

All the walls were hung with tapestries, gaily decorated. Most of the scenes were of hunts, although a few biblical stories were portrayed. Her ladyship said she and Sir James were probably not as interested in religion as they should be. Margaret

did notice a favorite one of her Catholic grandparents, a picture of Saint Christopher with his big-featured, honest face and the stylized waves washing about his feet. It reminded her of how upset they would be over the arrest of their daughter and grandchildren.

"Mother will love to see these tapestries, Lady Mary," Margaret said. "She is a fine artist, you know. I'm sure you have seen some of her oil paintings on display in St. James Palace portrait gallery. Since her marriage to my father, she has added to her talent of painting that of weaving the cloths for her tapestries and embroidering them also. She has enjoyed a great success in these additions, which have made her portrayals of individuals quite life-like."

"I would like very much to see some of your mother's work," said her ladyship. "Perhaps, when this ridiculous arrest and imprisonment is over, we may pay her a visit."

"Oh, how she would delight to entertain you, Lady Mary."

In between the tapestries, the Mitchell family's Coat of Arms was hung, along with suits of armor, swords, bows and arrows, and boar spears--all of which presumably would be needed if Sir Mitchell's household was ever called upon to defend themselves or their sovereign in case of attack by an enemy or in time of war. Lady Mitchell called Margaret's attention to the Coat of Arms in gules and argent, with a wild boar rampant in the center of the shield.

"Looks just like my sister-in-law," she claimed. "Same face, same figure. Same attitude, too. Ready to charge head first into anyone or anything that gets in her way. Not a bit like my dear James, who wouldn't hurt a flea if he could help it."

They visited the parlor next, a comfortable room just off the hall. In addition to the tapestries on the walls, there were curtains at the windows. These were not usually found in manor homes in Essex County, Lady Mitchell explained. But her childhood chum, who lived in Suffolk County, had them in her parlor; and she wasn't about to be outshone by her friend, so she had them made up for herself.

The tables in the parlor were also covered with green carpets and the chairs carved, as was the bench, which had a back with a benchcloth and cushions. Two cupboards stood on either side of the room. On the shelves of one were hogsteads and flasks of beer. "Sir James' family are heavy beer drinkers," she told her young guest. The shelves of the other cupboard were lined with pewter dishes and candlesticks.

"Now here," Lady Mitchell said as she opened the doors of the lower part of the cupboard, "are my most prized possessions. I keep them hidden away and only bring them out on special occasions." Reaching into the cupboard, she brought forth a silver-gilded wooden bowl, with matching silver spoons and silver salt sellars. "These were part of my wedding present from my parents, along with my substantial dowry. I will always cherish them and

keep them safe and in perfect condition to remind me of the generosity of my family. Sir James' parents gave us an ornamented brass chamber pot for out master bedroom."

The humor of this outrageous gift struck Margaret and started her giggling. Soon her hostess, who had been standing there thinking about it with a disgusted look on her face, joined in and the parlor rang with their laughter.

When they were able to collect themselves, Lady Mitchell insisted Margaret take a tour of the inside kitchen, which as far as she could see was much like her mother's, except the pots and pans and kettles were of copper and the dishes of pewter. There was, however, a great powdering trough for meat at one end of the room. It could accomodate the largest buck Sir James or any other man would ever be able to bring down while hunting in their woods, she claimed. Margaret was certain that was true and thought the size of the trough a bit much.

As Margaret wandered around the kitchen, admiring its utility, Lady Mitchell was busily searching through her cupboards for a recipe she knew Isabel would want to have. At last, she proudly produced it for her young guest.

"I'm going to get a quill and paper so you can copy this for her. She will love using it for her next venison pie." She hurried out of the kitchen to fetch the writing implements, leaving Margaret to ponder how a recipe for curing deer could possibly be of use to them when they were facing imprisonment and probable

execution at the hands of Bishop Stokesley.

Her ladyship returned, handed the quill and paper and a small container of ink to Margaret, and began enthusiastically to dictate the following:

Recipe for One Red Deer

One pound of lard to cooke 2 shillings 8 pence

One and one half pecks of rye mash 1 shilling 2 pence

One ounce of cinnamon and

One ounce of ginger 3 pence each

One pound of pepper bestowed on it 2 shillings 6 pence

The deer is then to be wrapped in green leaves and hung from the rafters, where it is left for several days to allow all the spices to penetrate and flavor it. Afterwards, it is placed in an outdoor fireplace and roasted until tender.

When Margaret had copied the all-important recipe, she was taken outside and led through the summer kitchen, laundry, bakehouse, brewhouse, salting house and dairy. She exclaimed over these for their size as well as their utility and pleased her hostess in so doing.

"We are proud of the conveniences we have provided for our staff, said Lady Mitchell. "Our servants work very hard, but there are more than enough of them to share the tasks they are required to undertake. And food is always in abundance for them as it is for ourselves. We believe that servants who are comfortably fed and clothed and sheltered are happier and better workers."

"You are a very wise employer, Lady Mitchell," Margaret told her. "I can see by their smiling faces and cheerful attitudes that they find pleasure in serving you and your guests. Your generosity is everywhere evident. I have truly enjoyed touring your beautiful manor home. It has been fascinating and very educational. Some day when I am mistress of my own home, I shall try to make it a place of warmth and friendliness also. Thank you for allowing me this experience."

"The tour isn't over yet, young lady," said her hostess. "If you have liked it so far, just wait until we explore the upstairs portion of the manor house." She led the way up the opposite staircase to the one they had come down.

"This is the "Great Chamber," she explained as they entered an enormous bedchamber, "where King Henry always sleeps whenever he comes to visit."

Margaret was somewhat taken aback to see the magnificent canopied bed with purple and white satin curtains. The bedclothes consisted of a huge mattress, feather bed, bolster, feather pillows, a quilt and coverlet of the finest needlework, and several linsey-woolsey blankets. The colors of the bedclothes were shades of blue, rose and violet, which blended in beautifully with the purple and white canopy curtains.

There was a fireplace on one side of the room and tapestries on the other walls. Two chairs and three massive chest, all carved with the tudor rose design, lined the walls. One of the chests

was painted green, another blue and silver, and the third was rose and gilt. A fourth large chest was made of iron, Lady Mary said, so that His Majesty would have a place to store his valuables when he was out hunting.

The other side of the hall upstairs housed the servants and the remaining bedchambers, including the one in which Isabel lay sleeping. The Mitchell's chamber was smaller than the king's, but it also had a four-poster bed with a red and gold curtained canopy. At the foot of the bed was a large carved chest for the bed linens, and an ornately-carved armoire stood against one of the walls. Alongside it, looking as if it had been fashioned to match, was a brass chamber pot.

When they reached Isabel's bedchamber, she was still sleeping. They stood watching for awhile. She was not as pale as before and seemed more calm, which eased Margaret's worry. This suited Lady Mitchell, for she wanted to give the young girl hope that her mother would be able to bear the terrible business Bishop Stokesley had brought upon them. She decided it was time to tell her about the plan she and Sir James had in mind, although she had not fully informed her husband of it.

"It so happens," her ladyship explained, "that my sister-in-law is the warden of Fleet Prison. You see, her husband was descended from Robert de Leveland, whose family had counted the Fleet Bridge part of their estate since William conquered England in 1066. When Robert, who took part in the Crusade to the Holy Land

in 1201, died without having a male heir, his wife, Margaret, became his successor as custodian of the Fleet."

"Isn't that unusual to have a lady serve as warden of a prison? It seems like such an awful responsibility even for a man." said Margaret, who thought of such places as horrible, rat-infested dungeons. "How could she stand to superintend it?"

"Well," Lady Mitchell replied, "my understanding is that conditions at the prison are not too bad. After all, only debtors and those who are arrested for contempt of court are usually sent there. The Fleet is actually not a real prison, but an ancient castle--probably not kept in best repair, if my sister-in-law's housekeeping has not changed drastically--and certainly more like a home than anything else. Let me give you a little of its genealogical history."

"Ownership of the prison was passed down from father to son, or to daughter if there was no male to inherit. This has meant many name changes through the years. Some of the surnames of former wardens were Goodwin, Ballard, Thorncraft, Wickham and Andrews, the name of my sister-in-law's husband, who died last year from a fall off his horse during a race in which he was trying to win a wager, leaving her in charge. Stupid thing for him to do, as if anyone could ride sidesaddle without a sidesaddle, but not nearly as stupid as Philadelphia being left to run the Fleet."

"Is she not strong enough for the task, then? How very difficult it must be for her without her husband's support."

"Not strong enough?" Lady Mitchell snorted. "As I told you, she is like the wild boar on the Mitchell Coat of Arms, both physically and mentally. She will ride roughshod over everyone she can. And that's where the good offices of my husband come into play in your behalf. He has a great deal of influence with his sister."

Margaret arose and walked over to stand by her mother's bedside. "Do you really think he can talk her into being lenient with us while we are in her custody?"

"I'm absolutely certain of it," Lady Mary replied. "All he needs to do if she turns down his request is to hint that he might put an on-dit in the king's ear about her husband's family scandal."

When Margaret wanted to know whether it was something which would give His Majesty a bad opinion of Lady Andrews, Lady Mitchell was quick to say "Au contraire, My Dear. He would burst into peals of laughter, though she has no way of knowing that."

"Now here is the story," she continued. "Her husband's grandmother, Mary Carter, was warden of the Fleet when a young man named Joseph Andrews was imprisoned there, claiming to be scion of a deceased nobleman whose estate he had gambled away. He was a charmer, winning her pity, then her heart so that she married him and he became the warden. It wasn't until years later, when they had a son and heir, that she learned he was actually son of the nobleman's steward and had run off with the family's silver, which he lost while gambling."



Isabel was greatly improved by morning and felt able to undertake the last leg of their journey. She told the captain so when he called to see how she fared. His kind concern gave her the courage to talk to him about why he had been mistrustful of them in the beginning of their travels and had treated them with such disdain.

"I believe you have had a mistaken idea of our behavior, Sir," she said. "What do you think we have done to warrant our being punished by imprisonment and even possibly by execution? Do you believe our desire to read the Holy Bible in English, which is all we have been accused of, is sufficient grounds for what we face?"

"No Ma'am," replied the young officer, "if that were all; but my understanding is that it is not. According to what I have been told, your behavior has been a great deal more blasphemous than that. Why, for example, did you people break into Birdbrook Parish church the night before we left and steal the alabaster image of Our Lady, which was found broken and lying in a ditch at Steeple Bumpstead early that morning? And why did you pull down and burn the rood with its taper? That is sacreligious, Ma'am, and wanton destruction of God's property, and certainly grounds for being branded heretics and punished accordingly."

Isabel said nothing for a time as she gazed open-mouthed at him.

When she spoke at last, it was with controlled tone of voice.

"I do not know, Captain Coffield," she declared, "who is responsible for destroying that property, but I do know that we are not. We are peaceable, law-abiding subjects of His Majesty, King Henry, who has--in the past, at least--given tacit consent to non-conformism in England. I believe it is evil clergymen of the Roman church who have branded us as heretics and brought false accusations against us."

Margaret had quietly entered the bedchamber with Lady Mitchell and added "My mother is correct, William. We have done nothing against the law of the land or the laws of God. And since all of us were in custody of the bishop and his private army during that night, I should imagine some other persons were assigned to vandalize St. Augustine's in Birdbrook--just as so many of the neighboring parish churches have been treated thusly of late and been made to appear the work of non-conformists."

Captain Coffield seemed stunned by this announcement. "Can this be, Margaret? If this is true, I apologize, Mistress Choate. Of course you could not have been in two places at once. But the curate of Birdbrook himself told me you had come--all forty-one of you--and that when the bishop's men arrived a little later, you had just completed burning the rood. He said they followed in the direction he told them you had gone and found where you had thrown the statue of Our Lady into the ditch and then they had returned and had given him their report. When he heard what had happened, he decided to send for us to Halstead, where my

men and I were engaged in military maneuvers."

"I hope you have learned some wisdom today, young man," said Lady Mary, who had been listening with great interest. "Make sure you remember it well. Things are not always what they seem to be."

"I shall remember, Lady Mitchell," the captain said, not looking at her but at Margaret. "I certainly shall." Then he turned to Isabel and asked "Are you ready to be carried back to your horse, Ma'am? We should be on our way before the sun gets too high in the sky."

She agreed and they said their goodbyes to Lady Mary with promises of visiting each other at some future date, promises that Isabel thought stood little chance of being kept by her. But she was careful not to voice her misgivings.

Everyone was in better spirits for the rest of the journey. The comfortable night sleeping in the barn on the soft hay, covered with warm blankets, and the good food they had both eaten and had been provided in satchels for their nourishment later in the day while they travelled, cheered them for the miles ahead.

Also they were nearing the end of their trip to London and were somehow encouraged that things would not be as bad as they had originally thought. Perhaps the stories they had heard were much exaggerated about prison conditions, thought Isabel. Tortures were surely not engaged in as in ancient times, were they?

The attitude of the guards towards the prisoners had changed also. While they were not overly friendly, they were certainly much more considerate of them--particularly the women--and they engaged in conversation with all of them frequently as they traveled. The result of this was a number of lively discussions of religious matters, carried on at each rest stop. Those between Thomas and Captain Coffield, who seemed quite taken with each other and were growing in comraderie, were the liveliest.

Katherine called Isabel's attention to their friendship at one of their rest stops. "Master Thomas is in a fair way to be makin' a convert of the worthy captain, Ma'am. Faith, and I were not already of like mind, his fine explanation of the word of God would be the persuadin' of meself."

She made this remark while they rested in Epping Forest, where they had been admiring its beauty and the magnificence of the great hornbeam trees. They had agreed that nature reflected the goodness and the love of God toward mankind and that the creation of the earth for human benefit humbled them and made them more conscious of their need to show their gratitude by doing His will.

Thomas and the captain were walking in their direction and were having a discussion about Saint Paul's epistle to the Ephesians that caught their attention. Isabel motioned to the men to sit down by them so that they might listen to their thoughts on this interesting subject.

"But if we are to have one Lord, one faith, and one baptism," said Captain Coffield, continuing without interruption as they seated themselves, "as you say he told the people, why wouldn't that be the Holy Roman Church? After all, before these reformers came along and tried to change the church, we seemed to be one."

"I grant you," replied Thomas to his question, "that the church in Saint Paul's day was of one mind and purpose. He made it very plain that the Lord organized His church with apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers for "the perfecting of the saints, the work of the ministry, and the edifying of the body of Christ till we all come to a unity of faith,' which was to be the outcome of this kind of organization. Else why do you think these things were mentioned by Saint Paul as necessary?"

The captain countered Thomas's question with one of his own "Do you know why those offices you spoke of were not carried down if they were part of the early Christian church?"

"No, I do not," replied Thomas, "but Saint Paul also told the saints at Thessalonia that 'the day of Christ shall not come except there be a falling away first and satan be revealed as one who sits in the temple of God, showing himself as if he were God.'

Isabel watched the expression on the captain's face change from one of thoughtfulness, to understanding, and then to amazement as he began to digest these words. Finally, with reluctance, he asked "Are you suggesting that His Holiness the Pope, who sits upon a throne, is pretending to be God?"

"My Good Fellow," Thomas answered, shaking his head, "I am merely quoting from scripture. Being neither a prophet nor seer, but an ordinary man, I can only search for truth from the sole source of truth known to me at this time, my New Testament."

"I always pray for understanding," he continued, "but as Saint Paul's words to the Corinthians, 'I now see through a glass darkly.' Yet I have faith as he did that when I leave this earth and come face to face with my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, I shall know Him even as I am known by Him."

Captain Coffield shook his head, bemused, while Isabel silently applauded the testimony Thomas had just borne. He is so right, she thought. It will be worth every sacrifice we must make to one day know and be known by Him. She was reminded of the hymn composed by the German monk, Martin Luther, who had broken away from the Roman church some time ago. Let me think, how does it go? She tried to recall the words.

A mighty fortress is our God
A tower of strength ne'er failing.
A helper mighty is our God,
O'er ills of life prevailing.
He overcometh all.
He saveth from the Fall.
His might and power are great.
He all things did create.
And he shall reign forevermore.

The sun was setting by the time they reached the outskirts of London. Even though bone-weary and anxious about the future, Isabel's heart was full as she gazed at the dear familiar landmarks of this place where she had spent her childhood and youth. Their passage through the city took them along the banks of the Thames, a little to the south of her parents' mansion, which was near Mary le Bow, King Henry's private park. She wondered how they were, especially her father, whose illness still had her concerned. Apparently Margaret felt the same.

"Mother," she asked, "do you suppose Grandfather will be well enough to visit us in Fleet Prison? I know Sir James has some influence with his sister, but Grandfather's presence would lend even more support, surely."

"Yes, My Dear," her mother, who had been told the Mitchell's plan, agreed. "I've been thinking about that, too. Not only the wealth Father has, which Lady Mary has told you carries a great deal of weight with her sister-in-law, but also his friendship with the king should give her reason to court his favor through us."

"Why Mother," Margaret said, giggling, "I do believe you have a spot of deviousness in your character, just like Lady Mary. But never mind, I forgive you for it. Lady Carter-Andrews sounds a tartar, but with Sir James and Grandfather poised to whisper in King Henry's ear she should be somewhat inclined to lean toward favoring our cause."

"We will pray so," said her mother, before cautioning Margaret not to mention Lady Mitchell's conversation concerning her sister in-law to the others. It might prejudice their opinion of Lady Carter-Andrews, which would not be fair, Isabel said. Margaret agreed to keep her own counsel.

When their company reached St. Andrews by the Wardrobe, Captain Coffield issued a command to turn right towards St. Martin Ludgate. There, to the east of Ludgate Hill, stood the Fleet. It was a castle turned prison, and of such antiquity that it was rumored to have been built before the Conquest. However, Isabel thought the towers similar to the Norman Keep at Castle Hedingham in Essex. The prison was enclosed by a high stone wall and surrounded by a broad, deep moat.

They crossed the bridge which spanned the moat and entered the tall iron gate into the prison courtyard. Captain Coffield gave his men instructions to immediately dismount and help the women prisoners, while he reported to Lady Carter-Andrews. Sergeant Coggs wore a heavy frown as he assisted Isabel and Margaret; and when he was asked why, hesitated before replying to Margaret's question.

"That ent hardly fer me ta say, Miss," he told her, "but it do seem suthin' worse than a Cogg'shall job fer ye here. That owd warden ent carin' for but two things--guineas 'n givin' turr'ble whippins--mind ye dunt do nuthin' to make she angry so's ta be feelin' the sting of the lash."

"Why Sergeant Coggs," said that young lady, smiling sweetly at him, "how very kind of you to worry about us." She patted him on the arm. "We will be fine. Lord Mitchell came on ahead of us, you know, and will have talked to his sister by now, explaining that we are not ordinary prisoners."

"Do that did that done, Miss," the sergeant muttered as he began to walk away. He stopped before mounting his horse and turned back to her and added "Doubt ye'll cum ta harm, the good cap'n doin' the watch o'er ye; but if ye do be needin' owd Coggs, I ent so fur away ta cum bumble-footed to yer aid."

"Thank you, My Good Friend, I know you will," she assured him. "We realize we can count on you no matter what happens and, if necessary, we shall certainly call upon your services."

The heavy carved oak doors of the prison opened. Out of these stepped the largest lady Isabel had ever seen. She was several inches taller than her brother and at least twice his girth. She appeared even more so because her farthingale made her skirts stand out like boxes on either side, so she completely filled the doorway, making it necessary for Sir James and the captain and yeoman warders to trail behind her.

Her dress combined Tudor and a much earlier design. Perhaps she is reluctant to give up the fashions she cherished in her youth, thought Isabel. Black velvet proclaimed her widowhood; but her low-necked and tight-fitting bodice--more suited to a younger married woman--revealed an astonishingly ample bosom and rolls

of fat that its stays could not disguise, even though it was draped over with several necklaces of gold, rubies, diamonds and emeralds. The shorter strands of these lay partially hidden beneath her double chins.

Attached to the back of her gown, at the neck, was an elaborate white ruff, which framed her large head and accentuated the porcine roundness of her features. A matching white kirtle, or underskirt peered out from below her split skirt front. Then to complete her unusual costume, she wore an old-fashioned henin on her head, her hair tucked up inside its tall, peaked cone-like shape.

Despite her heaviness, Lady Carter-Andrews moved briskly down the ramp toward the spot where Isabel and her family had gathered. Ignoring the other prisoners, she stared at the Choates for what seemed an interminable length of time to Isabel, then addressed her in an imperious manner.

"You are Mistress Choate," she stated. At Isabel's "Yes, Lady Carter-Andrews," she continued "I understand you are to be given special consideration, you and your family."

"Oh, not more than our friends, I hope," Isabel protested. "We are none of us crimminals."

"I am the warden of the Fleet, Madam," declared her ladyship, "and I shall decide who is or is not a crimminal." She waved a ring-bedecked hand over the rest of the group. "And while I am

making my decisions, you will each stay where I assign you and be treated as I deem proper. Now follow me."

Upon entering the Great Hall--a room so vast it was almost overwhelming to Isabel and the others--Lady Carter-Andrews began to give directions. The yeoman warders were to take all the prisoners to their quarters in the lower rooms of the castle, except for the Choates, who were to be housed upstairs.

"Lord Mitchell and Captain Coffield will accompany Thomas Choate and your sons to the upper apartments where your family will be staying," she told Isabel. "Married couples have their own accommodations, otherwise men and women are strictly separated. Rules of the Fleet ordinarily prohibit socializing among its inmates, but an exception has been made in your family's behalf, as long as you conduct yourself appropriately. Just remember not to abuse your privileges or they will be taken away from you, regardless of the consequences."

This last remark of the warden was directed towards her brother but was not lost upon Isabel and Margaret, who were careful not to look at each other while she was talking.

"While you gentlemen escort the others upstairs, I'll acquaint the ladies with the History of the Fleet. Then I will show them to their rooms. Come with me," she said and led them into the center of the Great Hall, where she intends to make us feel our insignificance, Isabel thought. And I do feel very small indeed and very dependent upon my Heavenly Father's guidance.



ELEVEN

"You will note," said her ladyship as she began her lecture and tour of the Fleet, "that our Great Hall is much more luxuriously appointed than Lord and Lady Mitchell's, which she has taken the responsibility of decorating I might add. We have more elaborate tapestries, more suits of armor worn in famous battles and arms used in those battles displayed on our walls, and all our family crests are of more ancient origin."

More luxurious and older perhaps, but not as well-cared-for as the Mitchell manor house, Isabel noticed. Those objets d'art were covered with so many layers of dust it was difficult to see them. One of the walls was top-heavy with weapons of all kinds. Leaning against it were countless suits of armor which were so filthy dirty their odor was sickening. Tapestries on two of the walls looked faded from dust and grime. When they were new, the hall must have been ablaze with color.

On the remaining wall was a two-hundred-foot tapestry, which the warden had commissioned some women prisoners to weave and embroider. It was crudely made and the design difficult to make out, although she claimed it depicted the exploits of her husband's ancestor, Nathaniel de Leveland, in the Battle of Hastings and the famous Crusade of 1201, where his son and heir, Robert de Leveland, had--according to her--almost singlehandedly carried out that religious expedition and thus brought honor to himself, his king and his country.

After her lecture tour, Lady Carter-Andrews let them spend some time looking over the treasures she had pointed out to them while she stood guard. Margaret browsed among the Coats of Arms and was soon able to spot the Mitchell crest with the boar rampant that Lady Mary Mitchell had taken such delight in telling her about. And she decided Lady Mary was right. Her sister-in-law did indeed bear a remarkable resemblance to the beast. And judging by what Margaret had seen so far of Lady Carter-Andrews, it appeared her personality was also akin to that of the charging animal.

Katherine was fascinated by the suits of armor, although she felt somewhat repelled by their nauseous odor. She was examining one very ornately decorated when she started to giggle. Lady Carter-Andrews frowned as she walked over to where she was standing and addressed her in an accusing manner.

"You find something amusing about this armor worn by Robert de Leveland while on the Great Crusade of 1201 to Jerusalem, where he distinguished himself above all his comrades in arms. As I believe I have told you, the ornamentation on these was commensurate with the knight's station in life. His was of the highest. In the ranks of the nobility, he was second to none."

"I'm sorry, Milady," Katherine apologized prettily, "I was not meanin' to be makin' fun of his lordship, truly I wasn't; but lookin' at this grand metal coverin' of a brawny sort of lad--clean and shiny as it must have been in the beginnin'--tickles the Irish in me. I have a picture in me mind of the noble sir

huggin' his lady love as he's off to the wars, and her standin' there with tears in her eyes, and a broken rib or two, wavin' him farewell."

Katherine's laughter was infectious and Margaret, Isabel and Elizabeth soon joined with her in picturing the scene that might have taken place on the eve of the Great Crusade. But her ladyship frowned even more heavily at Katherine, as she now had some- dreadful with which to accuse her.

"You are Irish?" she asked, her voice expressing deepest outrage. Her heavy lips were pursed as though she had eaten food that was very distasteful. "With all that atrocious red hair, I should have suspected it. What are you doing here with Mistress Choate's family? I am certain you cannot be a member of it, unless there is a tainted branch on her ancestral tree."

"Katherine is betrothed to my son, Christopher, your ladyship." Isabel said with quiet dignity. "She is a lovely young lady of noble lineage whose father, being the youngest of several sons, was neither titled nor wealthy."

In obvious disbelief, Lady Carter-Andrews continued her interrogation of Katherine, asking "And what, may I ask, would be your surname?"

"O'Brian, Milady," she replied, looking straight into the eyes of the warden. "Descended we are from the first king of Ireland, Brian Boru. 1000 A.D. the beginnin' of his reign, me father says.

"A likely story," her ladyship snorted in disapproval. "As your father undoubtedly kissed the Blarney Stone once too often, or had had one too many beers at the local tavern when he told you such a fairy tale as that. I do not believe a word of it, and I have a mind to-----"

"My Lady," Margaret said quickly, before the warden could let her mind be known, "pardon me, but I wonder if you would point out to me your Carter-Andrews Coat of Arms." She stood in front of one she thought might be the correct one. "My grandfather was well-acquainted with your husband, and I would like to be able to show it to him when he comes to visit us. I'm sure he would be very interested in seeing it."

The warden was not happy with the interruption of her lecture, but she seemed torn between continuing her castigation of this Irish upstart and the satisfaction of giving another splendid discourse on the prominence of her husband's family.

"You are not standing near it," she said to Margaret. "It is on the north wall. This way." She lead her to where the Coat of Arms in question was hanging and pointed out its features with pride while Margaret admired, seemingly enthralled by her description.

When Lady Carter-Andrews finished, she expressed interest in Sir Hubbard Quarles. "Your grandfather is a very wealthy man, is he not? Of course, he amassed his fortune in trade. He is a draper, I believe, and has shops where his merchandise unloaded from the ships sent to foreign parts are made into items for sale."

"Yes, he is a draper, the finest of his guild in all of London," declared Margaret. "His merchandise, much of which is from the orient, is sought after by members of the nobility for their more costly wearing apparel. He himself, as you know, was knighted by King Henry the Seventh, father of our present monarch, for his service to his king and country."

"For his donations to the Royal Treasury, you mean," the warden sneered. "It is disgraceful that the nobility has been sold so cheaply of late. Those of us with ancient lineage are not given the respect and consideration due us, nor do we have the funds with which to adorn ourselves and our mansions properly. Fleet Prison is a very large institution, and its affairs expensive to conduct. Perhaps your grandfather would be willing to contribute funds for its upkeep."

"Possibly," said Margaret, a bit sarcastically, "if his daughter and grandchildren were not held here as inmates."

"I have no control over who is sent here to be imprisoned, Miss Choate," her ladyship angrily retorted, "nor do I have anything to do with their trial and sentencing. But I should warn you that I have a great deal to do with how they are treated with in my care, and you would do well to give heed to what I say and to conduct yourselves as I wish at all times while you are here."

"Oh, I think I can promise you that our conduct will be above reproach," countered Margaret. "My mother's background is that of polite court manners, and she has taught these to her children

Lady Carter-Andrews brushed aside the implied insult to her in Margaret's statement because she wished to pursue another avenue to Sir Hubbard Quarles generosity. She suggested that there were ways that a stay in the Fleet might be made more comfortable for them.

"There are sometimes granted to prisoners who can afford them special amenities. The fees for these are not prohibitive--only the bare minimum of the cost to me when they are granted--and I am authorized to grant these privileges whenever I see fit. With your grandfather's great wealth, he will surely be able to provide the fees needed."

"I'm sure he will, Your Ladyship," Margaret agreed. "He will no doubt wish to do everything in his power to ease our imprisonment whatever the cost to him. He will be trying to have us released first of all, but barring that, he will give us money for those special amenities you spoke about."

"And oh yes," continued Margaret, "he may possibly be able to aid you in solving your money problems." She paused here for emphasis. "Just as Lord Mitchell, my grandfather is very well-acquainted with His Majesty. Since they both have his ear, they may drop a hint or two there in your behalf. It's surprising what a little bit of influence have on our gracious king to make him aware of the respect due your ancient lineage." And that, My Dear Lady, Margaret said to herself as she heard the unmistakeable sound of choking coming from the warden, will give you food for thought.

The three apartments they were to occupy--one for the men, one for the women, and a separate one for Thomas and Elizabeth--were far more austere than the rooms downstairs would have led them to expect. They were divided into small bedchambers and kitchen-sitting rooms. In the former were cots for beds, each with straw mattress and scanty bedding, and a cupboard for their clothes. The latter contained a table made of a long plank placed over two large and heavy casks, with one bench on either side of the table made of planks placed over smaller casks.

Breakfast and midday meals would consist of bread and milk and whatever other items of food they were willing to pay for. As they were to be given special consideration, per the instructions of Lord Mitchell, they would dine with Lady Carter-Andrews in the Great Hall downstairs. But the younger members of the family would be responsible for carrying the food from the kitchen--a not inconsiderable distance from the dining area--and serving it before sitting down to eat with the others.

Lady Carter-Andrews would have been surprised, thought Isabel, to know that having her children given chores to do was quite pleasing to her. They had been taught to work and would have found idleness difficult. She must look for other ways to keep them busy.

She must find ways to keep her own thoughts from overwhelming her soul with melancholy. Her prayers should be prayers of faith not of desperation. She would work on that.

Posted on the door of each apartment was a list of the fees that were charged for special privileges. They were few in number and rather expensive, when one considered how restrictive they were in description:

For the liberty of the house	L 2. 4. 6
For the liberty of the garden	L 4. 8. 2
For Liberty at large	L 6. 10. 4
For a chaplain	12. 6
For a porter	3. 0
For a chamberlain	5. 0
For visitors	L 8. 6. 2

The men came down the hallway from their apartment, and Thomas and Elizabeth from theirs. Captain Coffield was ready to leave and carry any messages or instructions to Isabel's father. He was happy to do so, he declared, smiling at Margaret while he talked to her mother.

"Thank you, Captain Coffield," said Isabel. "If Father is not too ill to come himself, please tell him I long to see him and Mother again."

"I will inform him so, Mistress Choate, and if they are unable to come because of ill health, I shall bring word from him to you. And I shall notify him immediately of the fees required for the special privileges you desire to purchase and return with the necessary funds straightway. I am sure he will be more than pleased to send all that you wish."

"Oh, yes," Margaret joined in the conversation, "if he sends us enough for liberty at large, we can go to see them. That would be even better than them coming here. According to the map of the area Lady Carter-Andrews showed me downstairs, their mansion is well within the boundaries established by the Rules of the Fleet."

"It certainly is," agreed the captain. "But don't be too surprised if the warden increases the cost of taking these liberties. She is aware that your grandfather can afford to pay more than the usual fees and will be sure to take full advantage of this knowledge."

He then turned to Katherine and said "I have already informed your intended that there is a priest imprisoned here who would be willing to perform your marriage ceremony. For the proper fee, Lady Carter-Andrews will make arrangements for your wedding at any time you wish." He glanced at Christopher, who was grinning broadly. "A separate apartment can be yours also after you are wed, at your grandfather's expense, of course."

"You may tell Grandfather for me," Christopher stated emphatically, "that I will pay him back every half-penny he lends us for this or any other purpose while we are here. I do not wish to be beholden to him any longer than necessary."

"But please tell my father we all appreciate any help he is able to give us," said Isabel, worried that Christopher's statement might offend her father.

Thomas intervened at this point. "Isabel, I believe I have the best solution to the problem. Chris shall not bear the burden of repayment, I shall, in lieu of John Sr." He explained to Captain Coffield that "Elizabeth and I, never having been blessed with children of our own, have adopted John and Isabel's, so to speak and I have stood in loco parentis for them ever since my brother passed away. I am sure that Sir Quarles will not object to my repaying him, whereas he may very well object to Chris doing the same."

Before the captain turned to go, while Isabel was thanking her brother-in-law and his wife for their generosity and the other members of the family were happily discussing future wedding plans, he took Margaret by the hand and led her to a corner of the room where they could converse a little more privately. He looked down at her with such tenderness that she blushed and tried to turn her eyes away from his.

"Darling Meg," he said, "we must talk also. Whatever the future holds for you and for me, I want us to face it together. But only if you are willing, of course. Will you give some thought to what I am saying and let me know how you feel when I come to see you next time?"

She smiled impishly up at him. "If what you are saying is supposed to be a proposal of marriage, Captain William Coffield, Sir, I don't see you falling on your knees in what we girls consider the proper romantic fashion. However, I am pleased to

inform you that I really don't have to give a modicum of thought to your suggestion." She saw the worried look on his face begin to disappear as she went on "Yes, yes, yes, yes, My Dear Darling Sweet William, I'll marry you. I love you, don't you know? And you must love me, too, although you haven't exactly said so. But if you don't want me to throw my arms around you and kiss you in front of everyone, you'd be well-advised to leave this room right now."

"I'd welcome that gesture with outstretched arms," he teased, but looked at the others and added "It might be better to wait until I have your mother's consent, and perhaps even that of your Uncle Thomas, before we can celebrate in that fashion. Yet I don't want you to think I don't love you. What do you mean, girl? I've shown you in every way that I can. I hope you don't expect me to write silly sonnets to your beauty or serenade you beneath your window. I can't write poetry and I can't carry a tune. But I can kiss you till your toes curl, so you just keep that thought in mind." With that remark, he left on his errand to the Quarles.

As he left, Isabel noticed that John was standing a little apart from the others. He seemed not to be sharing their good spirits and happiness about the wedding, but looked rather sad. She went over to him and asked "What's the matter, Dear?"

"I don't know, Mother," he replied. "Everyone but me seems to have found a way of coping with our situation. Sometimes I feel

they're almost glad to be here. The twins were so wrapped up in the excitement of associating with members of the King's Guard while we were on the road. Chris and Katy have had no time for anyone else for a long time, and it looks like Meg and Captain Coffield are headed that way, too. I just don't fit into this family any more."

"It is hard, John, I know," his mother said, nodding in agreement, "not to be part of a twosome. It's a very lonely feeling. After your father died, I suffered from that even though I had all of you children to console me. I discovered then the best remedy for my loneliness and grief was to be found in work, especially creative work. For me that meant weaving, painting in oils and embroidery."

"I suppose for me that would involve the carving and cabinetry Father taught us boys. I would enjoy doing that, but I haven't any tools or wood to work with. And how could I do that here in prison? The warden would never give her permission."

"I'm not sure, Dear, but you've given me an idea. Let's have a family counsel and discuss what can be done to make our stay in the Fleet more worthwhile. Perhaps we won't be able to do much in the way of arts and crafts, but we might do quite a bit to make this ancient ruin more habitable."

TWELVE

They held a brief family counsel and decided they would volunteer rather than have to be ordered, to do the chores that needed to be done around the castle. It was apparent that her ladyship had little understanding of what was necessary to care for such an establishment. The other prisoners from Birdbrook could help--the women would do the housekeeping and cleaning, and the men would see to repairs of furniture and other things that needed to be fixed.

Thomas asked Isabel to suggest their plan to the warden, for he felt she would be more amenable to an offer coming from a woman. But Lady Carter-Andrews was so amazed that prisoners would not only be willing, but actually volunteer to do such menial labor, she quickly consented before they changed their minds. With one stricture, however, that she was to supervise and that all must be done according to her high standards. If so, Isabel said to herself, nothing could be easier.

Lord Mitchell remained at the Fleet for a week or so, allowing the Choates liberty of the house and garden, which he insisted were their rights without the payment of fees. He seemed puzzled over their plans to set the castle to rights, but seeing they were doing this of their own free will and quite cheerfully, he gave the project his blessing and promised he and Lady Mitchell would pay them a visit soon to check on their progress.

The household chores were organized with Isabel in charge of the evening meal, both the ordering of supplies and the cooking and baking. Using menus of her own, they were a great improvement over the usual fare. Even Lady Carter-Andrews grudgingly conceded this as she took second and third helpings. In fact, after some preliminary skirmishes with Isabel over the cost of supplies, she decided not to interfere in case the meals would cease to be as tasty.

Other duties Isabel assumed were seeing that there were linens sufficient for frequent laundering, and changing of these on a regular basis, something her ladyship had long overlooked or had considered unnecessary. Isabel spent a good deal of her time in mending bedclothes and napery that should have been discarded or used for cleaning rags.

Elizabeth was assigned supervision of the housecleaning, with the other ladies from Birdbrook as assistants. They began immediately to turn the castle inside out, almost causing the warden to have a heart attack by the ferocious manner in which they were beating the carpets and wall hangings to remove centuries of dust which had collected on them.

Margaret and Katherine took over the garden and grounds surrounding the castle. They spent hours clearing the brush that choked the walkways, hoeing the weeds turned to seed and sprouting all over the place, tilling the soil until it was soft to the touch and ready for the flowers and vegetables they planted.

When their work in both the inside and outside began to produce results--the Fleet starting to look worthy of its ancient heritage--the warden was quick to take pride in and credit for this accomplishment. Her greatest pleasure was in supervising the men and boys, claiming she was the one to point out repairs which needed to be done around the castle. That it was Thomas who had observed and unobtrusively brought them to her attention, she blithely ignored.

Isabel actually found her chores much easier than having to be in Lady Carter-Andrews company for the better part of each day. Her resolve not to judge others met its severest test in association with the warden. It seemed to Isabel that her heart and mind were in constant conflict over that lady, and she wished she had more empathy. She soon discovered she was not alone in these feelings.

One morning while she was wandering in the garden, mulling over her problem, she came across Elizabeth, seated on a bench and sobbing her heart out. "Elizabeth Dear," she asked, as she put her arm around her sister-in-law's shoulder, "what is the matter? Are you ill?"

When Elizabeth's weeping quieted down so that she managed to tell her, inbetween sobs, what had started her crying, she said "I'm so unhappy, Isabel. My thoughts are so wicked, and I can't seem to control them no matter how hard I try. I'll never ever become a true Christian."

Isabel smiled, knowing how sensitive her sister-in-law was, yet how kind and good she always was to everyone, said "Tell me what those very wicked thoughts of yours are."

"It's terrible," Elizabeth moaned. "I've never felt like this about anyone before now, but I think I hate Lady Carter-Andrews. She frightens me so, and she says things that make me want to strike out at her. Can you imagine? I didn't know I could feel so bestial."

"Well, if your misery is in need of company," said Isabel, "then we must belong together. I've had the same thoughts and feelings and wondered how I can reconcile these with my desire to live all the Christian virtues I prize so highly."

"But what can we do to overcome these thoughts and feelings? I've prayed about them but have not received an answer, at least not one I've recognized."

"I have prayed also without gaining peace of mind. Perhaps the Lord would have us try to understand her point of view. She has such need to convince us of her superiority. And yet the things she values most--wealth, position, pride of ancestry--are not of great importance to you and me. Instead of resenting her attitude toward us, I suppose we really should pity her."

"And always keep in mind the things that are most important to us and those we love," Elizabeth said, "those things for which we would sacrifice any worldly goods we own."

"Yes. Our families, friends, simple country life, love for the Savior and His teachings. These are the things of greatest worth and more precious than gold. We must live for them and, if it is necessary, die for them, though I pray earnestly we will not have to do the latter."

"That's true, Isabel," Elizabeth agreed. "I know that is true. But I still don't know if I can control my thoughts and feelings about Lady Carter-Andrews. Every time I make up my mind that I will do better she says something that stirs my emotions and I lose my temper."

"I know what you mean. It's hard not to be petty. I believe we women tend more to pettiness than men, don't you? I imagine that Thomas would tell you and me not to expect too much of ourselves. After all, only the Lord was perfect."

"Yet He told us to be perfect even as our Father in Heaven is perfect. I don't see how we can ever do that. I can't, anyway."

"He did not mean we could reach that state all at once, I'm sure. but that gives me an idea. Remember what Saint Paul said about charity being greater than faith or hope?" At Elizabeth's nod, she went on "Well, everything the Savior did was for others. His life and mission was entirely one of charity."

She paused, then continued "now we might not be able to give the love He gave, the true charity, but we can give charitable service to Lady Carter-Andrews. Not that we aren't helping her by

doing chores at the present time, but we might do some special things for her that no one else has ever done before. We can use the talents God has given each of us and, in so doing, help to overcome our resentment and pettiness."

"Isabel, that's a wonderful idea," Elizabeth's look of helplessness vanished. "I'll go right now and ask her if I can make some needlepoint covers for the cushions on the carved chairs in the Great Hall. I've learned how to do those rather well over the years since Thomas and I were married."

"Lady Carter-Andrews will be delighted," said Isabel. "You always do such lovely handwork. I'll go with you and offer to make her another great tapestry. With the aid of the other women from Birdbrook, I believe we can create one she will be very pleased to show to visitors. The old one can be relegated to the upper storey out of sight. After talking to her, we might think of some special creative projects the others can do for her."

The warden was again stunned by their proposal, although a bit suspicious about its purpose. Nevertheless, she agreed. Indeed, the smirk that appeared so often on her face during the following days and months while these projects were being carried out, mirrored the superiority she felt and planned to demonstrate to her friends and acquaintances.

The others were enthusiastic about Isabel's ideas. They were so accustomed to being busy, time hung heavy on their hands, even with their many chores. Katherine and Margaret planned to help

Isabel with the weaving and also the easier painting and embroidery of the tapestry, under her direction.

Thomas and the boys decided they would fashion a beautiful chest and armoire, carved in the Tudor Rose design, for her ladyship. The other men and boys from Birdbrook would assist them. While engaged in repairing an old cupboard in the kitchen, they had come upon several carving knives and chisels. All they needed were oak panels, which they would ask Captain Coffield to secure for them. The captain was almost a daily visitor to both the Quarles' mansion and the Fleet, carrying messages and supplies to Isabel and the others. Her father was not well enough to be able to visit for some time; and her mother, highstrung even in the best of times, bordered on hysteria over her husband's poor condition and would not leave his side.

Preliminary work on the projects--the initial building of chest and armoire and weaving of cloth for the tapestry--went forth at a slow pace to begin with. But as the housecleaning and other duties were brought under control, it moved steadily forward. The warden was so delighted with the new look of the castle, as well as the progress of the special projects, she decided to open the Fleet to visitors and have conducted tours of the Great Hall, charging a "modest fee to cover expenses" for the privilege and the wear and tear on both the hall and her sensibilities.

Isabel worried about these tours, wondering if the bishop would be among the visitors. They had not as yet seen or heard of him.

He would surely be upset to see them treated as well as they had been by Lady Carter-Andrews.

Nearly three weeks had gone by before plans were made for the wedding of Christopher and Katherine. It had been thought best to wait for the proper moment to approach her ladyship--not only concerning the ceremony itself, but also the arrangement of a separate apartment for the newlyweds. One Sunday morning in May Captain Coffield arrived to find the family gathered inside the prison chapel, where they had held their own worship service and were now discussing the forthcoming nuptials.

After greeting the captain, Thomas said "While Chris, with the help of the good captain, the boys and myself, can assist in the carrying out of the wedding plans, it is customary for a bride and her female relatives to make these plans. In Katy's case, that means Isabel and Margaret and my good wife have the responsibility."

"Merciful heavens!" exclaimed Katherine. "This lass wouldn't be knowin' the first step to take. Sure and tis for Ma'am and the others to be tellin' me how to go. But Ma'am, one thing at the top o' me worries is what to be wearin'. The wee bit o' clothin' they let me carry away from the cottage is becomin' threadbare from the constant wearin' and launderin'. I fear I may have to be wedded in my shift."

They all laughed heartily and Isabel, her arm around her future daughter-in-law, said "I don't think we shall be forced to such

an extreme measure as that, Katy. Indeed, I believe that will be an easy problem to solve. Father is a draper and has fabrics of all kinds at his disposal. I will write a note for the captain to deliver to him, and I am certain we will soon find ourselves awash with so many varied lengths of cloth we will have difficulty choosing among them in making up gowns for the ladies and garments for the gentlemen."

"Oh yes, Katy," Margaret agreed with great enthusiasm. "Grandfather will be delighted to furnish us with all the fabrics we need. He has some from the east that are truly fabulous. I can't wait till you see the silks and---"

"It is quite obvious that we "gentlemen" are in the ladies way," said Christopher. "Let's take ourselves off into the garden and talk about getting a special license and any other arrangements we need to make for the big event."

True to Isabel's word, her father sent several boxes of fabric the very next day. Lady Carter-Andrews was not pleased with the influx of these and complained bitterly about her castle being used as a warehouse. However, when Isabel showed her one of the boxes containing velvets of every color and hue, from which she might choose the fabric for her own gown, she was mollified and soon became caught up in a fantasy of having a gown superior to all other attendees of the wedding. So enraptured was she with her dream, she absentmindedly consented to all arrangements, up to and including the furnishing of the newlywed apartment.

From that moment on, the Fleet became a beehive of activity and abuzz with excitement. The chores and special projects could not be neglected, but everyone seem bursting with the energy needed to accomplish all tasks. The men from Birdbrook were assigned the fixing up of the new apartment, under the direction of Chris. Their ladies, armed with needles and thread, carried out Isabel's designs for the wedding garments.

Margaret was giving the finishing touch to her own gown on the eve of the event. She sat with her head bent over, concentrating on her work, when the captain slipped up behind her and planted a kiss on the top of her head. "William!" she exclaimed. "What are you doing here, tonight? Has anything gone wrong?"

"Of course not, you little worry-widgeon," he replied. "I've come to tell you a secret. No, that's not exactly right. I've come," he teased, "to tell you I have a secret which I'm not going to reveal."

"William, you wouldn't be so mean. Tell me. I won't tell anyone."

"No, no, never," he said, pursing his lips pompously. "I want to keep you in suspense, guessing and wondering and going wild with anticipation, but none the wiser until my secret becomes public knowledge. However," he paused for effect, "I've another little secret I am willing to divulge on receipt of a kiss from you, My Sweet."

"I'm not sure you deserve one," she pouted. "Any man who would

lead a girl on so." She shook her head at him, noticing the sly twinkle in his eye, then giggled and gave him a little peck on his cheek. "There now, you've had your kiss. What is this not-so-secret secret?"

"Well, I hardly think that little excuse for a kiss deserves to have any secret revealed in return for it." He drew her into his arms and kissed her thoroughly on the lips and said "Now, that is a kiss so I'll tell you. I love you, Meg Darling, and your mother and Uncle Thomas have both consented to our marriage as soon as you reach your eighteenth birthday."

She squealed with delight at his announcement, and he continued "Now are you sure you want to marry me since I'm not willing to tell you that other gloriously exciting secret, no matter how much you beg and plead and cast longing looks in my direction?"

"You know I'll marry you, William, you terrible tease. You are stubborn, obstinate and pig-headed, besides being unfeeling and inconsiderate; but on the other hand, you are absolutely the most adorable man in the world." And she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him back with enthusiasm.



THE SECOND INTERVIEW - June 1533, St. James Palace, London, Eng.

John Stokesley had been cooling his heels for hours in the king's library while waiting for his audience with His Majesty. He felt restless and would have paced the floor if it had not been for the armed attendant who stood nearby, ready to escort him into the royal presence when the call should come.

My time is too precious for this, he said to himself. I should be engaged on my mission, scouring the English countryside to the Scottish borders for the heretics who have infested every part of the realm, but in particular East Anglia. What makes those devils so stubborn, clinging like leeches to their damnable doctrines? And what makes their numbers increase with every burning at the stake? Those I have sent to hell have become martyrs to their cause. What is there about their religious beliefs that make them so willing to give their lives for them?

The bishop's lips curled in scorn to think of their particular cause--reading the bible in the English language and thinking to find support in it for their determination to do away with the pomp and ceremony of the Roman Church. Why wasn't that what these were all about, to humble the lower classes so they would know their place and not foolishly try to better their lot? Gothic cathedrals, massive and ornate with awe-inspiring vaulted ceilings, were constructed to give the laity a sense of inadequacy, of nothingness. The rich robes of the priests, and the comforts and luxuries these chosen and ordained representatives of God on

earth enjoyed, were to separate them from the masses, who in utter abasement were to look only to them for spiritual guidance.

I wonder why I was summoned here today. Perhaps His Majesty has further instructions to give me, or he may even wish to reward me for my efforts in his behalf. He has no way of knowing that I do this on the Pope's behalf rather than his. No, I do it on my own behalf. I, John Stokesley, the Bishop of London, the most prestigious clerical office in the realm, hold power over life and death throughout England. To all intents and purposes, I am actually greater than the king or the Pope, for I exercise this power personally. I do not merely assign agents to carry out my decisions.

Another armed attendant entered the library and said to the first "His Majesty will see the bishop now." John Stokesley arose and followed them both into the king's presence.

"What is this I am hearing about you chasing all over my kingdom and routing loyal subjects from their beds, condemning innocent people to death without so much as a "by your leave?" The ringing tones of His Majesty bespoke his fury with the prelate.

"But, but Sire," sputtered the bishop, "surely you are aware of the wanton destruction of Your Majesty's churched and monasteries by these religious fanatics? Believe me, I have only your interests at heart. My great desire is to rid the realm of these non-conformists with dangerous objectives, who have become thorns in your side."

"And is it your plan to do so by causing this wanton destruction of my churches and monasteries by your own agents and placing the blame for it on your so-called dangerous heretics? My interests at heart? I think not." The king's stare, fixed upon the bishop was unnerving.

John Stokesley turned pale with fear. How had his ruses become known to His Majesty? Had the curates he bribed to destroy their own property confessed to the King's Guard?

"You and your cohorts did the damage in Birdbrook, and you have had the daughter of a friend arrested--Isabel Choate by name--as well as her family. I will not rescind your arrest order, for it would undermine your authority as Bishop of London; and I am not ready to make any changes at present. But I wish you to proceed carefully with regard to my friend's daughter and grandchildren. Otherwise, you may find yourself without authority. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," the bishop replied in a subdued manner.

"Now tell me why you are going to such lengths to apprehend these non-conformists. I find this difficult to understand," his good humor returned now that his wishes had been made known. "My Good Fellow, these people only desire to read the New Testament in the glorious English language, surely that of God himself. Why would you deny them that privilege?"

The bishop was not allowed to explain. The interview was at end.



THIRTEEN

June 1533

The bridal party and their Fleet guests were in their places in the chapel, dressed in the latest Tudor style. The ladies' gowns and the men's garments were so well-designed and sewn they could have graced a St. James Court Presentation. Isabel thought Katy a most enchanting bride in her white silk and lace wedding gown with its long train. The crown of white roses, from which her fell softly over her head and shoulders, was as lovely as any Queen's. And Chris was so very handsome in his white linen shirt hose, over which he wore a blue velvet doublet. It was similar to those worn by the other men in attendance, but more elaborately embroidered.

Isabel and Elizabeth had gowns made of satin. For the occasion, Isabel had forsaken widow's black and chosen half-mourning lavender, while Elizabeth's choice was palest yellow. Margaret wore a gown of soft green, which complemented her dark hair and eyes extremely well, her mother decided. Judging by the gleam in her Sweetheart's eyes, he agreed. The other ladies seated in chapel were attired in pastel hues of every color in the spectrum, with the exception of Lady Carter-Andrews, who had indeed managed to set herself apart in brilliant orange and velvet. That she was more than satisfied with the reception she received in the wide-eyed stares as she made her entrance was evident in the smug look on her face.

The prisoner priest Captain Coffield had arranged to perform the marriage ceremony was the eminent John Rogers, a young man whom Isabel greatly admired. She understood that he had been consigned to the Fleet for speaking out against popery. Perhaps she would have an opportunity to talk with him after the wedding and they could share their views on religion, particularly non-conformism. She was certain they would have an interesting discussion.

But the service was about to begin, and her attention was concentrated on Chris and Katy, thrilled beyond measure to know they were to become one. John Rogers asked the young couple to join hands and said the first words of the ceremony "Dearly Beloved, we are gathered together---" when suddenly the chapel doors were opened and several unexpected guests entered: Sir James and Lady Mary Mitchell, Sir Hubbard and Lady Ann Quarles, and last of all His Majesty, King Henry VIII and his bride, Queen Anne Boleyn!

Isabel could not believe her eyes, nor could the others. Amazement was written on every face. All came to a standstill until the king began to shout "Carry on! Carry on! Our royal presence must not detract from the solemn ceremony in progress." Thomas and Isabel, though stunned, recalled their duties as host and hostess and seated the royal assemblage. Then King Henry called out again to John Rogers "Carry on, My Good Fellow, carry on. Unite this young pair in the bonds of holy matrimony without further ado."

His Majesty, enjoying the expansive mood of his halcyon days of

marriage with the beauteous Anne, had decided to take over the catering and entertainment for the wedding reception of his good friend's grandson as a lark. Therefor, what Isabel had planned as a quiet gathering of their friends in the Great Hall, with simple refreshments served, turned into a royal spectacle. The king joined the receiving line, holding court and insisting that the wedding guests bow and curtsey to the bewildered bride and groom as well as to himself and his queen.

However, his joviality became contagious and he soon had everyone in good spirits. Isabel heard Katy's lilting laughter and Chris's deep chuckle frequently throughout the reception. She also noticed that Robert and William were so awe-struck by all that was happening they were able to make their bows in as perfect a manner as Margaret had instructed them that night, which now seemed so very long ago, in the cottage at Birdbrook.

After everyone had been presented, the king bade the doors to the castle be opened. When the command was obeyed, a long train of servants in royal livery entered carrying enormous trays on their shoulders. They were piled high with food of all kinds and numerous bottles of wine. Isabel wondered who would drink the latter, since most of the guests were non-conformist and therefore eschewed strong drink. The food and drink were placed on the long tables of the Great Hall, along with silver service needed for the feast.

His Majesty explained "We were to receive the ambassadors from

the courts of King Louis of France and King Phillip of Spain this evening. But we are not well-pleased with either monarch at the present time, and our pleasure is to leave their agents to find their own entertainment while we ourselves mingle with a more convivial company."

The court musicians had followed the servants into the hall and were commanded by His Majesty to play during the feast. After several glasses of wine, the king began singing along with them, serenading the bride and groom. As the evening wore on, and he imbibed even more freely, he started to entertain them, telling stories of marriages arranged among the royal families of Europe with those of England. He had a never-ending storehouse of these on-dits. He spent some time bemoaning what he called his disastrous union with his brother's widow. Isabel felt his comments about the Spanish queen were in particularly bad taste, but had to be endured under the circumstances.

She wondered what the others were thinking, especially the warden who normally would have made short shrift of unexpected company, not to mention behavior of this kind. But her ladyship was not her usual domineering self. She seemed to be doing her best to remain in the background. Perhaps the shock of seeing the king in the company of her brother and Sir Hubbard Quarles, and the concern that they might bring her husband's family scandal to his attention, was enough to affect a personality change in Lady Carter-Andrews. If so, Isabel thought, it would be nice if they could all remain here in the castle.

Although Isabel and her children were overjoyed to see her parents, her father having regained his health and her mother in good spirits, this was obviously not the time or the place for a lengthy family reunion. Instead, they made plans to visit the Quarles home two days hence. It was pleasant also for them to see Sir James and Lady Mary, whom they considered true friends, and have an opportunity to talk with them for awhile. Margaret and Isabel couldn't help smiling at each other as they noticed Lady Mary's enjoyment of the king's outrageous behavior and her sister in-law's apparent discomfort at the same. That their friend was finding it hard not to tease Lady Carter-Andrews about it was obvious.

King Henry and party were preparing to leave when he stopped paying extravagant compliments to the bride and groom to declare "It is not our wish that this lovely couple should spend their honeymoon in a prison, even if it is in reality a castle which merely houses prisoners. It is our wish that you," he said to Christopher and Katherine, "shall travel in our royal coach with us to New Hall Manor, where you shall be entertained with Queen Anne and myself by her parents."

The newlyweds were quick to point out the difficulties of their accepting this impulsive invitation. They would be imposing upon the royal couple and her parents, they had no clothes suitable for a stay at the manor, with the exception of their wedding garments, and they were prisoners of the Fleet. His Majesty refused to regard any of these arguments, saying all would be seen to as

he had only to command, and they found themselves packed off to spend their first two weeks of marriage at Boreham in the company of their more-than-a-little inebriated sovereign, his Anne and the Boleyns.

Aware of Isabel's dismay at these high-handed tactics of the king Lady Mitchell told her friend "Please don't worry about them, My Dear. His Majesty will sober up before they reach their destination and become the most charming of hosts to your sweet young honeymooners. They will have a glorious few days in the greatest of comfort at New Hall, and no two people could be more deserving than they."

"Thank you, Lady Mary," said Isabel, "I appreciate your counsel and will try to consider this contretemps as a stroke of good fortune. Will we be seeing you and Lord Mitchell again before you return home? We would so much enjoy a nice visit with you."

"Oh, I believe so, Dear Friend," Lady Mitchell replied. "I take every opportunity possible to liven up Philadelphia's very dull existence and will call here as often as I can. Although I'm sure you have found your stay in the Fleet rather unbearable most of the time, it has provided me with the most delicious grounds for needling my sister-in-law and I can't thank you enough."

Watching Isabel's look of dismay at these words, Lady Mary began to chortle "Please don't regard my teasing Philadelphia with any great concern. It's just my way. Perhaps having you as a friend will teach me a better way. Say a prayer in my behalf, Isabel."

Margaret and Isabel were wearily climbing the staircase to their apartment, looking forward to a night's rest, when Lady Carter-Andrews called them back down. The self-effacement of the wedding reception had disappeared with the departure of the royal couple and their guests, the Mitchells and Quarles. Her fear that her brother and Isabel's father would disclose her husband's secret to His Majesty was temporarily set aside. And her temper was in full flower. The scarlet of her gown was a match for her florid countenance, so outraged was she.

"I have decided," she declared with unmistakable rancor, "never again to permit activities--the nature of which I have had to endure this night, to be engaged in on these premises, regardless of the fees you may offer for the privilege." Her voice rose in her anger. "To think that I have allowed persons whose connections are so low as to be involved in trade to subject my castle to such vulgar proceedings."

"But Your Ladyship," Margaret protested. "The vulgarity was not of our doing. It was King Henry who---"

"Silence!" interrupted the warden, her loud voice sending echoes throughout the Great Hall and up the stairs. "I'll hear no more excuses. His Majesty may do as he pleases, but the responsibility for this night's work lies with you, Mistress Choate, and with your family. Henceforth, there will be more stringent rules for you to abide by and a curtailment of your liberty. Do I make myself clear, Madam?"

"Yes, My Lady," Isabel replied with quiet dignity, "of course we will be pleased to do whatever you desire of us. Do you wish the special projects discontinued? We can easily return to merely taking care of the household chores."

"Absolutely not!" exclaimed Lady Carter-Andrews. "They must go forward at an even faster pace to be ready for the tours of the castle. And I have other projects in mind that I want you and the others to embark upon immediately."

"May we know what these projects are, My Lady?" asked Isabel.
"We will need to arrange enough time for them along with those we are engaged in at present."

The new projects concerned the boxes of fabrics left over from the wedding preparations, said the warden. "I wish curtains to be made of the silks, satins and velvets for every room in this part of the castle." She indicated the downstairs area. "And in my bedchamber I shall also require a coverlet to be made. You may choose the materials for the Great Hall and the other rooms after I have made my selection for my bedchamber."

"Very well, My Lady. We shall undertake these new projects on the morrow." Isabel turned to her daughter. "Come along, Meg. We must get our rest in order to carry out her ladyship's will."

They once more started up the staircase, leaving behind them the warden with a puzzled expression on her puffy facial features. Had she once again lost out to the serene widow from Birdbrook?

Upstairs, as mother and daughter were preparing to retire, they talked about the past few weeks since they arrived at the Fleet and the events that had taken place. They felt good about their cleanup and repairing projects, and their special projects were coming along well also.

"We have been here for nearly two months now, Meg, said Isabel, "and have actually had it easy, despite how hard we have worked. You know, it has been a great blessing to have had to work so hard. It has kept our minds off our worries. I suppose that the warden thought we would object to new assignments, when in truth we welcome them. Our projects have been very tangible answers to our prayers, and I believe everyone has been grateful for them as well as gained much satisfaction from having engaged in them."

"I agree," Meg said, "although the preparation for the wedding has been the most exciting of our projects and has probably been responsible for our enthusiasm keeping us working at fever pitch. We really have been blessed so far in our confinement."

"Yet I have an uneasy feeling that things may change soon," said Isabel. "From what William tells us, the world outside the prison is in great turmoil over questions of religion. His Majesty is constantly involved in controversy with one minister or another in his determination to be his own judge of what is right for England, and this involvement has kept him from seeing what is happening throughout the country. I fear the mood of the people in desiring freedom of choice in all matters of religion has been

causing many to go to extremes and will work against us."

"I have some of the same fears, Mother. What worries me most--and you also, I'm sure--is that Bishop Stokesley has not been here to sentence us, which must mean he is piling up evidence against us. We know the evidence will be false, but that will be of little difference, since he will be believed rather than us. And not only has he not come to the Fleet, he has not sent any word concerning us to Lady Carter-Andrews, or she would have been swift to carry out his instructions."

"Well, perhaps she wouldn't," Isabel said, "in view of promised reprisal by Lord Mitchell and Father if she were to mistreat us. But you are correct about my fears of having John Stokesley pay his visit. I dread what it will mean for us, especially for you children. Remembering his mad ravings when he came to search our cottage, I can't help but feel he will carry on much worse here in prison."

"Oh, that awful man," cried Margaret. "Where do you suppose he has gone? Out harassing other non-conformists in the far reaches of the kingdom? It would be too much to expect he may have simply forgotten about us."

"No, he has not forgotten. Of that I am quite certain," Isabel arose from the cot where she had been sitting during their talk and walked over to the doorway, stood looking down the hallway for several minutes before completing her thought. "The bishop is probably biding his time, hoping to increase our anxiety and

letting us be the recipients of the harsh treatment he has come to expect her ladyship to hand out to those prisoners she has in custody. He may hope that our resolve to remain non-conformist is weakening and that he will have the satisfaction of listening to us confess to heresy and beg for his mercy."

"I think you are right, Mother," Margaret agreed. "Nothing would delight him more. Yet there is another possible reason for him staying away from us. According to William, John Stokesley may be walking a thin line between his fanatical dedication to Rome and his subservience to King Henry. He may hesitate to carry out his own wishes for fear of incurring the wrath of His Majesty. After all, Grandfather is one of the king's good friends and a constant source of financial support to the Royal Treasury. The bishop would be very foolish to go so far as to alienate him at this time."

"That is true, Dear, but I am not sure that his mind is capable of grasping the difference between that which is wise and that which is foolish. We do not know what schemes he harbors for us in his madness. The important thing for us to ask ourselves is whether we are strong enough to withstand his plans for us."

"You are our strength, Mother Dear," said Margaret. "If you are strong, we shall be also."

"Then come, Little Meg," Isabel said, kneeling by the side of her small cot. "Let us pray for courage."



FOURTEEN

As it happened, Bishop Stokesley would not make an appearance at the Fleet until late August, when all the projects, except for the painting and embroidery of the long tapestry, would be completed. Isabel and Margaret had no way of knowing this, however, which made them on edge whenever they heard that a visitor was expected and no one seemed to know his or her name. Their uneasiness made them start every time the castle doors opened to anyone, even Captain Coffield.

In the meantime, they were having to endure the warden's harsh and constant criticism of all their efforts to please her. She did her best to discourage them from visiting Isabel's parents by saying that they could not leave the supervision of the curtains and coverlet for her bedchamber to Elizabeth.

Isabel countered this measure with praise for the fine needlework her sister-in-law had accomplished for her ladyship. "How can you doubt her capability, My Lady? Surely the needlepoint covers for the carved stools in the Great Hall are evidence of her skills, not to mention the gowns and garments for the wedding--of which yours was a prime example--that she had complete charge of sewing after she and I conferred in the designing."

Lady Carter-Andrews was unwilling to accept this explanation and had started a blistering denial of Elizabeth's talents when she was frustrated by the arrival of the Mitchells.

"My Dears," said Lady Mary to Isabel and Margaret, after a brief 'Good morning, Philadelphia,' to her sister-in-law, "we have come to see all the delightful improvements you have made in this here tofor dreary place. You and your family can run along now to see Sir Hubbard and Lady Ann. We left them waiting patiently for your arrival. With us out of the way, they can entertain you privately and talk about all those things that families have in common only with each other."

Lady Carter-Andrews sputtered a little, trying to keep them from leaving, but to no avail. Lady Mitchell's limpid stare finally gave her no choice but to give reluctant consent.

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What a wonderful feeling to be free even for a short while and be able to think happy thoughts, Isabel said to herself as she and Meg and the boys walked to her parents' home. Of course, to know the truth was to be free in mind and spirit; yet to go where one wished and do what one desired was also a freedom to cherish. Men had fought wars for it and would continue to do so as long as there were those with power to prevent its exercise. But this moment now she felt like a child again, on her way home to loving parents who placed her happiness above all else. She expressed this feeling to her family as they entered Mary le Bow Park.

"I feel no more than seven," she confessed. "I remember coming to this lovely place with my nurse and playing under the great trees at that age. The flowers were just as beautiful as they are now, and there were always rabbits hopping about and squirrels darting

in and out with birds of every kind my childish imagination could dream of discovering. My sketchpad was full since I made drawings of everything I saw here. I wasn't old enough to have painted in water colours or oils. That came a few years later. But I have other memories of Mary le Bow Park. Sometimes King Henry, father of His Majesty, would ride through on his great stallion. Once he lifted me up onto the saddle with him and took me for a little gallop."

"Was he as jolly a person as his son, Mother?" asked John, who was too polite to refer to their sovereign's behavior two nights ago in any other way.

"No, John," she answered. "King Henry VII was a very cold man, quite shrewd and capable in politics, but rather sly in his dealings with others. His show of interest in me was probably to gain Father's financial support."

They were walking beneath the trees, admiring the scenery, when the twins told Isabel they had wanted to be in the King's Guard as soon as they were old enough. They had changed their minds, however, after being given a taste of what might take place in the Royal Court. If the king was in the habit of acting as he had at Chris and Katy's wedding reception, they could never be happy there.

"I don't think Captain Coffield is too happy about that part of his duty, Either," their mother said, "except that's how he came to meet Meg." Mother and daughter exchanged smiles. There is much

about life in His Majesty's court that is contrary to non-conformist point of view, and our dear captain has become one of us now. He will find court life very hard to endure, I'm afraid."

"Decidedly!" exclaimed Margaret. "That's why we are hoping--he and I--for him to be transferred to a permanent army post after we are married. If not, William will have to continue as an officer in the Guard, being away on maneuvers most of the time; and I shall have to become a lady-in-waiting. How I shall dislike being at the beck and call of a very whimsical Queen Anne!"

"I should dislike that also. It seems such a fruitless existence. The ladies and gentlemen of the Royal Court fill their days with frivolity, always playing games and gossiping. You and I would be rather bored and restless--"

"And feel inclined to engage in talking about some controversial matters that would upset the queen, who considers herself quite an authority on all subjects."

"No, Dear Meg," said her mother. "One thing I am certain of, and am so grateful for, is my faith in you and your brothers. I know you will always act in good conscience wherever you may be and in whatever you may be called upon to do. Father and Mother will see that admirable quality in each of you children and be pleased to claim you theirs."

Sir Hubbard and Lady Ann Quarles greeted their daughter and grandchildren with open arms. They were invited into the comfortable sitting room, where they chatted and enjoyed some refreshments. The boys were wide-eyed seeing the mansion for the first time and realizing it was more grand than any home they had ever seen or heard about. Despite her shyness and lack of experience entertaining boys, Lady Ann wanted to get to know her grandsons and volunteered to take them on a tour.

"Grandmother," said John, speaking for the three of them, "there is nothing we'd like more than than. Will you tell us who made the elaborately carved furniture we've seen here and in the Great Hall as we came in? All of us have an interest in cabinetry, and you have such wonderful examples."

Lady Ann replied that she would be delighted to do so, and they left the room. Meg also excused herself to go up to her bedchamber and leave her mother to talk alone with her grandfather. They had so much to say to one another, so many years full of experiences to share.

"My Dear Isabel," he said, taking her hand in his. "I fear that we have treated you shabbily, your mother and I. We should have given you a substantial dowry in order to make your life easier in Birdbrook, instead of leaving you on your own. Please find it in your heart to forgive us, and let us make it up to you and the boys, who appear to be fine young men. Don't be independent and say no, now that you have no husband to take care of your needs."

"Father," she said, taking both his hands in hers, "you have no need to ask my forgiveness, nor does Mother. John and I and our children have had a wonderful life in Birdbrook in our charming little cottage and few acres of farmland. If you had made things easier for us, the children might not have learned to work or to develop the fine traits of character you admire in them. Each of them has a sense of responsibility and an innate honesty which no amount of wealth could have gained them."

"I'm sure you are right, My Dear, but it is time for me to offer help to you. And it is more than time for me to find a way to have you released from prison. I must, if necessary, bribe the warden or the Bishop of London to secure it."

Isabel arose and began pacing the floor. "No, Father, I'm convinced that would be the worst thing you could do. You have made a contribution to the Fleet in the form of fabrics, and these are now being used for its beautification. Please do not attach any strings to your gift or offer money. And on no account attempt to bribe John Stokesley. He is determined to keep me in prison until I admit to being a heretic or renounce my beliefs. He would only use your bribe as evidence against me."

"But what can I do?" asked her father. "I know of no other way to be of assistance to you. Could you not give in a little to his demands? I feel certain he would drop the charges against you if you were to promise not to read the New Testament in English ever again."

"I can never promise that, Father. The teachings our family have read and studied in John Wycliffe's English translation of the New Testament have provided the foundation for our lives. They are true teachings of Christ, and I am willing to lay down my life for the privilege of knowing them and teaching them to my children and their children. I cannot forsake my convictions, no matter what the price."

"I honor you for those convictions, Isabel, even though I do not understand nor share them. Yet I must find a way to help you. Do you have any suggestions?"

"The only one I have is for you to keep close to His Majesty and let him know, if you can without harming your good relationship, what a treacherous man London has in its bishop."

Their conversation had turned into recollections of Isabel's days as a child by the time her mother and the boys returned and Meg came downstairs. A few of the most humorous of her escapades were repeated for the enjoyment of the children until all were relaxed and laughing uproariously. The boys were getting to know their grandparents and feeling at home with them. Still, it was very much of a surprise when Sir Hubbard told them about his plans for them.

"Your mother tells me she and your father wished for you boys to be raised without financial support from us so you would learn to be independent and able to provide your own livings. I can appreciate that, but there is something I want to do when each of you

has reached his majority that I think will not detract from your parents' wishes--No, My Dear Isabel, hear me out."

"Now that Christopher is married," he continued, "I want to have the holdings he inherited as the eldest son of John enlarged. I will send an agent into Essex to acquire acreage adjoining the farmland at Birdbrook. I understand it has a messuage on it in good condition where Christopher and Katherine may live. I shall also arrange by contract the same for John when he becomes of age and for each of you, William and Robert, when you reach 21, providing each of you wish to remain farmers. Margaret's future has already been taken care of by your parents' prenuptial agreement."

The boys were gleeful at this announcement, while their mother merely said "You are being too generous, Father, although I know I cannot prevent you from doing this. I do have one stipulation, however. If the boys prefer another occupation then farming, just make sure it doesn't involve buying their colors for them."

"Mother," Robert protested, "William explained that we no longer want to be soldiers of the king. If you really want to help us when we are old enough, Grandfather, perhaps you could see about getting us work as cabinet-makers. We both love building things and are wizards at carving."

"Well, aren't we proud of ourselves?" John said. There's nothing like blowing one's own horn. They are good for their age, Grandfather, but could use a great deal more of instruction in the art as well as a few lessons in modesty."

"Rather than pride, shall we say the twins just have confidence. What ever instruction they need is easy to come by, and I think cabinetry is an excellent idea. Artisans are ever in demand. But now tell us about your life in Birdbrook. Your grandmother and I have never visited that part of Essex."

The boys were eager to share their experiences of growing up in a small village. They talked about everything they could remember until it was time to return to the Fleet. The goodbyes were said with promises on both parts to visit again soon.

During their walk back through the park, while the boys went on ahead to look for animals, Isabel and Meg talked about her engagement to William.

"I didn't mention it to Father, Meg, for I felt the announcement was yours to make. I'm sure Father and Mother will be delighted. In fact, I will be surprised if they do not insist on giving you an engagement party. You know how Mother loves giving parties and fussing over the arrangements. Will you like that?"

"Of course, I will," Meg assured her mother. "I think most girls like that sort of fuss made over them. But on the other hand, I want it to be clearly understood that I love William very much and would be just as willing to marry him in my shift as Katy feared she would have to marry Chris."

Isabel laughed. "As I told Katy, I don't think we will ever come to that no matter how straightened our circumstances. Remember,

Father's business rather cancels out that worry. Seriously though, I believe it would be well for you and William to keep the news a secret from Lady Carter-Andrews so that it won't come to the attention of the bishop. Oh, I wish that man would come to Fleet Prison and relieve our tensions, wondering what his next move is to be."

"I know," said Meg. "It's like sitting on a keg of gunpowder just waiting for it to explode." She giggled. "Of course no one but a simpleton would do that."

"Then I think we might be classed as such," Isabel declared, "for you are right. That is an apt description of our situation. But, remember, Meg, we simple folks have something those with power over us lack; we have the faith to move mountains, if necessary, so we ought to be able to handle a small keg of gunpowder."

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They entered the Great Hall of the castle to find Sir James and Lady Mary Mitchell still there, talking with the warden. It was obvious that Lady Carter-Andrews was in a very foul mood, but not Sir James, who was smiling broadly, and Lady Mary, who chattered cheerfully away as if everything was just fine.

"My Dears," she greeted Isabel and Meg, coming towards them with hands outstretched, "you have been working wonders in the castle. How lovely and clean it is. I've been telling Philadelphia what a shame she didn't have its filthy condition pointed out to her

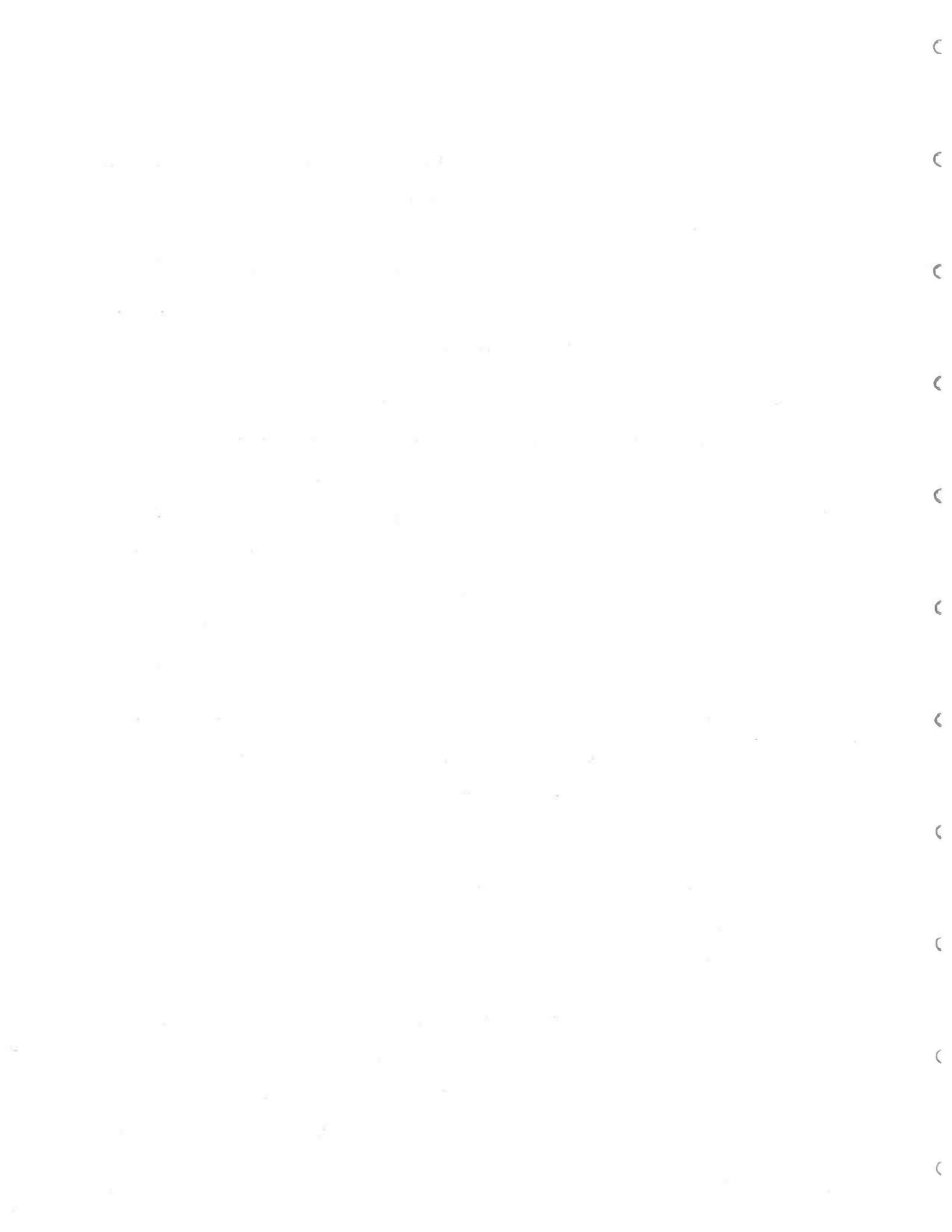
years ago. Her parents had a penchant for pigs, you know--due, no doubt, to the wild boar rampant on their family crest--and they kept an enormous pig sty on their manor estate in Sussex, which her father enjoyed taking care of himself. Her mother never seemed to notice the mud and slime he tracked inside on the carpets when ever he had been mucking out the pens."

The warden's face turned purple as she snorted her indignation, but Lady Mary continued "The curtains in the downstairs rooms are charming. They give a sadly-needed air of elegance, their soft colors blending so well. Dear Isabel, with your artist's eye you must have chosen them to create a restful background for all that marvelous carved furniture your menfolk have fashioned. However, someone else surely chose the hideous colors for Philadelphia's bedchamber. She'll have nightmares and wake you up screaming."

Lady Carter-Andrews went off in a huff, climbing the stairs as fast as her bulk would allow, and Meg--who could hardly keep from laughing--scolded Lady Mary for making fun of the "Poor Lady."

"Poor Lady, my foot," she declared. "You should have seen how she preened herself, boasting that the entire renovation was her idea. Her pretentious airs are enough to make Parliament outlaw women as prison wardens."

"Whose idea it was is not as important as that it is going forward and will make the Fleet a better place for both her ladyship and her prisoners," said Isabel. "A wise man once observed that 'one can accomplish a great deal of good if one is not concerned



with who will be given the credit."

"Well, I believe in giving credit where credit is deserved, and it belongs to you, Isabel, and those who are working with you. This has been such a tremendous undertaking. I can't think of another person, or group of people, who would have dreamed of the project, much less carried it out."

"Thank you, Your Ladyship," Isabel said, smiling at her friend, "I appreciate your kind words and support more than I can say."

"You are welcome, I'm sure," said Lady Mary. "Now tell me about the long tapestry you are going to make. What will you paint and embroider on it? Will there be a series of pictures or one story told in scenes? I can hardly wait to see it, though I suppose it will be months in the making."

"Yes, it will. I can't begin the painting until the cloth is finished being woven, and that is weeks away. The theme I have in mind for the painting is a rather nebulous idea at the moment, but I believe it will be religious in nature."

"Mother's creative ideas have a way of beginning slowly and then gathering momentum until she has formulated plans for a masterpiece. This I know, she will paint what is closest to her heart and it will be worth waiting for."

FIFTEEN

August 1533

One afternoon near the end of August, Isabel sat puzzling over the long tapestry. With the weaving completed and the finished length of cloth very much to her liking, it was time to begin the painting. Thomas and John Rogers had fashioned a framework for it on which the part she was to paint could be stretched and held in place. She had already sketched her ideas on paper, but was hesitant to start on the cloth with oils.

It must be my concern that the bishop will take exception to the theme I have chosen, she decided, that makes me hesitate. If I could just show my sketches to someone who could advise me and tell me whether what I propose to do is right. As these thoughts went through her mind, she remembered John Rogers, with whom she had wanted to converse after the wedding of Chris and Katy. The warden objected to the prisoners, other than her family members, carrying on conversations; but she was upstairs taking her afternoon nap now and would remain there for two hours or so.

When Meg came in to see what she was doing, she asked her to find John Rogers and tell him she would like to meet with him if it was convenient. He arrived a few moments later, accompanied by Meg, who excused herself to attend to other duties.

"Good day, Mistress Choate," he said in the deep-toned voice that had won him acclaim as an orator. "You wanted to see me? How may

I be of service to you?"

"Thank you for coming, Sir." She offered her hand, which he took in a firm handclasp, and sat down on the bench beside her so she would not have to look up at him. "I need your counsel before I proceed on the long tapestry I have promised to paint and have embroidered for Lady Carter-Andrews."

"This is indeed a project of magnitude you are undertaking," he said. "I have not been blessed with artistic talents and am not sure my advice in this endeavor would be of value to you, but I imagine you may have concerns other than painting and embroidering for which you need counsel."

"Yes, Sir," said Isabel. "These sketches, which I have not shown to anyone else except Margaret, will give you some idea of the theme I have intended to carry out. My problem is that I am not certain I have chosen well."

He spent several minutes studying the sketches before speaking.

"My Dear Lady," he said at length, "I find your theme most appropriate. What is there about it that worries you?"

"Only that Bishop Stokesley may see it and add it to his list of my heretical acts. Any theme coming from the English translation of the New Testament will be considered blasphemous in his eyes."

"I understand," said John Rogers, "but you must never let fear of another's response keep you from speaking or, in this case, painting the truth. Are you going to include the scriptures which

these pictures will illustrate?"

Isabel smiled as she replied to him. "Oh yes, thanks to your good counsel in bringing to my remembrance where my responsibility in this endeavor lies. The scriptures will be embroidered beside the pictures with which they belong so that there will be no misinterpretation. I am grateful to you for confirming that which I have always known in my heart I must do." She sighed.

"These are difficult times for those of us whose convictions run counter to established religion," he said. "The day will come when men and women are free to choose how they worship God, but it will not be in your lifetime nor in mine."

"But you are still a young man, Sir," said Isabel, "and have a great future in the non-conformist movement. It is a shame you are imprisoned and away from family and friends. I'm afraid I know little about you aside from your reputation as a preacher of note. Have you a wife and children?"

"Yes," he replied, "we have three children. My wife, Adriana, is from Antwerp, where I was living when we were married. I became well-acquainted with Eagles while abroad. Since my return to England, I had been helping him distribute New Testaments to the converts in the London area until my arrest just prior to yours."

"That was a noble endeavor, for which you have my whole-hearted admiration. I feel sure that if every Englishman and woman would read the bible in translation, most of them would change their

point of view. There is so much in the scriptures to inspire and help us live more Christ-like lives. They have been very important to me in teaching my family correct principles from the time each of my children were quite young. Have you not found this to be true in your family?"

"I have, Mistress Choate. And with regard to my children, I have one project in progress which may take me years to complete. It is an English translation of the Old Testament. My young ones love the stories of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, Noah and the Ark with the animals entering therein two by two, and those of the three great patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. I must say that I enjoy telling those stories as much as my children do listening to them."

"What a wonderful project!" exclaimed Isabel. "I hope I may live to see its completion and read those same stories to my grandchildren."

After John Rogers left, Isabel went back to work on her sketches. She drew flowing lines of clouds trailing in the wake of the Lord as he descended from heaven. She wanted to create the feeling of infinity by having them become gradually more wispy as they arose until they seemed to fade from sight. She had decided on a blend of pink, blue and violet to provide the softness she desired, and yellow and white for the light of the sun and the halo surrounding the Savior's form. When Meg and Katy came to see if their help was needed, she explained her plans.

"Mother," said Meg, "you promised I could do some of the preliminary painting, the undercoat you said. Let me try to paint the clouds. If the lines do not flow the way you want, you can always go over them. Oils take ages to dry. I know you are so talented you get things right the first time, but I usually make a false start or two. I need the practice."

"All right, Dear," her mother said. "You try your hand first and Katy and I will supervise your efforts. Remember to use a very light touch for the wispy clouds at the top left of the canvas. Then take more sweeping strokes as you near this spot." Isabel pointed to an area a few feet to the right and a little more than halfway to the bottom of the canvas "where I shall paint the form of the Lord. I want Him to stand there in the midst of several billowy clouds which will reflect his halo."

"And which of the scriptures am I to be embroiderin' underneath the Blessed Savior's feet, Ma'am?" As yet Katy had not been able to address her mother-in-law in any other way.

"The scripture is from the first few verses of the gospel of St. John. I will not quote it to you now, for I'm afraid you must not know them until just before you start your needlework after the painting is done. Bishop Stokesley may come at any time; and even though he may object to my depictions of scenes from the Savior's ministry, I believe he will allow me to finish the painting. But the scriptures will be certain to infuriate him, so the less you know about them, the better it will be for you. Besides, I want

to present the long tapestry, painted and embroidered, as a fait accompli."

"Then since you won't be needin' me, Ma'am," said Katy, "I wonder if I could be spared a bit of time to be workin' on a project of me own."

"A sewing project, perhaps, My Dear Katy?" Isabel smiled at her daughter-in-law. "You are welcome to any of the pastel fabrics that remain in the boxes Father sent. Lady Carter-Andrews has no interest in them. Her tastes run to brighter colors. But won't you tell me what your project is to be?"

"What with me havin' the mornin' upsets, and you havin' had your own wee ones, I've no doubt you've come to expect cuddlin' and croonin' to your first grandchild next spring."

"I have, but thank you for confirming my expectations. I'm so pleased to see your happiness in spite of the two of you being confined to this place. Perhaps you and Chris will be released before the blessed event takes place, and your baby can be born in the cottage at Birdbrook, or in the new messuage that's part of the property Father has given you."

"Oh, Ma'am," Katy sighed, "so grand it would be for the wee one to see the light o' day in the dear cottage in our lovely village of Birdbrook."

"But I am afraid I do not see that as a possibility," shouted the bishop from the doorway of the Fleet, "not while I have a say."

They stared as he came into their presence accompanied by a yeoman warden, having been so engrossed in their conversation they had not been aware of the door being opened. He stood before them his steely eyes aglow with demonic fire and his black-caped form seeming to hover over Isabel like a great vulture circling before swooping down to devour its prey.

"You believe yourselves to be free now that you have the King in your camp, but it will not be for long. His ears are always open to suggestions--all kinds of suggestions--even from some who have similar views to my own. The Quarles and the Mitchells are not the only people with influence."

When Isabel had caught her breath, she asked "Why do you hate me so, Bishop Stokesley? I can find no logical reason for your persecution of me and my family."

John Stokesley did not equivocate in reply. "I hate you because you have interfered with my plans, my righteous crusade. I hate you because you have opposed my will at every turn and placed a stumbling block in my path wherever I go. I hate you because you are an evil enchantress, who has cast a spell upon all around you. The King, his Guard, even the warden of this prison, who in times past ruled with an iron hand, dealing only in punishments for her inmates, have come under your wicked influence. All of this," he indicated the improvements in the castle with a wide sweep of his arm, "has been the work of a sorceress, a witch who has woven a spell over everyone she meets."

"My mother, as you very well know, John Stokesley," Meg heatedly declared, "is neither a sorceress nor an enchantress. She is, or was, a widow living a quiet, peaceful existence in the English countryside until her arrest. These improvements are not due to spells or incantations on her part."

"No one person," the bishop's stentorian voice insisted, "could have inveigled the warden into accepting improvements as well as wrought such changes in so short a time."

"I agree," said Margaret, "no one person could. But a group of people--Christians dedicated to following the Lord's example and performing charitable acts for others--could, and did. We saw Lady Carter-Andrews needed help of various kinds in her management of the Fleet, and we merely pooled our talents to provide that help."

"And provided an easy life for yourselves, whereas you have all been guilty of committing crimes for which you should suffer the greatest privation, in addition to frequent beatings and torture until you confess your sins against God and the Holy Roman Church and renounce your heathenish practices. As soon as I can bring His Majesty around to a correct understanding of the consequences of such permissive behavior among the prisoners here, there will be changes made that will not improve your condition, I promise you." Then he turned from Meg to Isabel and declared. "I will yet see you burn in hell, Madam." and swept down the Great Hall and out of the castle

y the yeoman warden.

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not help

A family counsel was called by Thomas later that day. He told them "We must make plans to protect each member of our family, especially Isabel, from the vengeance of the bishop. He is determined that she will be sentenced to death by fire. We must enlist the aid of others to prevent this from happening."

"Father is working together with Sir James Mitchell to influence the king in our behalf, Thomas. Do you not think that strategy will suffice?"

"I fear not, My Dear Isabel, for we are dealing with a madman in the bishop. If he is thwarted in his obsessive desire to rid the realm of all non-conformists, he may very well take things into his own hands. He is ambitious for power and feels himself above everyone else. In his fanaticism, he is convinced he owes allegiance to no one--and that includes the crown and the Pope. I am certain we will need more than King Henry's assistance."

"What about William and Sergeant Coggs?" suggested Meg. "Either one would do anything we asked of them."

"That is true, Meg," said her uncle. "When William comes to see you tomorrow, have him take this message to your grandfather." He handed her a paper that she placed in her apron pocket.

"It seems to me," said Christopher, who sat across the table from his mother and uncle, "that the bishop is not in the good graces of King Henry at the moment. We heard things while we were at New Hall about an interview which took place in London. He apparently

was given notice to leave Grandfather's family alone, and in no uncertain terms. I don't think he will do anything, for a while at least, to stir the king's ire."

"You are probably right, Chris," Thomas agreed. "He will wait, perhaps months, until the escapade at Birdbrook, where the destruction of the alabaster statue of Our Lady and the rood at St. Augustine was, according to William, found to be that of John Stokesley's private army, has been long forgotten. In the meantime, he still has the authority to round up non-conformists and cast them into prison. As long as they are not relatives of the king's special friends, his crusade is in no danger of being held up or called off."

A heated discussion then ensued over what should be done to the bishop were he to be put on trial for his misdeeds. The twins took great pleasure in devising all sorts of horrible punishments to the dismay of their mother and Aunt Elizabeth, but the others just laughed and Thomas reminded the ladies that "boys would be boys" and shocking their tender-hearted womenfolk was part of the growing up process they were going through.

Christopher had been lying in bed, wide awake, for some time when his wife gently touched his shoulder. "Chris, Darlin'," she said, "I have this terrible feelin' about Ma'am. The things your Uncle Thomas was tellin' us fair made my blood run cold, with chills goin' up and down me spine. When your little brothers were sayin' they wished to have the arrestin' of the evil bishop so they could be throwin' him in a dark dungeon and leavin' him without food and water, then tossin' him in a pot and boilin' him in oil like the heathen cannibals, I was near to be offerin' help in such an undertakin'."

He laughed at the picture this painted of Katy wreaking vengeance on a cowering John Stokesley, then said seriously "I know how you feel, and I also sympathize with the boys. It is very difficult just to stand by and do nothing when someone you love is being threatened. But My Love, remember Father's dream. Even if we have to endure this persecution now, we will be all right eventually."

"How could I ever be forgettin' what you told me that day in the field? It made my heart sing with hope for you then, as it does for the wee one growin' within me. And I feel that your brothers and Meg and your uncle and aunt will be released in time and be returned to Birdbrook. A kind of woman's knowin' tells me that. But for Ma'am, the feelin' in me heart if one of forebodin'. I look at herself, whom I'm lovin' more than anyone else, except you, Darlin', and am havin' the sense of time bein' short for her. Please be assurin' me tis not so. Make me feel these thoughts I'm thinkin' are but foolish mother-to-be meanderin's."

"But Katy, Sweetheart, the man in the dream said Father's line would continue and have numerous descendants. Don't you think Mother is part of that promise?"

"Not in the same way as you, Chris Darlin', for it is through you that your dear father's descendants will be blessed. And I am knowin', as sure as I am lying by your side in this grand bedstead built for us by the fine men of Birdbrook, that this wee one nestlin' in me womb is a son whose name will be Christopher Choate Jr. That he will be a handsome, healthy lad, fatherin' sons of his own at the proper time, tis certain."

Chris raised himself up on his elbow. "You're saying that Mother has already fulfilled her part of the dream by bearing a son--me? I have never once considered that. I've always thought everyone of us would be safe. But Mother must feel as you do. I notice at times she seems to be wrestling with a problem she cannot or will not share with the rest of us."

"Yes, Darlin' Heart. And when she thinks herself alone, she is fallin' on her knees prayin' for the lovin' Father to give her courage."

"Well, her life will not be taken by Bishop Stokesley or anyone else if I can prevent it," Chris promised Katy. "Perhaps we can ask King Henry to release her to Grandfather's custody. I doubt even the bishop would dare to try taking her away from his home."

"What a wonderful idea, Darlin'. You are so clever to be thinkin'

of it. Isn't our little Chris lucky to be havin' such a father."

"Of course, Sweetheart, and it must be the 'Luck of the Irish' for it is his colleen of a mother who makes his father feel he can perform miracles, but is so beautiful he never gets a good night's sleep to have the energy for the performance of those miracles." He gathered her into his arms and kissed her tenderly. "Good night, My Love. I'll talk to Uncle Thomas and to William Coffield tomorrow about Mother."

SIXTEEN

September - October 1533

But even though His Majesty gladly gave consent to the plan, and her father was more than willing to make all the arrangements for Isabel's removal to his home, She would not go. "I cannot," she said. "Do not ask it of me."

As the weeks of Autumn passed and nothing but rumors circulating at St. James Court were heard of, Isabel settled down to almost routine life at the Fleet. The painting of the tapestry was progressing and attracting such interest from visitors that Lady Carter-Andrews increased the number of tours through the castle each day, and also her fees for conducting them. A tour of the Fleet was becoming the favorite amusement of the nobility, who gathered in London for the Fall and Winter Season.

Isabel lost herself in artistic endeavor. Daily scripture study, which had been so satisfying in the past, was supplanted by her painting of scenes from the Savior's ministry. She was pleased to recall the verses they represented and to experience a feeling of kinship with those whose lives he touched and changed. She knew her talent was increasing, as in the Parable of the Talents, for she was using it in His service.

As she pondered the sacrifices the Lord had made, especially giving His life for each of Heavenly Father's children--no matter who they were, for He was no respecter of persons--and the saving

of those who believe in Him, she felt humbled with gratitude for this gift and for her own weakness. 'Greater love hath no man than this,' He said, "that a man lay down his life for his friend.' Would her love ever be that strong? Would she be willing to sacrifice her life for her friends? For her family? I don't know, she said to herself. I just don't know.

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William came almost daily to see Margaret and deliver messages from her grandfather. One afternoon he brought Sergeant Coggs to the Fleet with him, and she greeted him joyfully.

"My Dear Friend," she cried, shaking his hand, "how delighted I am to see you again. I've missed our interesting conversations."

"That do be kind o' you ta say, Miss." A broad smile lit up his weather-beaten features. "I ent been soo happy betimes since."

"Tell me what you've been doing these past several months. Have you been climbing any more plum trees? Going to Coggshall to see your wife? How is she, and how are the Squire and his Lady?"

"Do that did that done, Miss," said the sergeant. "I wont never think how ta be tellin'. They be too many questions at one and the same time."

"Well, just answer them one at a time, then," she told him, "but come with me first, both of you." She included William in her invitation. "I want you to see how Mother's painting is coming along. She will be as happy as I am to see you and hear your adventures.

Isabel was indeed happy to see Sergeant Coggs. She had sensed in him from the beginning a loyalty to those he called friends. She chuckled at his humorous tales of military life and his latest trip to Coggshall to see his wife.

"I wunt but feelin' a might uppity on me mount ridin' high by the Squire's house and sportin' a medal on me chest the cap'n give me for stoppin' a great gang o' cut-throats lookin' ta steal the king's hogsteads o' ale we wuz cartin' ta Lunnon."

"A great gang, Coggs?" his captain asked, amusement written on his face at his sergeant's telling of the incident.

"Wull, now," said the sergeant, grinning at Isabel, "p'raps they wuz jest one or two of 'em, but they stood half agin as high as owd Coggs, Ma'am."

"I believe you, Sergeant," she said. "You're a brave soldier, and it must have taken courage to confront the would-be thieves. And apparently the captain thought so, too, or he wouldn't have given you that medal."

"Yes, m," he agreed and went on with his story. "It be soo long I dint see me missus. I say ta meself 'Coggs, that woman wunt be sa happy wi' lookin' on yer cracky owd face and mebbe not open she's door ta ya. And when I come ta me hut, she wunt there but in the shed a'milkin' the Squire's cows, her back ter me." He stopped talking and his face took on a mischievous look that prompted Meg to interrupt.

"Why do I have a feeling what you're going to tell us happened didn't exactly please your wife?" asked Margaret, giving William a quick wink of the eye, which Coggs looking at Isabel didn't catch.

"Do that did that done, Miss," he replied. "I dunt aim nothin' but ta s'prise me missus. Of a sudden, I think ta come up wi'out warnin' and give the owd woman a bit of a snuzzle on she's neck."

"How very romantic, Coggs," said his superior, his eyes twinkling at the picture this created in his imagination.

"Yes, Cap'n," the sergeant agreed, "an' it likely would'a been 'ceptin' jest afore I wuz set ta grab herself, me bumble foot got cotched up on an owd pitchfork layin' in the hay. I fell kerplunk agin that woman, sendin' she sprawlin' out on the floor, all them milk pails splishin' an' splashin' ever which way."

Margaret's giggle started them all to laughing, including Coggs, so that he had to wait awhile before concluding his story.

"She were soo madlike she wunt let me hep she up, but riz herself and said "Coggs, ya diffy-daffy owd coot. The Squire'll have me head fer this.' Then she comes after me wi' the pitchfork an' pokes me backside all the way to we's hut, mutterin' ta herself 'Me mum be soo right. She kep tellin' me ta dunt never marry a Cog'shall man."

With tears of laughter streaming down her face, Isabel told him "I hope you and your wife are on good terms again, Sergeant."

He scratched his head and replied "Wull, I dunno, Ma'am. Afore I left she took ter wonderin' if they wunt a post fer me somewhere a fur ways from Essex County."

"Some place like India or China, perhaps, Old Friend?" suggested William.

Later, while Margaret took Sergeant Coggs on a tour of the Fleet the warden considering anyone below the rank of captain beneath her time and effort--William stayed with Isabel and watched her work.

"I am very impressed by your artistic ability, Ma'am," he said. "The people in the scenes you've painted look so real, not at all stiff or wooden as they do on most of the tapestries I've seen."

"Thank you, William. I've tried to paint them true to life. I suppose I've subconsciously patterned them after persons I have met, or those with whom I am well-acquainted. For that reason, I have come to think of them as real people."

"I like this scene the best." He pointed to the one of the Lord as He sat blessing the little children. "I fancy I see a resemblance to Meg and the boys in a few of them."

"Is there really?" she asked, examining the scene closely. "Oh, you're right. I can see the resemblance also. My goodness, I do hope I haven't done any self-portraits."

"No, you've not put yourself into your work, merely your talent.

which is considerable." He again studied her painting and told how amazing he felt her progress had been. "But I'm afraid I have news from Sir Quarles which will be disturbing to you."

"It's about John Stokesley, isn't it?" Her voice sounded choked with fear. The prolonged absence of the bishop had lulled Isabel into a false sense of security. Now the words William spoke made her anxiety--never far from the surface of her mind--become like a blanket of dread, covering her entire being and suffocating any faint hope that he might stay away permanently.

"Yes, it does, indirectly," said the captain. "It seems that some non-conformists have become as fanatical as the bishop and are going throughout England wreaking havoc on the monasteries and cathedrals, stealing their treasures and burning or breaking them into pieces."

"How awful!" she exclaimed. "They cannot have been reading their scriptures or, if so, understanding the Savior's teachings. His words were of love and peace. He said 'Peace I leave with you. Not as the world giveth, give I unto you.'"

"I agree this destruction of property does not accord with the true Christianity you and your family practice. Yet my real concern is how this will affect you, because His Majesty has become incensed over these wanton acts of vandalism. This may influence him to give the bishop free rein to bring them to a stop."

"And he will abandon us to John Stokesley. Oh, William, I have

feared this would happen." Isabel put down her paintbrush and, as she arose, looked up into the eyes of her future son-in-law, an expression of vulnerability on her countenance which tugged at his heartstrings.

"Please, Ma'am," he pleaded, "I will do everything in my power--even assist in your family's escape if your lives are threatened by the bishop--to save you from his revenge. The problem is that the king may not care to recall that he discovered the damage in Birdbrook was caused by the prelate's private army rather than by you and your family and friends. The work of these non-conformist fanatics may lead him to forget all else in favor of inflicting punishment on anyone associated with the movement."

After William and Sergeant Coggs had left, Isabel thought over what she had been told and debated whether to confide in Thomas. She didn't want to worry other family members. When she finally decided to tell him about her conversation with William, she was comforted by his counsel.

"Although we have little control over what others may choose to do to us, we do have control over how we respond to them. On the other hand, we have unlimited freedom to think and feel, to pray and exercise faith and trust in the Lord, and to have hope in the future and complete assurance in life beyond the grave."

"Remember the rest of that scripture you quote: to William?" he asked her. "The Savior concluded His words of peace by saying to His disciples 'Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be

afraid. In my Father's house are many mansions. I go to prepare a place for you, that where I am ye may be also. And whither I go ye know, and the way ye know."

"Thank you, Thomas. I shall try to let those words fill my soul and help me to achieve the peace of mind that passeth all understanding."

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Sir Quarles sent word through William that he would like his three younger grandsons to pay him a visit. Lady Carter-Andrews was not about to give her permission until she discovered his Lordship had sent her triple the fees, and William would have to return the money to him if they were not allowed to go.

Isabel noticed that the twins were overjoyed with the invitation but that John seemed a little reluctant. When she was able to see him alone for a moment, she asked him what was bothering him.

"I thought you and Father were on good terms, John. He wants so much to make up for those years he feels he neglected you. Won't you please try to be friendly?"

"I don't have to try to be friendly, Mother," replied John. "I like him and Grandmother, too, and enjoy being around them. But I don't want to leave you here. Can't you come with us?"

"No, Dear," she answered his worried look with a smile. "I'm sure Father has something for you boys alone in mind--something very special--otherwise he would have asked me to come also."

"Well, I suppose he has, but I just feel I should stay here with you in case anything happens, like the old bishop coming and giving you trouble. After all, now that Chris is married I'm responsible for your safety as your eldest son at home--not ^{here,} but you know what I mean."

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"I think I know exactly what you mean, Son. You ^{of} man of the house now and want to protect your ^{to} appreciate your concern more than you will ever know. Thank you, John Dear, but I am certain I will be safe while you visit your grandfather. I understand the bishop is scouring the length and breadth of England for heretics at this time, and is too busy for those of us he already has in custody. You may go without worry. Sans souci as the French would say."

The boys left early the next morning and were gone for several hours. When they returned, Robert and William were full of all the exciting things they had seen and done in visits to their grandfather's places of business.

"First, he showed us the shop where he displays his goods," said Robert. "Mother, you wouldn't believe the hundreds of bolts of material he has there."

"Hundreds?" William snorted. "I'd say thousands. Everywhere you looked were rows and rows of them. He imports a lot of them, and he said we could go down to the port sometime and watch the cargo being unloaded from one of the ships and taken to his huge warehouse. We saw it, too, from the doorway, and it was piled to the

roof with all kinds of cloth from the orient. Just think of it, Mother, our grandfather doing business with the Chinese."

"Grandfather is a member of a merchant guild," said Robert with a touch of pride. "Did you know that, Mother?"

"I seem to recall hearing something about a guild when I was very young, but it's rather vague in my mind. Why don't you explain it to me?"

"All right," Robert replied. "It's an organization where craftsmen can make things for sale and merchants can buy and sell what they make. William, I forget what Grandfather told us the name of his guild was."

"Well, I remember," said William, importantly. "It's the Society of the Drapers of London. But you haven't told her about the shop where he has people weave the cloth he doesn't import. That was the most interesting of all the things we saw today."

"Wasn't it, though," Robert agreed with his twin. "You should see the spinning wheels and looms, Mother. They're so much bigger and work so much faster than ours at home. Grandfather said he's made a lot of improvements since he first started out in his business. He told us the secret to success in any kind of work is to always be looking for better ways to do things."

"That is very wise counsel," said Isabel. "Father has this gift of ingenuity which I believe you boys have inherited. Remember when the pedal I used to have to press with my knee to spin the

yarn broke, and you all worked for days fashioning a foot pedal, which was so much easier to use. There have been numerous times when you've been of great help to me by putting your creative minds to a problem. As far as I'm concerned, that is the definition of creativity: the ability to solve problems."

"You ought to see Grandfather's workers," William told her. "I'm sure some of the apprentices are much younger than Robert and me. Of course, they are beginners who receive board and lodging and training in exchange for their work. It takes years before they are skilled enough to become journeymen."

"But Grandfather says he's found these young boys work best when they have something to look forward to after their apprenticeship is over," said Robert. "He's made it a practice to promise them new clothes and a bag of sovereigns if they learn their craft well."

"How very kind and generous Father is." Isabel's heart was full as she thought of her parent's many good qualities. She was so happy her sons were having the opportunity to see this for themselves.

"And as journeymen," continued William, "they must work for more years and construct masterpieces which have to meet very rigid standards if they are to be declared masters. But they receive regular wages as journeymen. Not too many of them become masters. To those who do, however, Grandfather gives enough money to set themselves up in their own establishments or shops and have their own apprentices and journeymen. Some of the shops that come under

Grandfather's business really belong to these masters. It was fascinating to watch them at work."

All the while the twins were telling her about their exciting day she was aware of John standing quietly by, letting his brothers do the talking. She wondered if he had enjoyed himself as much as they did and finally had a chance to ask him.

"Yes, Mother," he replied, smiling broadly at her. "I've never seen anything I found more to my liking. When our tour ended, we went back to the mansion and Grandfather told me to come into his library so we could talk privately." John's face took on a glow of confidence she had never before seen on it. "He told me that he wanted someone to carry on his business when he retired, and he hoped I would be that person."

"Oh, John," his mother cried, "how wonderful that will be for you if that is your wish also."

"I wish it with all my heart. I will have to learn the business by working in the shops and the warehouse and at the docks, but I am more than willing to spend the years until his retirement doing just that. I shall make both of you proud of me."

"Of course, Dear," she agreed. "I should expect nothing less of you. None of you children," she said, looking at the twins, who were open-mouthed with surprise at John's news, "has ever failed to give your very best effort to anything you've undertaken; and that makes my mother's heart almost burst with happiness."

SEVENTEEN

November 1533

One morning in early November Isabel saw that she was well along with her painting and that Katy would be able to start on the embroidery soon. If so, they would be finished by Christmas. She told Meg and Katy this when they came in after taking care of the household chores.

"That's wonderful," said Meg eagerly. "I can't wait to see how it will look when the scriptures are added. Mother, why can't we have a Christmas Pageant and act out the Nativity. We have all kinds of fabric left over to make the costumes."

"Meg, Darlin' Girl!" Katy exclaimed. "That's by way of bein' a marvelous idea. All will be wantin' to be part of it. We could be havin' two for each part." She giggled. "Sure, and this colleen would be perfect for playin' the Blessed Virgin, big with child. Then you can be Mary when she is in the stable gazin' upon the Christchild lyin' in the manger. Chris can be Joseph with me, and William can play the dear man with you."

"Katy, you're a genius," said Meg. "We'll use one of Mother's old dolls for Baby Jesus. What do you think, Mother? Would there be any reason why we can't have a Christmas Pageant here?"

"Not if the warden agrees, Meg, and we can always appeal to her great need to provide something new and unusual for her highborn acquaintances. Certainly the Nativity as a pageant would not be

their usual Christmas fare. I believe it is not common among the nobility or royalty to present such a program. Its rarity will probably draw many of them to the castle, which will make Lady Carter-Andrews the celebrity she longs to be. Yes, I think she'll be pleased to agree to our plans. However, be ready for her to lecture us about neglecting our chores while we are carrying them out."

True to form, her ladyship spent a considerable length of time, after agreeing, listing all the things she wished to have accomplished in the castle before the work on the pageant was to be done each day. One or two of them were newly-created tasks--such as designing a gown for her to wear on the occasion and having a chair made large enough for her to be comfortably seated while watching them sew her gown.

So the plans were put into operation. Actors and actresses were measured for their costumes, which were cut out and sewn by the ladies of Birdbrook under Elizabeth's direction. The most elaborate of these were those of the three wise men (or six wise men for the dual roles). Their robes and headdresses were embroidered in seed pearls and other jewels from broken necklaces the warden had discarded.

The men and boys from Birdbrook, together with John Rogers, constructed the stage settings and backdrops; and Margaret, with a few selected amateur painters, painted them. Everything looked so authentic one could almost imagine being in the stable with Mary

and Joseph and Baby Jesus, or on a hillside with the shepherds, or riding upon a camel across the desert following the great star.

The enthusiasm for the project never lagged, but grew daily as they saw the results of their efforts. They sang as they worked, and even Lady Carter-Andrews could not stay away from watching their progress. She had somehow convinced herself it had been her idea all along, and no one enjoying the brief respite from her usual criticism would gainsay her.

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Isabel laid down her brush for the last time with a sigh of relief, knowing her part of the long tapestry was finished. It had been very satisfying, a true test of her talent; and she had given her heart and soul to the project. Now it was Katy's turn to employ her magic fingers in embroidering the scriptures. Of course, Meg would help first by writing them on the canvas. She had such a beautiful secretary hand, having been tutored in penmanship by the clerk who was scribe for the wills at the Prerogative Court at Canterbury.

Thinking of the scriptures reminded her what might occur should Bishop Stokesley see the verses written beneath each of the biblical scenes. She shuddered at the thought as if a cold wind had passed through the Great Hall. Ought the tapestry to be left as it was? She was certain he could not object to the paintings. He would have no way of knowing what the scenes represented, for in spite of his high office, he had an ignorance of the scriptures, even those in the Roman bible. Perhaps he could not read Latin.

Priests in England were appointed by the Pope in Rome, and they were chosen more for their experience in politics than for their understanding of spiritual matters. The bishop's cunning had won him his post, Isabel was certain.

But John Stokesley's education was not entirely lacking. He could read English very well. Once the scriptures were written, their meaning and source would be abundantly clear to him. And there would be no turning back for her. She would have taken her stand and, in so doing, issued a challenge. According to her good and noble friend, John Rogers, she had already made her choice when she became a non-conformist--when she first accepted a copy of John Wycliffe's translation of the New Testament in English. Now she must remain true to her convictions even if she must die for them.

Hadn't she said she knew this in her heart? Why did she rationalize her feelings? What was it she needed to give her courage? The Savior said 'Ask, and ye shall receive; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.' She had prayed so often for confirmation that the steps she had taken were right ones. Was she seeking for a sign? Only the wicked sought for them. They were freely given to those who believed on Him. She must be weak in the faith.

"Mother, are you ill?" asked Meg, as she came upon her mother sitting there with her head resting in her arms on the table. Isabel looked up to see the concern on her daughter's face.

"No, Dear," Isabel replied, "just tired and relaxing now that the painting is finally done. Will you give me an honest evaluation of it, Meg. I have been too close to it, I can no longer see it with any objectivity."

"It's lovely. Every scene is perfect within itself, yet each harmonized with all the others. You have surpassed yourself, Mother. Your talent has increased to the point where you may well rival the masters."

"I will allow you may have some natural bias, My Sweet Meg, but I appreciate your words of encouragement nonetheless." She kissed her daughter, who asked if she should begin writing the verses so Katy could embroider them.

"Yes, it is time," Isabel said. "But will you go find Katy and ask her to come here. I want you both to see the scriptures I've chosen so you will know the danger we face from Bishop Stokesley should he come to the Fleet after the verses are on the canvas."

"Perhaps we should not----" Meg started to say, but was prevented by her mother, who held out her hand in a silencing motion.

"We must, Meg," Isabel stated emphatically. "We must."

Seeing it was useless to argue the point, Margaret went to find Katherine. When they came back, Isabel had the drawings she made while planning the long tapestry in her hands. She spread them on the table for the girls to examine. They did so carefully for several minutes, gasping their concern over the first one and

shaking their heads over the others.

"Mother," said Meg, breaking the silence, "do you have any idea what you will be doing to that mad man by using this particular scripture?" She pointed to the first one. "He will be so furious he may strangle you before our very eyes. And this will not be the first time something of this sort has happened. Today, while William was here, he told me about a man named Edward Freese, a Yorkshireman and painter by trade, who had fled from persecution because of his religious convictions into Essex County."

"He settled in Colchester," she continued, "and when he had been there for a good while was hired to paint certain cloths for the New Inn, which is in the middle of the marketplace. In the upper part of the cloths, he wrote certain sentences of the scriptures. Hearing about this act, Bishop Stokesley came roaring into Colchester, declaring it showed the man plainly was a heretic and deserved to die. He brought Edward Freese to London and placed him in the tower, where he denied him food and water and visits from his wife and children. The poor man became so weak from the starvation and thirst that he lost his mind. When they hung him in a public square, with his family forced to view the terrible event, they were close enough to the scaffold to hear him muttering incomprehensively until he died. John Stokesley's cackling laughter was heard throughout the square as he boasted that this would serve as an example to any others accused of committing a similar crime. These verses you have chosen will be even more inflammatory than those of Edward Freese."

"Oh, Ma'am," Katy added her concern to Meg's. "I'm fearin' for your life at the hands of that dreadful man. Sure, and he'll not be forgettin' how you have stood up to him. Hatin' is his way o' goin' and revenge his greatest pleasure."

"That is true, Katy," agreed Isabel, "but as Christians we cannot let him have his revenge. We must turn the other cheek, as our Lord has said, and we must walk the second mile."

"Yet I'm thinkin' you should be takin' the advice and goin' to your father's home for a while. The be doin' you harm there, and he isn't needin' to revenge against the rest of us."

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"Thank you, Katy Dear," said Isabel. "I know you have my welfare at heart, and I wish I could do as you suggest. Though my flesh is weak, my spirit tells me I must stand for truth. If I lose my life for the Savior's sake in this world, I shall gain it in the next; for our cause will triumph at last. But come, let us not dwell longer on these solemn thoughts. There is work to be done. This is how I want you to write these first few verses, Meg."

They discussed Isabel's plans and Meg began. The first verses were to be written from the top of the canvas, on the left-hand side, as though they were drifting down with the clouds towards the place where the Lord's form stood. Underneath His feet, the rest of the passage from St. John would be written.

Isabel and Katherine were standing back, watching Margaret work.

when Lady Carter-Andrews came storming in and almost caused the tapestry to fall off its framework as she threw herself against the table in her rage.

"Madam," she shouted at Isabel, "your sister-in-law is impossible! I asked her to applique a replica of my Mitchell Coat of Arms on the bodice of my Christmas gown, and she had the nerve to tell me it would be out of place for the occasion. She told me, a Lady! Imagine a lowly prisoner, a wretched woman without a title to her name, talking to me, a member of the nobility and the warden of the Fleet! You must do something about this at once!"

"Yes, Your Ladyship," Isabel calmly said. "Did Elizabeth have a suggestion as to what might be more appropriately appliqued on the bodice of your gown?"

"Of course she did," replied the warden, "a very stupid one. She suggested a branch of holly would be in keeping with the holiday-something to do with the religious aspect of Christmas, I suppose."

"Very much to do with our remembrance of our Lord, whose birth we are commemorating with the Nativity Pageant," Isabel agreed.

"What a splendid notion Elizabeth had, the very thing to make your gown unique. I'm sure no one of your ladyship's guests will have come up with anything as clever as that Christmas symbol for her gown. Yours will undoubtedly be the most fashionable."

Lady Carter-Andrews stared at Isabel, a look of amazement illuminating her porcine features. "Do you really think so?"

"Oh, absolutely, don't you agree, girls?" she asked Meg and Katy trying to keep a straight face as she looked in their direction.

"Milady," Katherine's soft brogue giving her answer a musical quality, "never let your mind be thinkin' otherwise. T'will be most eye-catchin'. The ladies will be fair fallin' over themselves to be discoverin' your modiste, while the magnificence of it may render the gentlemen speechless."

Margaret, looking as if she might explode with laughter at any moment, merely nodded her head in agreement.

Lady Carter-Andrews resembled the cat that had been at the cream as she started to walk away toward the staircase. Then she turned back suddenly and took a second look at the tapestry. Isabel held her breath as the warden stared at the writing. She had forgotten that John Stokesley didn't represent the only danger to her and her family.

"Why are you spoiling the tapestry with all those scribbles?" she asked. "It was better with just the pictures, although I would have preferred it to be pictures of the Battle of Hastings or of the Crusade where my husband's ancestor distinguished himself." But she finally turned away with a shrug and again started to go upstairs. She hadn't gotten far when one of the yeoman warders announced the arrival of Sir James and Lady Mary Mitchell. Lady Carter-Andrews' expression was one of exasperation that her sister-in-law seemed to take delight in calling everyone's attention to as she came forward to greet the warden.

"Philadelphia," said Lady Mary, giving her ladyship a peck somewhere in the vicinity of her ear, "you look pained to see us. Did we come at a bad time? Take you away from your paying customers? Honestly, My Dear Sister, you are so good at turning a profit, you ought to be in trade. Why don't you consider keeping a pig farm like your parents did? You could convert part of the castle grounds into it. Then you could slaughter them for His Majesty's table. With his enormous appetite, you should make a fortune."

Lady Carter-Andrews had been glaring daggers at her sister-in-law, but this look turned to dismay as Lady Mary continued "We're staying with the king this time, you know, so you won't have to worry about giving us board and room."

After his wife stopped talking, Sir James greeted his sister with a kiss on the cheek. She seemed a little more mollified, Isabel thought. Probably she was torn between relief that she would not have to play hostess to them and suffer the constant barrage of insults from her sister-in-law's barbed tongue, and the anxiety of wondering whether they would reveal her secret to King Henry.

"I'm going to take my afternoon rest," she told the Mitchells.

"I will expect Mistress Choate to entertain you."

After she had gone, the friends greeted one another happily. Sir James was his usual amiable self and just beamed at them while having nothing to say. But Lady Mary made up for him, going into raptures over the tapestry.

"It's beyond description," she said, as she proceeded to describe

its beauty in detail. "And you are a brave woman, Isabel. I will not be surprised at anything John Stokesley does upon seeing the verses of scripture Margaret has written on it. A good thing he is far from here at present."

"I almost had heart failure a moment ago," Isabel admitted, "when Lady Carter-Andrews was studying the writing. I'm certain she has reported all the rule infractions we have been responsible for to the bishop, unless she does not know how to get in touch with him by messenger."

"Oh, don't worry about that," her ladyship quickly dismissed the possibility of the warden apprising him of the scripture verses. "Philadelphia is nothing if not ignorant. She can't read or write and wouldn't recognize her own name if it were spelled out in seven foot letters across the entrance of the Fleet."

"But tell me about the Christmas Pageant you are planning," she continued. "We will be in attendance with the royal family, as we are to stay in London until after the New Year's celebration."

A lively discussion of the preparations for the pageant ensued, in which the girls explained casting of two persons for almost every part so all in the Fleet could be involved in the event.

"The only role that won't be played by a real person is the Baby Jesus," said Margaret. "We have to borrow one of Mother's childhood dolls for him." But little did she or any of the others know this was not to be.

EIGHTEEN

December 1533

A week before Christmas, Isabel was helping Elizabeth put the finishing touches on the Wise Men's robes when Meg came bounding upstairs and cried "Mother, Aunt Elizabeth, stop whatever you're doing and come downstairs quickly!"

She then turned and ran down the staircase, and they wasted no time in following her. When they came into the Great Hall, they saw William gently placing a young woman on one of the tables, which Katherine had covered with some blankets. She was obviously in the last stages of pregnancy; and from her moans and writhings, they could tell she was soon to be delivered of a child.

Isabel came over to her and placed a soothing hand on her forehead, telling her not to be afraid for she and Elizabeth had each had considerable experience in midwifery. Then as she was able to get a closer look at the young woman, she exclaimed "Why, she's-----!" She stopped suddenly, then said calmly "Never mind. You men had better leave. We women have work to do."

After two hours, with encouragement and assistance from Isabel and Elizabeth, the young woman gave birth to a baby boy. As far as they could tell, he was perfect in every way. He certainly had a healthy pair of lungs, which brought everyone running from all corners of the castle to see him. Isabel let them have a look at the child, then sent them away after motioning William and Meg

and Katy to remain there with her. Since Thomas had been upstairs making some minor repairs in the warden's bedchamber, Elizabeth had hastened away to tell him the news.

"This girl," Isabel said as soon as the others were gone, "is a friend of ours from Birdbrook. Her name is Eleanor Giles." She looked at the young mother who had gone to sleep under the warm blanket Katy had fetched for her. The baby, all bundled up now, was lying by her side. "She was betrothed to Roger Tanner, one of the young men who was arrested along with us and rode on the same horse as John on our way here. Do you know if he is the father of this child, William?"

"No, I do not believe so," replied William, "and I can tell you why I don't. She was arrested a few days ago in Birdbrook, along with her parents and her brother, and brought to London, where she would be tried and sentenced for fornication in addition to the heresy of which her family members were also accused. They were to have appeared before another prelate because Bishop Stokesley had been away for some time; but he arrived home yesterday, and the soldiers, his private army, brought the Giles family to him."

William had an angry look upon his countenance as he continued "When Eleanor saw who was going to try them, she fainted. Coming to, after several anxious moments for all who were present, she stood before John Stokesley and accused him of being the father of her unborn child, saying he had forced himself upon her after binding her so she could not defend herself. By his chalk-white

face and nervous reaction to her accusation, I am certain that she told the truth and he is guilty."

They all gasped at this revelation, but Isabel calmly asked her future son-in-law "When did this terrible experience occur, did she say?"

"According to Eleanor, it took place the same day the bishop came to search your cottage. After he left you, he went in a towering rage to her home and had his soldiers stand guard over her parents and brother. Then he carried her into a bedchamber, where he tied her to the bedstead and raped her. Her family had to listen to her heart-rending screams--indeed her mother's cries were equally as piercing--but could do nothing to help her. The soldiers just laughed and talked, one with another, while the deed was taking place."

"William," cried Meg, "how could any man do such a thing?" She shuddered as she wept, and he put his arm around her shoulder to comfort her.

"That awful person is no man, I'm thinkin'," said Katy, sobbing. "He is the very devil, himself."

"Yes, he is," William agreed, "but there is nothing we can do at present, except hope the account of his behavior will become known to the king, who may be able to dismiss him from office. I have learned that Parliament has just passed the 'Ecclesiastical Appointments Act,' which revokes all of the appointments of bishops

by the Pope. They must hereafter be nominated by the Crown and elected in England, rather than in Rome."

"In the meantime," said Isabel, "we must do all we can to care for and protect this innocent girl and her even more innocent son from John Stokesley's revenge. As soon as she awakens, Katy, go find Chris and John and have them carry the two of them upstairs to our apartment." She told Meg to go with Katy and bring Thomas back so that she might counsel with him.

After they left, she turned to William again. "Tell me how things stand with the bishop," she said. "Why is he in London instead of rounding up non-conformists, as we had heard? Is he likely to be coming here soon?"

"Just before the Giles arrived, he informed me that I was to be ready to accompany him here so that he could see all the preparations he had heard you were making for a Christmas celebration. He was furious to think you would do this and was determined to put a stop to it regardless of what the king, or the nobility who plan on attending would say. He ranted and raved in a deranged fashion, claiming he was his own master and could do whatever he wished."

"He would have seen the long taspestry scriptures," said Isabel. "In his state of mind, anything could have happened. He won't be coming now, I suppose, because of Eleanor."

"No, I'm sure he won't," William said. "He'll be waiting to see

if his crime comes to His Majesty's attention and causes him to dismiss the bishop summarily. I think you will be safe from him until after Christmas."

"I'm grateful for that breathing room, William, and I appreciate all you have done, especially for dear Eleanor. But will you do one more favor for me and tell Father what happened. Perhaps he can talk to King Henry."

"I'll relay your message to him immediately and let you know what he says." He took both her hands in his as he said goodbye, and he told her not to worry."

Thomas came soon after William's departure. His wife had not only told him about Eleanor Giles and her baby, but had taken him into Isabel's apartment to see the mother and child. He was not surprised, therefor, when she asked him if he thought it would be a good idea to talk to Roger Tanner. He agreed and listened as she related everything William had told her.

When she had finished, he said "I'll tell Roger the entire story. It will anger him and may influence his thinking about his betrothal, but I feel he must see Eleanor at once and try to understand how she feels. She needs his love and support more than she needs ours now."

"Roger is a fine young man," said Isabel. "I hope he will want to marry her and be a father to the boy. That seems to me to be the only solution to the future happiness of all three of them."

"He will if he has true Christian charity, Isabel, and I believe he has. And if he does need to be persuaded, I shall remind him of the Savior's counsel to the twelve disciples 'This new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another."

Isabel was in her apartment tending to Eleanor and her baby, both of whom were asleep, when Thomas came in a little later bringing Roger Tanner with him. The young man stood in the doorway, white-faced and mute, staring at his fiancee, when she awakened and saw him there. She covered her face with her hands and began to weep as if her heart would break. He ran in and fell on his knees at her bedside.

"Eleanor, Eleanor," he repeated over and over again, enfolding her in his arms and kissing her tear-stained face. "My Darling Eleanor, I love you so much. Will you forgive me for not being there when you needed me? But I'm here now and will be forever if you'll let me. I want to take care of you and the little boy and protect you both from any further unhappiness."

Isabel smiled at Thomas, the tears streaming down her face. It looked as if John Rogers would have another wedding ceremony to perform in the not too distant future.

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Lady Carter-Andrews had spent most of her time recently watching the costumes for the pageant and her own Christmas gown being sewn, inbetween conducting her usual castle tours. But she had been on a rare visit outside the castle walls when Eleanor Giles was brought to the Fleet and gave birth to her son. By the time she arrived home, mother and child were safely in Isabel's and Margaret's apartment. After a family counsel, it was decided to keep intelligence of the situation from her ladyship as long as they could. She had never come near the apartment since first showing it to them, nor was she likely to come now.

The trouble was, however, that they hadn't counted on the boy's healthy lungs setting up a cry during the middle of the night and awakening the warden. His hungry sobs pierced the upstairs hallway and bedchambers until she heard them and came charging out of hers to demand an explanation of the racket. When she was told the story, she harrumphed and said that she didn't believe it; and she could hardly take the word of a girl who was probably no better than she should be. If it was true, she said, the girl must have led the bishop on.

However, she was not averse to having the two stay at the Fleet, as long as someone paid for their upkeep. Isabel agreed to asking her father and informed William on his next visit so he might do this for her. Lady Carter-Andrews appeared pleased at the idea of making even more profit than she had counted on at the expense of the miserable trouble-causing widow's parent. Her purse was growing fatter by the hour.

The twins came rushing into their mother's apartment, where she was preparing to eat and drink her midday meal of bread and milk and cheese. They were bursting with excitement.

"Guess what?" they chorused. When she could not answer them, they told her Bridley had come to the Fleet with an offer to play his recorder during the Christmas Pageant. He had even written new words to an old song for Christopher to sing while the audience watched the manger scene with the shepherds and wise men kneeling before Baby Jesus.

"You remember 'Greensleeves,' don't you, Mother?" asked Robert.

"Well, Bridley's version is called 'Within the Stable.' Listen to the words:

Within the stable where he lies, we see the Christchild slumber,
While gathering in heav'nly skies are angels without number.
Kneel, shepherds, before the King.

Lay down, O wise men, the gifts you bring.

Hosanna, praise His name, the Son of God and Mary!

Why is he placed, this Babe Divine, upon a lowly manger?
The Father's blessing to mankind has come to earth a stranger.
Kneel, shepherds, before the King.

Lay down, O wise men, the gifts you bring.

Hosanna, praise His name, the Son of God and Mary!

The Lord of all creation now dwells among God's children.
To them he offers salvation and their return to heaven.

Kneel, shepherds, before the King.

Lay down, O wise men, the gifts you bring.

Hosanna, praise His name, the Son of God and Mary!

"Those are the most beautiful words I have ever heard," said Isabel with tears in her eyes. "And that lovely melody sung by Chris will add to the spirit of the occasion. I must go and thank Bridley."

When she returned, Sir James and Lady Mary Mitchell, who came to the castle daily to watch the preparations for the pageant going forward, were in the Great Hall. Lady Mary was all ears to hear Isabel's news of the baby boy born there and the forthcoming wedding of Eleanor and Roger.

"My Dear Isabel, how very exciting!" she exclaimed. "Of course, the circumstances that brought this about are shocking, but all of a piece with the despicable bishop. I would believe anything of him, for you have no idea the scandalous on-dits that make the rounds of the Court of St. James. Well," she stopped talking for a moment and grinned wickedly at Sir James, "we shall see to it that every single one of these is made known to His Majesty. Then perhaps he will rid London of the villain."

"Will King Henry really be offended by John Stokesley's ravishment of Eleanor?" asked Isabel. "He himself can hardly be in a position to cast the first stone."

"Oh, My Dear," Lady Mary replied, "don't you realize he always

has considered his numerous liaisons to be his privilege by Divine Right. The king is too enamoured of Anne to have other mistresses at the moment; but as soon as their relationship begins to pale, he will return to having several of them housed at his lodge at Jericho. In times past, whenever he turned up missing from St. James Palace, the standard joke around the Court was to say "He's off to Jericho!"

"But," she went on, "what he allows himself to engage in without censure from others, he does not often condone in anyone else, unless it suits his fancy. And I do not believe Bishop Stokesley is high on his list of favorite people at present."

Isabel took some comfort from these words. She told the Mitchells the ceremony uniting Eleanor Giles and Roger Tanner was to take place this morning in her apartment, with John Rogers officiating. She asked if they would like to attend, and they were delighted to accept her invitation.

The ceremony was brief, although afterwards the young couple were given some counsel by the minister, whose sweet spirit and kindness made all who listened aware of the sacred nature of the marriage vows they had witnessed.

"You must be true to one another if your life together is to last forever. Though the words of the ceremony promised only union on this earth, a loving Heavenly Father hallows faithfulness beyond mortality, I am certain. We do not now understand how this is to be, but it will one day be revealed to us."

"Love one another," he told them, "and love your son; for he is yours regardless of the nature of his conception. Parenthood is not a free gift, but it is earned by the loving care given to those children God lends to us for a time. Teach your son about the Savior. Live all the Lord's commandments and help him to do so also. Remember, He taught that the first and greatest of them is to 'love the Lord thy God with all they heart, might, mind and strength; and the second is like unto it, to love thy neighbor as thyself. Do this and you will have joy in your lives."

When you are released from prison," he added, "which I have faith you will be, obtain a copy of the scriptures and read them daily as your friends, the Choates, have done since the marriage of John and Isabel. This custom, together with faith and prayer and charity, will build a strong foundation for a happy home. God bless you, My Children."

Isabel and the Mitchells were the last to leave after the talk was over. They met Lady Carter-Andrews in the hallway just as they came to the head of the staircase. She was not pleased to see them there, scowling at them and asking sharply-phrased questions.

"What are you doing here, keeping my prisoners from their duties? What has been going on?" Her puffy eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"Why, Philadelphia," Lady Mary cooed in reply, "you must have had a bad night. Counting sins instead of sheep, Sister Dear? We have just taken a peek at your newest residents. That sweet mother and darling baby boy. You should be over the moon with such a coup."

The warden's confusion was apparent in the hesitant way in which she asked "What coup are you talking about?"

"The one in which you have been instrumental in bringing about an eventual downfall of John Stokesley, your former mentor and the deviser of the punishments you have heretofore dealt to those he has placed in your care."

"You are no doubt aware, Dear Sister, that the bishop has become persona non grata for some other recent escapades. He will surely fall completely from grace as far as His Majesty is concerned as this latest outrage comes to his attention. We can hardly wait to inform him and explain your part in all this, especially how you went along with his suggestions for such a long time."

There was dismay written on the warden's face as she realized any championship of her infamous friends was out of the question as Lady Mary went on "Perhaps we can suggest to the king that you've been acting as a spy for him. And you know, Philadelphia, you've pulled off another coup in having a real live baby boy to play the role of the infant Jesus in the Christmas Pageant, which will be the highlight of the season and the talk of the Court for time to come. You can start a Fleet tradition and produce it every year. You could even take a part yourself, perhaps as the inn-keeper's wife who turns down Joseph and Mary for a room inside the inn. It would be perfect casting."

Lady Carter-Andrew left in a huff while Lady Mary watched smiling "Too bad Philadelphia is so lacking in a sense of humor."

NINETEEN

December 23, 1533

Isabel and Meg, accompanied by William, went to see the Quarles the day before Christmas Eve, when the pageant was to be presented. All their projects were now finished, and the preparations for the Nativity were completed also. Everything was ready for their performance on the morrow, so Isabel wondered why she felt sad.

I should be even happier than I was the last time I walked here in Mary le Bow Park, she thought. Perhaps it's this blanket of snow, which now covers the lovely flowers and shrubs and trees that were warmed by the summer sun before, that make my heart as cold as the winter weather. I feel as if my purpose in life is drawing to a close, and I am just waiting for the end to come. All my prayers, pleading for guidance, are answered now with a spirit prompting which whispers to me 'Patience, My Child, thou wilt soon understand.'

The two young people had gone on ahead, but now stopped to wait for Isabel to catch up to them. "Mother, you look so pensive," said Meg. "Are you feeling nostalgic, recalling childhood days? I doubt your nurse would have brought you here when there was any snow on the ground."

"No, never." Isabel smiled to remember her old nurse's reluctance to take her out of doors, even in summer, should she show the

slightest sign of having contracted a cold. "But sometimes during the winter months Father and Mother and I would ride through the park on a sleigh pulled by four white horses. How beautiful it was to me, bright red in color with gold trimming. The three of us would be bundled up to our eyebrows in fur, so that we looked like the three bears on their outing the day Goldilocks came to call. It was a glorious experience for a child, and I will never forget it."

"It sounds as if it were, Mother," said Meg, "so why does remembering it make you seem so sad? You don't have too much to worry about today, do you?"

"Meg," William said, noting the concern on his future mother-in-law's face, "your mother still has a great deal to worry about. Her future and her family's future are very uncertain. How long all of you must remain in the Fleet is still subject to the whim of King Henry and, until he is dismissed from office, to Bishop Stokesley."

"Do you really think that horrible man can cause us any more harm than he already has?" asked Meg. "Surely he will not come to the castle while Eleanor is staying there."

"No, he probably won't," William agreed, "but he is capable of more evil than you can imagine, even when hampered by being out of favor with His Majesty. He has perfected the art of appearing unexpectedly, carrying out whatever malicious design his madness has convinced him is necessary to further his ambition, and then

disappearing without leaving a trace of having been there. He is like a thief in the night."

And that, said Isabel to herself, as they continued their walk, is what I fear the most. Not knowing when he will come, or what punishment he may inflict upon me, or if I can stand firm in the face of torture at his hands.

Their arrival at the Quarles mansion was greeted with joy by her parents. After their hellos were said and their wraps removed, they were ushered into the dining area, where a delicious luncheon was awaiting. The conversation around the table was a lively one, mostly centering upon the engagement of Meg and William, and in making plans--although not setting a date--for the wedding.

"My Darling Meg," said her grandmother in her soft and fluttery way of speaking, "I want your wedding to be a splendid affair--such a grand and festive occasion, I get so thrilled just thinking about it. Oh dear, I must remember who it is we should invite beside our family, of course. Let's see, there's the royal family and our titled friends--not all of them, for there are some who are not quite the thing. And, do you know, I believe I might have the crown heads of Europe. My parties are always well-attended. They have gained renown for their originality, they tell me, not that we will do anything terribly original for a wedding, just more splendid than any other. You must tell me which prominent persons of your acquaintance you wish invitations to be sent, and I will do my best to see that they attend."

"Oh yes, Grandmother," said Meg, "please ask Sir Thomas More to come, unless his falling out with King Henry forbids it. He has been so very kind to me."

"Of course, he must be invited," her grandmother agreed. "And I will ask Hans Holbein, your former painting instructor who has been appointed Court Painter at St. James Palace. Then there is Henry Howard, the Earl of Surry. He has been experimenting in a new form of poetry--called rather ridiculously, it seems to me, "Blank Verse." I hope he doesn't get me off in a corner to hear his latest poem as he did the last time he came to one of our parties, the silly man. Although I was quite flattered to know he had dedicated one in the Italian sonnet form he used to adapt to English verse to me."

"Grandmother, it's so exciting and what a feather in your cap!" exclaimed Meg. "I can't believe such a grand wedding will be mine and William's. You must invite all of the officers in the King's Guard, including my favorite Sergeant Coggs."

"I can see that you are going to cost me the moon and sixpence," her grandfather said, laughing. "But you are worth it, My Sweet Little Meg. I hope you think so, too, William, for she is a bit like her grandmother, who has kept me on my toes all our married life."

"I'm sure I shall never have a dull moment with Meg, either," he said. "You have survived well, Sir Quarles. If I can do half as well as you, I believe we shall be all right. I shall do my best

to make her life happy. I love her very much, you know."

A little bit later, while her mother made wedding plans with Meg and William, Isabel had a chance to talk to her father about the bishop.

"I have told His Majesty all about John Stokesley's violation of Eleanor Giles," he said, "and I believe he is near to taking all his authority from him. The new law makes it mandatory. In order to implement the "Ecclesiastical Appointments Act." the bishops who were originally appointed by Rome will have to be dismissed and then reappointed by the king."

"In Bishop Stokesley's case," he continued, "there will not only be no reappointment, I shall be surprised if King Henry doesn't have him tried and executed for his crimes. Some of his doings have bordered on treason, which is always punishable by death."

Isabel shuddered. "I would not want him to be executed because of what he has done to us, nor do I believe Eleanor would wish that punishment dealt to him on her behalf. We are trying our best to forgive him as our Lord has counseled us in the scriptures."

"Neither one of your complaints--as justified as they are--would be reason in themselves. It will be the multiplicity of his deeds and his treasonable ravings which will lead to his execution."

"It is his ravings that worry me the most," said Isabel. "A sane man can be coped with. A mad man is another matter entirely. And I am not sure if I have sufficient courage."

Sir Quarles was silent for a moment, then said "I know you have always refused to come and stay with us while the others in the family remained at the Fleet. But given the king's present feelings toward John Stokesley, I may be able to secure the release of all of you to my custody. If I do, will you change your mind and come here?"

Isabel's answer was slow in coming. "With all my heart, I want to say 'yes,' Father. I long to be together as a family with you and Mother and to make plans for a happy future. And yet," her voice was wistful as she spoke, "I cannot leave my friends from Bird-brook or--more importantly--desert our cause. Until the day when the powers that be let us read our New Testaments in English and hold our conventicles, without fear of intimidation of any kind, I must stay in prison."

"Somehow I knew that would be your answer, My Dear Daughter. I am a little envious of you, I think, and of your dedication to your non-conformist cause. I will probably never understand the great importance you place on reading the bable in English."

"You might, Father," she said, "if you took the opportunity of reading it yourself. Of course, I don't know where you would find one now. My understanding is that most of them have been confiscated and that Eagles and others who distribute them are hiding from the authorities."

"As it happens," he told her, "I have not just one, but two copies of the New Testament in my possession--yours and Meg's."

"Father!" Isabel exclaimed. "How did you ever----? Where did you get them?"

"I got them from Meg's favorite soldier friend. Sergeant Coggs brought them to me," said her father, smiling as he recalled the circumstances in which they came into his hands.

"King Henry had decided on a Parade Review of his guard in order to impress a delegation from King Louis XIV's Court at Versailles, and he invited me to attend and also join him in the inspection of them. It was indeed a grand display--the men all spit and polish in their colorful uniforms, and their mounts especially fine specimens of Horseflesh. King Louis would have coveted every last man and beast of them had he been present."

"Oh, I wish I could have seen it," cried Isabel, "Meg, also. We have such kind recollections of our association with those good men. Of course, we grew particularly fond of Sergeant Coggs, who has always been so loyal to William."

"And to both of you," Sir Quarles added. "But to return to my story. His Majesty and I rode slowly up and down in front of the troops. I noticed the strange facial expressions of the sergeant each time I came to him."

"What kind of facial expressions?" asked Isabel. "Sergeant Coggs has an unusual look about his dear weather-beaten face most of the time."

"Well, at first I thought he had something in his eye that he

was attempting to dislodge. Next, I decided he had a nervous tic. Finally, I realized he wanted my attention." Her father laughed heartily, thinking of Coggs' frantic batting of his eyelashes.

"Naturally, you had no idea why he needed you to notice him," she said. "I can see how confusing that must have been for you."

"No, I had no idea, but I respect him, also, and I knew he would only do that if it was important for him to get in touch with me."

"So how did you arrange to talk privately with Sergeant Coggs?" Isabel asked.

"It occurred to me that he might slip a written message to me if it could be done unobtrusively."

Isabel laughed. "Somehow I can't imagine Sergeant Coggs doing anything unobtrusively."

Her father agreed, joining in her laughter. "In any case, I was able to suggest to the king that since the five members of the French delegation were supposed to be expert horsemen, we might challenge them to a relay race on horseback. Our team would consist of the captain, lieutenant, sergeant, myself and His Majesty. He was delighted with the idea, considering the English are far superior to the French in equestrian activities."

"But there was the problem of Coggs transmitting his message to me," Sir Quarles went on. "He had given up winking after I suggested the relay race, correctly thinking I had understood him. Yet

as soon as the troops were at ease and King Henry was engaged in working out the details of the contest with the Frenchies, Coggs began twisting and turning in his saddle, alternately dropping and picking up his reins. He repeated this until I guessed that he was pointing out his saddle bags, so I told the king that they would be ideally suited for the relay, much better than the baton our visitors preferred to use."

"And I suppose Sergeant Coggs made sure you got the bag with the books in it?" his daughter asked.

"Right," he replied. "One bag was very light, the other quite a bit heavier. I asked Coggs which one we should give to the French and he said "Them Frogs dunt no nuthin' but long sticks what wont be more'n a bag o' peacock feathers in they's hands. We's likin' suthin' a bit hefty ter be passin' along."

"Our team lined up with William, followed by the leftenant, Coggs myself and King Henry," he continued. "All went well until time for Coggs to hand over to me. We had a comfortable lead, which looked to be extended, as he came towards me in a gallop. As he neared, however, his saddle loosened and began sliding off to one side. His head and one leg fell almost to the ground, his lame leg barely hanging on as I reached down to grab the bag from him. In his frustration, he shouted so loudly he could have been heard in the next county "Dan'me fer a bumble-footed Cog'shall Man."

Isabel joined her father and laughed till the tear rolled down her cheeks. "How were you able to keep the saddlebags after the race?

I presume the French delegation won."

"No, actually we won, due to His Majesty being quick off the mark, which did more for his vanity than a diplomatic coup. And I was able to volunteer to take Sergeant Coggs and his broken saddle and bags in my carriage to the Guard's headquarters. He removed the two bibles and handed them to me, saying "If it ent the way wi' owd Coggs, settin' meself above me station, tryin' ter win the good will o' the young miss and her mum."

While Sir Quarles fetched the bibles, Isabel went to remind Meg they must return to the castle. On hearing about Coggs, Meg was overjoyed. With their New Testaments hidden beneath their cloaks, they bid the Quarles goodbye and started back, talking about the risk Sergeant Coggs had taken in order to restore their bibles to them.

"The dear man," said Meg, "would have been executed if he had been apprehended. I wonder where he found them."

"He was talking to one of the bishop's private army," William said. "The fellow bragged that his superior had the largest cache of treasures in his home than anyone in London, including the Quarles. Coggs just scoffed at this claim, saying he 'wunt no fool ta fall fer that,' and the soldier got his dander up and dragged Coggs to the bishop's house to prove it."

"Was Bishop Stokesley at home," asked Isabel. She had a sinking feeling at the thought.

"Not when they arrived, for it was the same day he came back and Eleanor made her accusation. The soldier took Coggs into a large room, where there were paintings and wall hangings covering every inch of space on the walls and in huge piles on the floor. Coggs said his eyes "ent never behelt sech a parful mess o' gold 'n of silver."

"Is the bishop planning on keeping these treasures, which are clearly not his property?" asked Meg.

"His man told Coggs the bishop had a passionate love of fire and of watching people and precious things burn," William replied. "Every little while they would be ordered to cart several of the treasures to a clearing in the woods on the outskirts of the city where the bishop would dress up in a scarlet robe and dance in front of the 'funeral pyre,' chanting 'Death to the heathens' and 'Down with their idols and graven images.' When he could, Coggs was told, he burned the owners along with their treasures."

"How awful!" exclaimed Isabel. "But how did Coggs find our books?

"He noticed a pile of them in the corner. The soldier told him they were bibles and the two on top belonged to you and Meg. When the soldier went to get them a bite to eat and left Coggs alone, he picked them up and hid them in his tunic just as the bishop's carriage was heard drawing up outside. The soldier, fearing the wrath of his superior for having let Coggs see his treasure trove, hurried him out through the kitchen door as John Stokesley came in the front door."

William's recounting of Sergeant Cogg's adventure was finished by the time the three of them came to the gates at the entrance of the Fleet. They stood there talking it over, though, because they didn't want any of the yeoman warders to hear their conversation and repeat it to the warden, especially Meg's last remark before William left the women to return to his headquarters and report to Coggs that they were in possession of their treasures again.

"That is a most exciting story," she said. "However, I've just thought of something even more exciting about the return of our New Testaments. Do you realize, Mother, that Uncle Thomas and John Rogers, who are going to narrate our Christmas Pageant, now will be able to read from the scriptures rather than have to call them to mind."

"And we have our dear friend, Sergeant Coggs, to thank for that," said Isabel. Please tell him we shall always remain indebted to him for his bravery, as well as his ingenuity. Tell him if he is an example of a Cogshall Man, then we are in favor of an army of them working in our defense."

TWENTY

Christmas Eve 1533

The air was tingling with excitement as the cast of the pageant gathered in the Great Hall on the afternoon of Christmas Eve to receive their final instructions from Thomas. There was not much talking, for each member seemed to be contemplating his or her role, and they listened attentively to his counsel.

"The story we will tell this night," he told them, "is the most important ever heard by mankind. The birth of our Lord and Savior was the greatest gift ever given. This has been a glorious experience in our lives. We have felt His spirit as we have made our preparations and known we were in His service. Our prayers have been answered with blessings on our heads."

"How many times," he continued, "have I watched you going about your tasks with charity in your hearts, even though your circumstances have not been easy. I'm reminded of a passage from St.

Matthew:

'Come ye blessed of my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was an hungered, and ye gave me meat; I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink; I was a stranger, and ye took me in; naked, and ye clothed me; sick, and ye visited me; I was in prison, and ye came unto me.'

"And when your lives on earth are over and you are called by the Lord to account for your actions as the righteous in these verses,

who wondered when they had done the things for which they were being blessed, so shall you when you stand before Him at Judgment Day. And He shall answer and say unto you 'Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.' Thomas paused and smiled at his dear friends. "Now that our preparations are made, we are to present this greatest story ever told to an audience of non-believers--for the most part, at least--We need our Father's guidance and will ask John Rogers to lead us in prayer."

John Rogers, standing beside Thomas, bowed his head and prayed: "Hallowed Father in Heaven, we Thy servants call upon Thee in our humility, seeking Thy spirit to direct those things we may do this night. We praise and give thanks unto Thee for the gift of Thy Beloved Son. We rejoice in His birth. We testify of His life and ministry. And we glory in His death and resurrection. May our gratitude and praise and testimony be conveyed to all those who attend that they may desire to know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen."

Although the performance was set for 8:00 P.M., people began to arrive as early as 6:00 P. M. so they would have a chance to view the finished long tapestry. The first ones to greet Isabel and Meg, who were standing in front of it, were Sir James and Lady Mary and another gentleman whom Isabel had never seen before. But Meg apparently had, for she rushed forward and took him by the hand.

"Herr Holbein!" she exclaimed. "My very dear friend and tutor. How I enjoyed your marvelous instruction and your patient acceptance of my clumsy efforts to carry them out."

"Nein, nein, fraulein, I vas honored to be uf assistance to you," said the gentleman who spoke English with a heavy German accent.

"Before you get too wrapped up in talking over old times, Meg," interrupted Lady Mary, "I think you ought to introduce your former tutor to your mother."

"Oh, I am sorry," Meg apologized. "I was just so thrilled I wasn't thinking. Mother, this is Herr Hans Holbein, the famous painter King Henry has lured away from Germany to become the portraitist for St. James Court. He was my painting instructor for three year and taught me all I know about art." She turned to him and said "Herr Holbein, my mother, Mistress Isabel Choate, a painter also and far more talented than I."

"Frau Choate," said Herr Holbein, "I haf pleasure to meet you at last. Your work I haf seen in der St. James Gallery is fine tribute to der talent which is efen more goot mit your painting uf der long tapestry. May I haf der honor uf gifing more closer view." He raised his monocle, which was hanging on a chain around his neck, to his eye.

"Of course, Herr Holbein," she replied. "I will appreciate your comments." She led him to the beginning of the tapestry, where he spent several minutes studying the clouds and the form of the Lord,

reading the verses again and again. Then he slowly made his way down the length of the canvas, taking careful note of every scene and scripture. When he reached the end, he turned and came back to the beginning and gazed at the first scene for a long while. "I make bow to your genius, Frau Choate. You haf der special gift uf painting der persons and tings from a visionary imagination und making dem come to life. I only paint vat I see before mein eyes."

"But Herr Holbein," countered Isabel, "you are famous for your Madonna at Darmstadt, as well as your Madonna at Soleure; surely you must have painted them from your creative imagination."

"Nein," he shook his head sadly, "dose vere painted using models mit only outward appearance of spiritual quality uf der Madonna. But I do haf talent for der portrait mit der persons sitting for me. Efen mein old friend, Albrecht Durer--artist uf der rich und varied Masterpiece- haf always freely to admit."

"And anyone who has seen your portraits at St. James will agree with him," Meg told him. "Mother has not been there for many years but will perhaps return one day soon and see them."

"It would gif me great pleasure to show them to you, Frau Choate he said to Isabel, smiling at her and then taking one more look at the first of the scriptures on the tapestry. "I haf der fascination mit der English translation of der verses. Dey haf great beauty and majesty. Haf dey been der inspiration for so important a work?"

"Yes, indeed," replied Isabel. "The scriptures are a continual source of inspiration to me in my painting, as well in all the other facets of my life."

Lady Mary, who had been listening with great interest to this conversation asked Isabel "What will your next painting project be, do you think?"

"I'm not sure," she answered, " I haven't given it any consideration as yet. Perhaps I'll ask Lady Carter-Andrews if there is anything special she would like me to paint for her."

"Well, for goodness sakes, don't promise to paint a portrait of her or--should you be so foolish as to do so--don't hang it anywhere near a dining area. It would cause everyone who saw it to have indigestion." She glanced toward the staircase and saw her sister-in-law coming down. "My word, Philadelphia, aren't you a bit overdressed in your stylish holiday gown, with holly strewn across your bodice. It must have taken someone hours to applique such a wide expanse. And who paid you to leave off wearing all of those garish colors you usually sport to appear in only the red, green and white of the Christmas season?"

Lady Carter-Andrews glared at Lady Mary, then turned to Isabel and said "I heard what you said about painting something for me. I want you to do my portrait in this gown, and I want the canvas to be large enough to cover one side of the entryway so that it will be the first thing anyone sees when they come to the Fleet. It must be longer than it is wide, for I want the Mitchell Coat

of Arms painted above my head." She finished speaking and turned to walk away without waiting for Isabel's response.

"Well, now," Lady Mary grinned wickedly, "it looks as if my dear sister-in-law is going to pay me back in kind. I'm glad. I like sparring with her. It sharpens my wits."

With that, Isabel and Meg asked the others to excuse them, saying they must go put on their costumes and see if there were any last minute things for them to see to for the other cast members before the presentation.

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The Christmas Pageant was about to begin. Isabel's part would come later, as she was to play the role of Hannah, the prophetess who had her life spared so she could witness the blessing of the Baby Jesus in the temple by the priest, Simeon. She was able to stand in the wings with a good view of the stage and the backdrops of the various settings, which stretched across the long wall just opposite the one on which the long tapestry was displayed.

Starting from the right side, the first was a desert scene along which Katy, in the role of Mary, would ride on a donkey led by Chris, playing Joseph, to the next scene depicting the doorway of a small inn. Beside the inn was a stable with a manger, where the Christchild was to be laid. Further on, the scene changed to the hillside with the shepherds tending their flocks. The background of this scene included the staircase from which the angel would appear to them and the multitude of heavenly host would praise

God and sing. Finally, on the left side of the staircase, was the other desert scene with a bright star painted on the backdrop. In the front of this, the wise men were to travel to the manger and lay their gifts before their king.

When Isabel's turn came, a special backdrop showing the inside of the temple at Jerusalem would be brought onto the stage. In the meantime, she planned to watch the proceedings and the audience, who completely filled the benches the men had constructed for the presentation. All were on an equal footing, even though the entire royal court, numerous members of the peerage, and their special commoner friends were in attendance.

The performance began with John Rogers relating how Mary had been visited by the Angel Gabriel, who told her she had been chosen to bear the Son of God. He told of her amazement, but of her humble submission, saying:

"Behold the handmaiden of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word."

Then Katy and Chris and the little donkey that had been tethered to a tree in the castle garden entered, and the voice of Thomas was heard:

"And it came to pass that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed."

"And Joseph went unto the city of David, which is Bethlehem, to be taxed with Mary, his espoused wife, being great with child."

Isabel wondered how Mary felt as she and Joseph made the tiring

journey and were turned down for a room at the inn. She recalled the journey from Birdbrook to London, and knew that the trials of the mother of the Lord were much greater than her own. As she was pondering this, she became aware that a hush had fallen over the audience, that everyone's attention was centered upon the stage as the manger scene took place.

"And she brought forth her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him him in a manger."

Isabel remembered when Chris was born and John told her of his dream. She had marveled at both the miracle of his birth and the blessing given him by his two forefathers and--just as Mary did--pondered these things in her heart.

"And there were shepherds abiding in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night."

Robert and William were among those portraying shepherds. She saw their dear, earnest countenances displaying fear of the angel who came halfway down the staircase.

"And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them, and they were sore afraid."

"And the angel said unto them: fear not, for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy."

Then their frightened expressions turned to joyful ones as they listened to the angel.

"For unto you is born this day, in the city of David, a Savior which is Christ the Lord."

And just as in the scriptures, several members of the cast, who

were angels dressed in white, appeared at the head of the staircase.

"And suddenly there was with the angel, a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying:"

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace, good will toward men."

She watched the shepherds who took the places of her son's group as they made their way to Bethlehem, according to the narration by Thomas.

"The shepherds said: Let us go and see this thing which has come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us."

If Robert and William had been among those original shepherds on the hillside, thought Isabel, they would have gone to see their Lord and knelt in reverence as the others are now doing to pay homage to their Savior and king. Then the scene shifted to left stage as John Rogers became narrator to tell the experience of the Magi.

"Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the days of Herod the king, there came wise men from the East to Jerusalem, saying:

"Where is he that is born King of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him."

John was one of the three wise men, dressed in the splendid robes and crowns Isabel had helped Elizabeth make. Her heart was full as she saw him enter the stable.

"And when they were come, they saw the young child with Mary, his mother, and fell down and worshipped him and presented unto him his gifts: gold and frankincense and myrrh."

The soft background music Bridley had been playing throughout the performance became a song with words, which echoed all the thoughts and feelings of those in attendance, especially those privileged to be part of the Christmas Pageant. For them, it was an expression of their deepest spirituality.

It was time for Isabel to play her part. She took her place at the side of Roger Tanner, playing the role of Simeon.

"And the Holy Ghost was upon Simeon, and he came by the spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, he took him in his arms and blessed him and said:

"Mine eyes have seen thy salvation, which thou hast prepared before the face of the people, a light unto the Gentiles and the glory of Israel."

Then listening to John Rogers describe the character of Hannah, Isabel felt as if she were that dear soul, whom she understood so well.

"And one Hannah, a prophetess of great age, and a widow of fourscore and twenty years, who had departed not from the temple, but served God with fasting and prayer night and day.

"Came in the instant and gave thanks likewise to the Lord for all them that looked for redemption."

I am younger than Hannah, Isabel said to herself, and have not been without my loving husband for so many years as she had. But I am also a widow whose life has been dedicated to His service in order to show my gratitude for His redeeming love, and I must endure to the end as Hannah did with prayer and fasting. Perhaps playing this role has been the means of helping me realize that I have more preparation to make before being called home.

The Christmas Pageant was over, yet the audience did not arise from their seats. The hush that had fallen over them at the beginning still held them in their places. The cast also stood as silent and immovable as statues, gazing at the panorama of the Nativity.

Isabel saw there were tears in the eyes of everyone, the men as well as the women, royal personages and those of the nobility as well as the commoners in attendance, rich as well as poor. For each it had been a moving experience and a humbling one, which made them realize how much they owed to that Babe of Bethlehem, whom they should worship with all their hearts as the King and Lord of the earth and of the heavens. Perhaps they would not long feel that spirit which touched their souls this night, but it was an awakening which might change some of their lives forever.

TWENTY-ONE

December 28 - December 31, 1533

Margaret walked over to the table where Isabel was painting the large canvas held in place by the framework used for the long tapestry. She stared at the unattractive features of Lady Carter-Andrews which her mother had so faithfully reproduced in this portrait of the warden. Then she watched Isabel, noting the weariness with which she worked.

"Mother," she said, "I wish you didn't feel as if you must spend every spare moment on this portrait, even though her ladyship insists it be ready for display to her friends on Old Year's Ending. It was bad enough for you to have to put up with her fidgets and complaints while she posed for you. How you could ever stand it, I'll never know."

"I have changed my mind about Lady Carter-Andrews, Meg," said Isabel. "She is a very unhappy person and deserves our kindness and friendship more than those we find easy to love. Can you just imagine how it would make you feel to have your appearance and everything you did or said ridiculed at every opportunity by one as close to you as your sister-in-law? What if Katy were to treat you in that manner? I don't believe you would be able to maintain confidence in yourself. I know I would find it very difficult if Elizabeth always belittled me."

"You're right, Mother Dear," Meg agreed. "You always are. How do

you manage to have such charitable feelings toward people who treat you so badly?"

"It's much easier," replied her mother, "when you remember that the New Testament tells you to 'love your enemies, do good to them which hate you, bless them that curse you, and pray for them that despitefully use you.' Isabel sighed. "But you have no idea what a struggle I have gone through--am still going through--to forgive and forget and learn to love someone like her ladyship. I have to continually remind myself that she is also a daughter of God, and that her soul is as precious to Him as mine or yours."

"I feel ashamed," Meg told her, "for two reasons. The first is that I have neglected to read the scriptures as faithfully as I used to do, and the second that I have not put into practice what I have read. I guess I've been too caught up in worldly things, like the magnificent wedding Grandmother is arranging."

"Dear Meg," said Isabel, "you're so young and your thoughts are very naturally on your future with William. But try to take a little time each day to study the scriptures. This will give you the spiritual strength you will need to face and solve the problems in your life. And there will be problems. Nothing comes easy, not even a marriage that seems to be made in heaven, nor having and raising the children you and William will be blessed with. Your father and I relied on the word of God, as well as prayers to Him, to guide and direct our lives and the lives of each of you children."

"I promise you I will resume my scripture studies," Meg told her mother. "And now I'll show you how well you have succeeded in teaching me by painting the Mitchell Coat of Arms on the warden's portrait. Today is the twenty-ninth of December, so you have only two more days. I can help you meet your deadline."

Some time later, as they worked, they heard a woman's lilting laughter, followed by deeper male chuckles, from the top of the staircase, announcing the presence there of Katy and Chris.

"Chris Darlin'," they heard Katy say, "you're not to be treatin' me like a rare porcelain doll. Tis a big, strappin' lass I am, well able to be takin' meself down the stairway."

"Not when I'm around, Katydid," Chris warned her. "And the fact that you are a bit bigger than usual at the moment is the reason why I should assist you. After all, Little Mother-to-be, you are carrying my son and heir; and I should be a poor excuse for a husband and father if I didn't try to protect you both from falling and injuring yourselves."

Katy laughed and agreed to lean on him as they descended. When they reached his mother and sister, Isabel asked him how he was so sure Katy was going to have a baby boy.

"Because of Father's dream," Chris replied. "And that is why we have come down to see you. I wanted Katy to stay upstairs and get some rest--she has been working too hard for a woman with little more than two months to go before our child is born--but she was

insistant on coming down here to talk to you."

"I'm that worried about you, Ma'am," said Katy. "There is this terrible achin' in me heart for your well-bein'."

"We weren't going to say anything to alarm you," Chris told his mother, "except that we have noticed your preoccupation of late with what has seemed to us a heavy burden you are bearing alone. We have come upon you so often kneeling in prayer when you were not aware anyone else was about." He looked at Meg, whose frown mirrored her worry also.

Isabel studied their dear countenances and felt their love and concern. "It is true that I have wrestled with a problem which has been difficult for me to resolve, but I am at peace now in my heart and mind, though my body is weary." She pause a moment, then continued "Please try to understand what I am going to say and accept that it cannot be gainsaid. I have known for some time that I must give up my life for the non-conformist cause."

Meg gasped and moved to put her arms around her mother. Chris and Katy stood there, frozen in place.

"The first prayers I offered were for release from this burden, then they were for my acceptance of it. The answer was always the same: I should make the sacrifice willingly. Lately, my struggle has been one of preparing myself spiritually to be able to do so.

"My Dear Children," she said, "I do not fully understand why it is that I should be called upon to give my life any more than you do

but I know in my heart of hearts it is my destiny to be among those who sacrifice that the word of the Lord may become available to all who seek for truth."

"Why can't it be one of us?" asked Meg. "What would it matter if I take your place when they sentence you to be executed?"

"You cannot, Meg," Chris answered her question with resignation, "for her willing sacrifice--not yours--is what is wanted, according to what Mother has told us. Not that I will stand by and do nothing to prevent it, you may be sure of that," he declared.

"Nor will I, Dear Ma'am," said Katy, whose tears were streaming down her face. "Tis kickin' and scratchin' I'll be doin' to the beasts that would be cartin' you off to the burnin'."

"Thank you, all of you." Isabel hugged each in turn. "I realize you would be willing to do this for me, but I want you to understand something else of great importance. You also have missions to fulfill. Yours will require raising a righteous posterity. That means teaching your children from the English language translation of the scriptures--not just the New Testament, but the Old Testament as well, possibly the one our good friend, John Rogers, will soon have published--so that they will be able to seek for eternal life along with you."

She stopped speaking for several minutes, as though pondering the counsel she should give them, then added "I do not want your brothers to know what I have told you, but I am concerned about them

feeling bereft of both father and mother while they are still so young. Will you promise me to help your Grandfather Quarles and Uncle Thomas watch over them until they have families of their own?"

They promised to do as she asked. Then Chris, with a heavy heart, suggested they have a family counsel to talk over future plans. "We needn't reveal anything you have told us, Mother, but simply decide what we will do when we are released from our imprisonment. Perhaps we can have the meeting tomorrow afternoon when William will be present and Lady Carter-Andrews has made plans to visit her friends."

They met, at Isabel's request, in front of the long tapestry. All of them were seated at a table, except Thomas, who stood looking at the painting and addressing them.

"I hope that each of you children recognizes the artistry your mother has exhibited in this magnificent work. The blending of the painting and the scriptural message of each scene makes those passages in our New Testament come alive." He walked along as he pointed out the various scenes, commenting on how real the personages shown in the miracles were portrayed. "The beatitudes have been represented just as we saw them in our imaginations while we discussed their meaning that night in Birdbrook seated around your cottage table."

Then he came back to the first scene and gazed at it for a time.

"This scene is the most marvelous of all. Notice the sweep of the clouds gaining in momentum until they suddenly rise up and burst forth to surround the Lord's form with billowy phenomena, as if He were emerging from a holy tabernacle in the sky above. And the words of St. John flow down from the very throne of our Father in Heaven 'In the beginning was the Word; and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God."

He continued "Then underneath the form of the Lord, whose countenance is aglow with love and compassion, are the words describing Him in His power and majesty as the Creator and Life and Light of the world. 'All things were made by Him, and without Him was not anything made that was made. In Him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehendeth it not.'

"If Bishop Stokesley ever sees that passage of scripture," said John, "he will have us all transported to his favorite clearing in the woods outside of London and start a bonfire using us as kindling."

"I don't believe he will see it," William told his future brother in-law. "He is actually in hiding at present. His traitorous ravings, as well as his criminal actions, have come to His Majesty's attention and exasperated the royal temper to the extent that he would be glad to personally tie John Stokesley to a stake and use his own taper to light the fire should he be able to locate the villain."

"Well, that's a relief," said Chris. "Under these circumstances, we ought to accept Grandfather's invitation to celebrate Old Year's End with him and Grandmother tomorrow night. What do you think, Mother? Uncle Thomas and Aunt Elizabeth? William says you two are also invited. In fact, they will be disappointed if you aren't coming."

"Yes," his mother replied. "Let's go and enjoy ourselves. We can be finished with Lady Carter-Andrews' portrait by early afternoon and you menfolk can hang it in the castle entryway ready for her guests to see as they arrive. She will be so pleased and more than happy to have us out of the way while she entertains them."

Their talk then turned to what they would do upon their release from imprisonment. The boys discussed their Grandfather Quarles' plans for learning trades which would help them provide for their future families.

Isabel had talked privately to Thomas before the family counsel about the boys. He promised to have Robert and William stay with him and Elizabeth to serve their apprenticeships, for he was a master carpenter and cabinetmaker and could teach them all they needed to know in order to establish themselves in that vocation. John's situation was quite different. He would live in London with his grandparents, of course, so he could learn the drapery business, which would one day be his.

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Lady Carter-Andrews found Isabel painting alone when she returned from making her visits. She had an air of suppressed excitement about her as she spoke. "Will my portrait be ready on time for my party tomorrow?" she asked. "I'm very anxious that all will be in place. Your daughter and daughter-in-law need to start preparing the refreshments right away. Where are they now?"

"I believe Meg is in the kitchen, Your Ladyship, but Katy must be resting upstairs. She has to be very careful not to overdo at this point in her pregnancy."

"Piffle," the warden snorted, "she's as strong as an ox. I will not have my prisoners malingering."

"Of course not," agreed Isabel, "but you'll find Elizabeth and Agnes Harvie exceptionally skilled at making the sort of refreshments your guests will enjoy. They have always been in charge of the Sweets Booth for the Birdbrook Fairs."

After several minutes of fussing about this suggestion, her ladyship decided this would meet with her approval. But she was not at all happy to hear that Isabel's father had invited the Choate family to his home. She refused to consider the idea that their departure would allow her to have her party without interference, and that the refreshments could be arranged buffet style for her guests to help themselves."

"No!" Lady Carter-Andrews exclaimed, very agitatedly. "You must be here! Your family can go, but you must remain, I insist!"

Although the others wanted to decline the Quarles invitation and stay at the Fleet, Isabel wouldn't hear of it. She would be fine. She would help serve the refreshments and answer questions about the long tapestry, and the warden would be placated.

The portrait was in place by 4:00 P.M. and her family driven away by Bridley in the Quarles' carriage. She stood nervously by the entryway as the guests arrived two hours later. The amazement on their faces as they stared at the portrait and their surprised "ohs," as they caught their breaths, seemed to be all the warden had hoped for.

After looking their fill, they were led by a yeoman warden to the table in front of the long tapestry, where Isabel stood waiting to serve them. Lady Carter-Andrews delayed her entrance into the Great Hall until all the others were there. Then she came in, and with a great flourish of excitement, made an announcement.

"There is one more guest--a person of greatest importance--who will arrive shortly." Isabel wondered who could cause the warden to be so flustered. Surely she wasn't expecting His Majesty! "While we wait, Mistress Ghoate can point out the features of my long tapestry with its religious theme. You know how devout a member of the Holy Roman Church I am. I commissioned her to paint this as well as my portrait."

Isabel obeyed, explaining the biblical scenes and reading the text with her back to the entryway so that she was not aware that the final guest had arrived until he spoke.

"Madam," said Bishop John Stokesley, his raspy voice sending the shivers up and down her spine, "at last I find you without your champions, and standing in front of your blasphemous work of art. How fitting!"

"Yes, it is very fitting," she said calmly, as she turned to see him dressed in a scarlet robe, his face a fiendish mask, his eyes alight with madness.

"What sweet revenge shall be mine as I tie you to the stake and watch the smoke and flames curl around your body, turning it red, then gray, then black as the evil spirit within you until it has disintegrated into ashes. 'To ashes thou shalt return!' He threw back his head and roared with raucous laughter. "How will that do for an epitaph? Very appropriate for a heretic who reads the bible in English."

"I despise everything you stand for, Madam Non-conformist. You've been a thorn in my side and a bane to my existence, ruining the understanding I had with the king and causing me to lose my position of authority in England. Your ultimate insult to me is contained in those words." His rantings had reached a peak of fury as he pointed to the first scene of the tapestry and read from its text: 'In the beginning was the Word; and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.'

"The Word! The English word, not the Latin word! The greatest of all blasphemies, to compare the English word to God himself! What do you have to say for yourself, Madam?"

"I say that you have misinterpreted the text, Sir," she replied.

"The word of God is the same in whatever language the bible may be printed."

"Then renounce your English bible in favor of the Latin, and I may be willing to spare your life," he said, his jeering tone of voice mocking his words.

"I cannot," Isabel declared. "The word of God must be read in all languages and understood by the people of every country so that truth may be made known. This is my testimony and shall remain so to the end of my life, however you may choose to punish me for my convictions."

"Then it is time to haul you in my cart to your final destination. He turned to the men guests--all of whom had stood watching and listening in open-mouthed astonishment--and ordered them to take down the long tapestry that it might 'go up in flames along with its creator."

"No, no!" cried Lady Carter-Andrews, a horrified look on her puff features, "you can't take it away and destroy it! It's mine!"

"Shut up, you stupid fool of a woman," he shouted at her, "or I shall take your portrait also."

She looked at Isabel, pleading with her eyes for something to be done. But Isabel knew there was nothing she could do except wait.

THE THIRD INTERVIEW- March 1534, St. James Palace, London

The king did not look up as the archbishop entered the room. His eyes were on a paper which lay upon his desk. He studied it for a time, then raised his head to look at his visitor.

"I have just signed into law the most important act Parliament has ever passed, 'The Act of Supremacy.' He waited for comment.

"Yes, Sire," said Thomas Crammer, "it is now the law of the land that Your Majesty justly and rightly is the Supreme Head of the Church of England."

"It has been a long time in coming, this freedom I can enjoy from Rome's oppression. Since I am king by Divine Right, it follows that the direction of ecclesiastical matters should be mine."

"Of course, Sire," the archbishop agreed, smiling, "and the accompanying act placing the tithes in your hands also."

"Not to mention," reminded His Majesty, "your new authority to grant dispensations to the people for compensation."

"Quite," Thomas Crammer said, looking extremely self-satisfied.

The king sat back in his chair, seeming complacent. "Things have been going my way recently. I have but one regret."

"And what would that be, Your Majesty?"

"Not catching that scoundrel, Stokesley, before Old Year's End."

"But you had him executed the first day of January, Sire. Wasn't that soon enough?" asked the archbishop.

"No, confound it, it wasn't," the king replied angrily. "Early in the evening of December thirty-one, he went to Fleet Prison and dragged Sir Hubbard Quarles daughter, Isabel Choate, to his special funeral pyre just outside London and burned her to the stake."

"I'm sorry, Your Majesty. I realize Sir Quarles is a good friend of yours."

"Friend? Yes, of course, a friend," King Henry agreed half-heartedly. "The trouble is he will no longer support any deficiency in the Royal Treasury with generous donations, even though all his grandchildren were released to his custody and the others from Birdbrook returned to their homes. And he may become a damned non-conformist, for all I know."

"I believe his daughter is considered a martyr to their cause," said Thomas, "which will make it much harder to control them."

"Impossible, you mean. English bibles are flooding the realm. We will soon have non-conformist sects springing up all over England. It's like a tide that can't be stemmed, sweeping over our isle. 'The tide of change in the search for truth,' John Rogers told his guards when he was taken from the Fleet and placed in the Tower. Even though one is king by Divine Right, and the Supreme Head of the Church of England, it gives one pause for reflection. Yes, indeed, pause for reflection."

