

The Secret Diary
Of Eleanor Cobham



Tony Riches

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To my wife
Liz

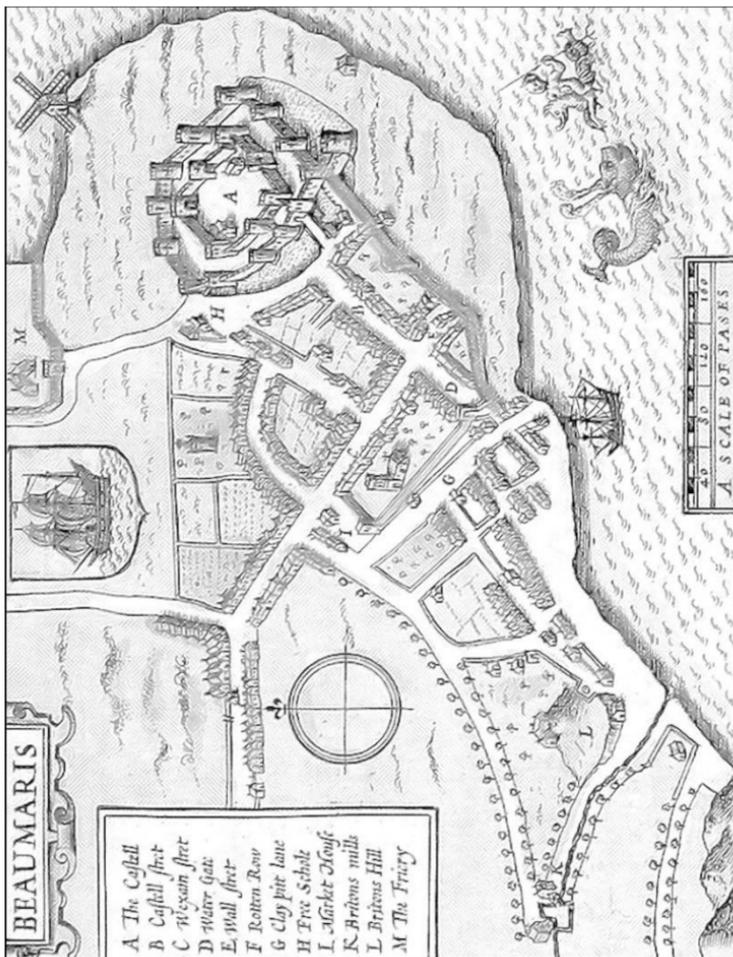
Henry VI. Part ii Act ii. Scene 3:

King Henry:

Stand forth dame Eleanor Cobham,
Glouster's wife.

In sight of God and us, your guilt is great:
Receive the sentence of the law, for sins
Such as by God's book are adjudged to death.
You, madam, for you are more nobly born,
Despoiled of your honour in your life,
Shall, after three days' open penance done,
Live in your country here, in banishment.

William Shakespeare



July 1450

Arceanum

Whoever reads this, my secret journal and only true companion, should know I am unjustly condemned to end my days within these castle walls. I am forgotten by the world and my poor beloved husband, once Regent and the Lord Protector of all England, is dead these past three years. My hope is, through these words, people of a time so far away I cannot comprehend will know the truth of how my good and loyal friends were most cruelly tortured and murdered by my enemies.

Loneliness is the worst of my punishment, as though this castle is in a beautiful place it is my prison. I am held as prisoner of Sir William Beauchamp, Constable of Beaumaris, and know Sir William receives my allowance. It is a hundred marks each year, from the dues for fishing on the River Dee and is supposed to cover my expenses. Little of that money finds its way to me. When first at Leeds Castle I had my own allowance and servants to help me. They left one by one and were not replaced. Now I have only the cook who brings my food and the maids who come to clean my room and wash my clothes. They speak to me in the Welsh language and are afraid to look at me. I fear they have been told I am a sorceress and will put some curse on them.

My only company most days are the rough soldiers who have the duty of guarding my prison and the elderly priest who sometimes visits me. Less welcome are the visits from my jailor, William Bulkeley, the Serjeant-at-Arms here at Beaumaris. Bulkeley is an educated man, although ambitious and disliked by the men he commands. He is well married though. Bulkeley's good wife Lady Ellen is the daughter of a powerful Welshman Gwilym ap Gruffydd. She is kind to visit me and the closest I have to a friend in this castle.

It was after one of the visits from the priest that I confided to him I needed to occupy myself more fully, as I have been imprisoned here some three months now, with little else to do apart from dwell on my memories. When the old priest first came to visit he would not look me properly in the eye, a sure sign he believed the stories of witchcraft. A good man, with white hair and stubble of grey beard, he leans heavily on a stick to walk.

Slowly, over the weeks, he has come to know me a little better. At Easter he kindly brought me an old Latin prayer-book, illustrated with brightly-coloured pictures of the saints. The priest put the leather-bound book solemnly in my hands with the suggestion that I may use it to find answers in God. It has been many years since I studied Latin and I care less for praying for salvation, but as I studied the little book I saw it was a version of the Christian devotional Book of Hours, probably copied by monks in the nearby priory.

I am grateful to the priest as it has uses for me. You may imagine it is better not to note the passing of the months, yet I find time passes more quickly if I do. The little book contains a calendar of the feast-days, helping me to keep track of the year and also serves as a bridge between me and one of my few visitors, the priest. It offers a small way

to show I am not entirely as evil as people would have him believe.

I amuse myself by translating excerpts from the gospels and the seven Penitential Psalms. My imprisonment has given me the one thing I never had in excess, the time to study and reflect on such things. I am surprised to find unexpected comfort in the sixth of the psalms of confession. The neatly written Latin of the last line read *'Erubescant et conturbentur vehementer omnes inimici mei; convertantur et erubescant valde velociter.'* This means *'May my enemies be put to shame and come to ruin. May they be turned away and be swiftly put to shame'*. As fitting a spell for any witch to curse her enemies.

On the days I am granted permission to visit the chapel tower, I kneel and devoutly recite psalm six from my Book of Hours. I pray for the eternal damnation of the souls of those who killed my husband by their wicked plots and would have me end my days forgotten here on this island of Anglesey. I was not a witch but they have made me one.



My eyes are also opened to an opportunity by my book of prayers. I contrived my plan to keep this journal. It will be my best company and maybe one day help to correct lies that are written of me. I asked the priest if he would kindly request a small payment from Sir William Bulkeley for some parchment, a quill and ink, so I may translate and copy out the prayers to pass the long summer days. The priest seemed pleased with my new-found religious conviction. He smiled at me for the first time in four long months and promised to help me improve my Latin. I believe there is a softening of his previously cold manner

towards me, so perhaps I do still have some powers over men after all.

On his next visit I could see the priest had brought me no parchment. I concealed my disappointment and asked what reply he had from William Bulkeley. The priest explained that my jailor had refused his request, as he is under orders to provide me with nothing that could be used for the purposes of witchcraft or necromancy. He had also informed the priest he is concerned I would write letters that could by some means find their way to supporters outside the castle. I had to hide my disappointment and listened carefully as the priest began to help me with my Latin texts.

It was some weeks before my next walk in the castle grounds with Lady Ellen but I reasoned that Sir William Bulkeley would listen to the opinion of his wife. I carried my Book of Hours and showed it to her, explaining my wish to occupy my time more usefully by translating the Latin. I had to share with her my request sent by the priest and her husband's concerns, yet I am able to say in truth that after nearly nine long years of incarceration any supporters I had were either dead or have long since forgotten me. Ellen was at first reluctant to intervene on my behalf yet could see the virtue of my planned religious study. I know she feels sorry for my dreadful imprisonment. She promised to speak to her husband but warned me he could be a stubborn man.

I know William Bulkeley was already a wealthy landowner in Cheshire before he married Ellen and has ambition to one day become the Constable of Beaumaris Castle. He is in the habit of coming to see me as a jailer not as a friend. He is not an unkindly man but apart from checking I am properly fed and not unwell, he rarely speaks to me. When he does, his manner is one of professional

detachment. I suspect he justifies his role in the knowledge that I am a traitor, even though I am certain he knows I was never convicted of treason. William Bulkeley would not be easily persuaded to risk his reputation by agreeing my request.

When I next saw the priest, I pleaded with him to reassure Lady Ellen my intentions were sincere. It seemed he had taken to heart his role as my reformer, for on the following Sunday he greeted me with a parcel of parchment of fine quality. He told me it had been provided by the Augustinian friars of St Seiriol's Priory at Penmon. The quill he provided is also new and holds a sharp point. I shall take good care of it, as I cannot be certain if it will be replaced when it is worn. The ink is good and black iron gall, probably also made by the monks at the priory from oak galls and vinegar, with iron to make it so black. They have given me a good quantity in a pottery flask with an airtight stopper, which I must be most careful not to break.

The priest was unsure if the guards would object but he also let me have a small blade to trim the end of the quill. He showed me how it could be kept sharp on the stone sill of my window and how to score the parchment for trimming into folded pages, which I can sew with my needles to bind together. Although my mother taught me to read and write in French and Latin from an early age, I am out of practice and happy to let the priest act as my tutor, a role he does seem comfortable with. I shall take care to have some verses to show him when he visits so he is also less likely to ask questions about other uses I may have for his materials.

I have found a secret place to hide my writing, where it will be safe. My room is on the second floor of the tower and follows its circular shape, with a high, vaulted ceiling

that gives a sense of space. I have little furniture, just my wooden cot with a straw mattress and rough blankets, my table and one wooden chair. I am grateful my room has a large hearth to keep me warm and a window which looks out across the inner ward. The heavy oak door is always bolted on the outside and has an iron grill near the top through which the guards can check on me. I wait until I am certain they have gone, then prise up the loose floor board which can be lifted to reveal a dry space beneath.

My guards are unable to read and have no reason to search but before I started writing I determined to use this cipher, taught to me by a princess. I must prevent my jailors from discovering my work as it is my wish to speak freely of the events of my life, without fear of recrimination while I still live. I believe the only other people who knew this encoded writing are long since dead and I am certain it will be beyond the wit of even William Bulkeley to read. My hope is that whoever understands this journal will also take the time to ensure it is used to ensure the truth of my story is not forgotten.



I am fortunate that when the weather is fine Sir William has permitted me to walk within the castle grounds, although escorted by his soldiers of the guard. I need the sun and fresh air, as it clears my head and makes me feel alive once more, if only for a few hours. The castle of Beaumaris is close to the sea and has a little harbour so that boats can bring supplies right to the wall. Although I cannot see them from my windows, I wonder if ever I were to find a way to escape it would be by boat, then perhaps over the sea to find some sanctuary in Ireland.

Such daydreams are of course no good for me as I have a dozen men trained to guard me, yet the sea is so close. I

wake each morning to the calling of gulls and when the wind is in the right direction I taste the salt in the sea air. My only comfort is to know the king is frail and most unpopular with the people, so the fortunes of my enemies may change. I have been imprisoned for too long now to hope of sympathisers to come to my rescue, but the thought does cross my mind, usually on these good summer days.

Lady Ellen has been on this walk with me and tells me this is the last and largest castle built by King Edward the first on his conquest of Wales. I can sense her mixed feelings about the history of this place. Her father is descended from a long line of Welsh lords and chieftains, but she told me her blue-grey eyes and auburn hair come from her mother, who is English of Norman descent. King Edward's devoted young wife was another Eleanor, of Castile, the daughter of a Spanish king. She would have visited Beaumaris, his finest castle. Eleanor of Castile would have walked these same paths, but as a free woman and Queen of England, as I should now also be.

My walk is usually confined to the vast square courtyard of the inner ward, flanked by the six tall stone towers of which one is my prison. This inner ward has interesting diversions for me as it houses the castle kitchens and stables, as well as the banqueting halls and barracks for those who work in the castle. My guards are under orders from William Bulkeley to ensure I speak to no one, even those who cook and clean in the steaming kitchens or the young grooms from the stables.

Last week I saw the horses being taken out for their exercise through the south gatehouse and wondered if my jailor would one day let me ride. Sir William Beauchamp has a good dozen horses in his care and I overheard one of

the guards say he treats them better than he does me. I look the unruly soldier directly in the eye and know he fears I will use my powers over him.

I take my time on my walk and usually end in the chapel tower. It is simply furnished but a quiet, peaceful place. Always cool even in this summer heat, the chapel has a high vaulted stone ceiling and carved wooden panelling. Lady Ellen said it was built by King Edward for his personal use. I am grateful for his piety, as his chapel is where I can find some peace from the soldiers and my jailers. I kneel in contemplation but do not pray. God has long since forsaken me. Instead I remember those who have treated me well, the few who have been kind to me and those who have died in the nine long years since I was last a free woman.



My husband taught me history is written by the victors. If I have been foolish it was to trust those around me who had so much to gain by discrediting his good name and reputation through their false allegations against me. They have called me many things, witch, traitor and harlot, but I am a lady of noble birthright. It saddened me to hear my family scorned and my good father called a 'mere knight' at my trial. He would tell me the stories of his famous grandfather, my great-grandfather, the first Baron of Cobham.

My father Sir Reynold, the third Baron of Sterborough, inherited his title when his brother died. He taught me to take pride in my great-grandfather, one of the most important knights of his day, who was richly rewarded for his support of the new King Edward. He took part in grand royal tournaments and jousting with horses and was a brave man, proving his courage in the savage wars against the

Scots. My great-grandfather distinguished himself at the battle of Crecy and negotiated the surrender of the French at Calais. My father told me the first Sir Reynold's proudest achievement was to be summoned to parliament as a Lord.

My own grandfather, the second Baron, died before I was old enough to remember him. As a young girl I would visit his memorial in our old Saxon parish church at Lingfield in Surrey. I always read the Latin epitaph on his tomb and committed it to memory. I would like to think I have inherited some of his determination, as it read *'Here lies Reginald, Lord Cobham of Starborough. As a soldier he was brave as a leopard, wary in council, yet bold enough when occasion required.'*

My mother was Lady Eleanor Culpeper. Beautiful and well educated, she was the daughter of the wealthy knight Sir Thomas Culpeper. I have happy memories of her and of my childhood at our family estate of Sterborough Castle in Surrey. A fine castle set in extensive grounds; it was built by my great-grandfather and improved by each generation.

A wide moat was crossed by a long wooden drawbridge and my rooms were in one of the two towers with French style conical roofs each side of the gatehouse. I would watch from my window as I waited for my father to return from his journeys to London. He would always bring gifts from the city for me, my little sister Elizabeth and my brothers Reginald and Thomas.

I wear my mother's simple gold ring to this day. She was sadly taken from me by a sudden illness when she was only thirty-seven. My father was heartbroken. He threw himself into his work and began to spend much of his time at court, achieving a knighthood for his services to the infant king. As well as bringing him closer to the centre of power in the land, my father's renewed importance also led him to

remarry. His unlikely new wife, Lady Anne, was the daughter of Sir Thomas, fifth Baron Bardolf of Wormegay. She was neither beautiful or rich, as her father's wealth was confiscated after he took part in the ill-judged insurrection against King Henry IV and died of terrible wounds.

I saw little of my father after he remarried. I think it was because I reminded him too much of my mother and what he had lost. One of the sad consequences of the ill luck that befell me was that the last time I ever saw him was before my trial. He was not able to visit me before he died four years ago, so now I am alone in the world.

Apart, that is, from my children. It saddens me to write of it but I fear my son Arthur was murdered by men who knew of his innocence, yet I know my beautiful daughter Antigone lives. My three young grandchildren are part of the reason this journal must be in code, as I still have enemies who would delight in spoiling their young lives.



Lady Ellen came to see me with exciting news from London. I miss being at the centre of things but it seems bad news travels quickly. I know Henry VI is one of the least able kings to ever have ruled this country and England has been ruined by taxes raised to pay for the futile wars with France. The signs of his mismanagement are everywhere, so I was not surprised when Lady Ellen told me the people of Kent have rebelled against the king. Last month an army of commoner workers marched on London but the king had been warned and fled to safety in Warwickshire.

She was unclear of the details but Ellen heard that the Tower of London was overtaken and several of the king's men roughly executed, their heads displayed on spikes for all to see. She heard the Archbishop of York bravely ended

the rioting by agreeing to the rebels' demands, although it seems more likely he has been used as a device to end this revolt. The rumour in the city is that the king has ordered the leaders to be hunted down and given a traitor's execution, a horrific way for any man to die.

I am most grateful to Ellen and look forward to her visits. I have yet to determine where her loyalty lies, so am careful not to criticise the king by calling him a madman, although of course he is. I pity his young French wife Margaret of Anjou, who is little more than twenty years old and has to try to rule the country when King Henry VI suffers from his bouts of insanity. It makes me sad to consider how different the world would be if my husband had been able to take his rightful place as king, with me at his side to guide him.

Ellen is not much travelled, although she is well tutored and well connected, so must surely have heard the dreadful allegations of my witchcraft, yet she shows no regard for it. One day I would like to see if she will hear the truth of it but that can keep. She has done much to benefit her husband William Bulkeley, as her father helped him secure his position in Beaumaris. For now, I am content to listen to her opinion of the world outside this castle and form my own in secret.

August 1450

Fratrø røgis

The summer has fortunately been dry and hot in Beaumaris. The sun has warmed the stones of this old castle so I can keep the shutters open, even at night. It is good to feel the salty air fresh from the sea and remember to be grateful I still have my health. Lady Ellen has not been to see me for some weeks but sent a servant with one of her gowns for me. The plain style and dull material is far from the beautiful dresses I once wore, yet it was a simple matter to alter so it fitted my more slender form. I doubt Ellen realises the worn blue dress it replaces was all I had to wear or that my cotton shifts are threadbare from washing as often as I am able.

At least I look like a lady of some value again, although the poor food in this place has made me thin. When first imprisoned I ate so well and exercised so little I put on weight. Now I can feel my ribs and have little appetite for the rough bread and salty stew the Welsh cook brings me almost every day. I have learned they call it 'cawl' and I suspect it is made from kitchen scraps. I use my little Book of Hours to note the saints days in advance and ask for special meals to be prepared, or a jug of wine instead of milk. One day Lady Ellen sent me a bowl of delicious strawberries, which I hadn't tasted since I was at Greenwich.

When her husband, my jailer William Bulkeley, visited me and enquired in his usual way if I was well, I asked if he could kindly tell the cook to make me something else to eat. Bulkeley seemed dismissive but sent a servant carrying half a fine cured ham and a dozen sweet green apples, so he may have some pity for me after all. I must keep on the right side of him, as it is within his power to make my life more bearable or most miserable. I shall wait until I know him better but my dearest wish is for a visit from my precious daughter Antigone.



Now I must explain how I became a lady-in-waiting to Jacqueline, Countess of Hainault, Holland and Zeeland, Dauphine of Viennois, Duchess of Touraine, Duchess of Brabant and then Duchess of Gloucester, wife of one of the most powerful men in England. The countess had sought sanctuary and arrived in England at the personal invitation of the king, as an honoured guest of his court. Jacqueline was glad to escape the threat to her life from civil wars in her home countries of Holland and France. She also needed to prove her marriage to her dislikeable husband John, the Duke of Brabant, illegal on the grounds he was also her first cousin.

In the year 1423, following the death of my mother, my father decided it was time I joined London society. He was concerned to find some way to improve my prospects of marriage and see me become a respectable lady. The fortunes of my family were to be inherited by my brother, so my father thought it unlikely I would find a wealthy suitor. Instead he sought a place for me as a lady-in-waiting. Fortunately, he was at court and heard talk of the imminent arrival of the Countess of Hainault from France. Her husband had replaced her ladies-in-waiting with those of his

own choosing and Jacqueline arrived with only a few servants and the most essential items, such as her haste. It was not a simple matter to arrange an introduction, as there were many others wishing to join such a powerful woman who enjoyed the protection of the king.

Before I was invited to meet the countess, I spent long hours preparing with a tutor paid for by my father, to learn as much as I could of her family. I found out she had not had an easy life, as her father died horribly before she was sixteen, making her the sovereign of Holland and Hainaut before she was prepared for the responsibility. Her father's death, quite likely from poisoning, was soon followed by that of her husband, whom she had been engaged to since she was four years old. My tutor explained that they had been betrothed as children and her husband was the son of the French King Charles, so the boy had the title 'dauphin' as the heir apparent to the crown. The marriage had been arranged by the Duke of Burgundy, at the suggestion of his sister Margaret, Countess of Holland, who was of course Jacqueline's mother.

When I met her I was surprised at how young and attractive the countess was, full of life and lively humour, with no trace of her troubled past. Her blonde hair was always braided in the latest fashion and diamond necklaces sparkled at her neck. The countess had an infectious laugh and a talent for seeing the amusing side of everything, so I was delighted to be asked if I would care to take my place at her side as her new companion.

I must admit my life had not been easy after my mother died. I followed my father to London and had fallen into difficult times, living in a rented house. The allowance he provided was barely enough to live on, and I met men who took advantage of my circumstances. They didn't treat me

well and damaged my reputation, so my father's intervention was most timely.

I found the countess good company once I was used to her condescending manner towards me. She told me her ladies at her Castle Le Quesnoy were of course of high degree and noble blood, ladies of good life and reputation, wise, honest and in all respects worthy. They were also for the most part educated with her from childhood, so had a proper understanding of their place. Although by implication I was not 'in all respects worthy', I knew better than to point out none of them seemed to have been loyal enough to accompany her to England. I later learned that the king had only granted safe passage through the English lines for herself and her mother, so only a few servants came with her from France.

The countess was a woman of more names and titles than any I have known. Baptised 'Jacoba' in Hainaut, her mother the Dowager Countess of Margaret of Burgundy called her 'Jac' and the French 'Jacqueline', the name she chose to use here in England. She told me once her enemies called her 'Dame Jake' and worse. As well as being the sovereign Countess of Hainaut, Holland and Zeeland, she was also a Dauphine of the house of Viennois and held the title of Duchess of Brabant through her ill-chosen husband.

I soon learned to call her different names, depending on her mood and circumstances. She told me her people called her Domina Jacoha but nothing seemed to please her more than to be referred to as 'la princesse' in company, although she was more properly known as 'the countess' at court.

Jacqueline quickly came to regard me as her most trusted friend and confidante, which made the future turn of events more painful for us both. We were the same age and had both been born and grown up in country castle estates.

She was a skilled horsewoman and we enjoyed riding fast in the royal parks, often leaving our armed escort far behind us. The countess was grateful for my help with her English and understanding of our manners, our English customs and fashions. In return she helped me to improve my French and Latin and started teaching me the Hainault dialect of her homeland.

There was little similarity in our upbringing or circumstances. My family were wealthy enough for comfort but of declining status since the glory of my great-grandfather's time. Jacqueline came from a different world. She told me that in truth the modern ways had yet to reach the wooded hills of Hainault. The countess loved to talk about how her household numbered more than two hundred servants and was defended by an army of six thousand fighting men. She said her family home at Quesnoy was richly furnished, with priceless tapestries, exotic peacocks and maidens playing on golden harps. I realised listening to her stories that her family had ruled as feudal lords, demanding absolute obedience and enjoying the highest privileges.

Jacqueline was also a wealthy woman. In addition to her income from inherited lands in France and Holland, King Henry V ordered a provision of one hundred pounds a month for her expenses so long as she sojourned in England. Once she told me the king had sent an envoy, Sir William Esturmy to proceed to Holland to offer the hand of his brother John, Duke of Bedford, to Jacqueline. It seems Sir William took his time and arrived too late, as by then she was married to the Duke of Brabant. I wonder if I would be in this prison now if he had reached Hainault in time.

When her marriage to the Duke of Brabant proved a disaster, Jacqueline's mother encouraged her to seek refuge

at the English court. She confided in me they had been afraid the king would be angry, but he was not. The king at once sent a personal letter of authority to permit her and her mother to pass safely through the English lines in France and entry into Calais. Jacqueline said that when she crossed the English Channel she was full of hope the tide might turn for her at last.



As the weather was fine I was permitted to walk the outer ward of the castle and climb the stone steps to the high battlement, watched by my ever vigilant guards. As I reached the top I could see two pairs of pure white swans on the dark moat which surrounds the castle on all sides. One of the soldiers told me the castle moat is deep and some eighteen feet wide at the narrowest point. I also learned that all the latrines empty into the moat, a thought I do not wish to dwell upon.

From my high vantage-point I can also see the blue green mountains of Wales and the shimmering expanse of the Irish Sea. Anglesey is of course an island, divided from the Welsh mainland by the narrow but fast flowing Afon Menai. A large sailing boat was unloading in Beaumaris harbour and the sounds of men's voices carried well in the still air. It took a moment for me to realise they talk in Welsh and I wonder if Lady Ellen will teach their language to me.

If I were not a prisoner here I would think it a good place to be on a sunny day. Lady Ellen told me this spot was originally the thriving Welsh coastal village of Llanfaes. King Edward decided it was the ideal site for his castle and forcibly moved the entire village some twelve miles away to a place he called 'Newborough'.

English kings have indeed shown scant regard for the local people, as even the Franciscan monastery here was plundered and destroyed by the men of King Henry IV, with many of the friars put to the sword for supporting the Welsh cause in their last uprising. It may be Ellen's influence but I feel sympathy for the people of Wales, who have been punished so severely for trying to defend their homeland.



It was through Jacqueline that I first met Humphrey Plantagenet, Duke of Gloucester, Earl of Pembroke and brother to Henry V, King of England. Of course I knew him by reputation, as he was a champion of the victory at Agincourt and second in line to the throne. I don't know what I was expecting when I first met him but I was taken completely by surprise. Countess Jacqueline had been invited to stay at the duke's London mansion, a fine building called Baynard's Castle near Paul's Wharf on the banks of the River Thames. The duke was not in residence when I arrived to take up my position as her lady-in-waiting, as he had been called away to deal with his business in Dover but Jacqueline was happy to tell me all about him.

She told me when she arrived at the white cliffs of Dover, she found Humphrey waiting to welcome her and escort her to his brother's court. He had brought Jacqueline a fine thoroughbred palfrey for the ride to London, which they reached at an early hour on the following day. She told me the king had received her most graciously, as a grand princess, former dauphiness of Vienne and one who might have been the queen of France.

I was able to explore the duke's London residence in his absence and knew from the library he was much more than a soldier. The walls were lined with the finest collection of

books I had ever seen. Many of the duke's books were beautifully written on fine vellum with many illuminated letters and bound in gold tooled leather. I marvelled at the French translations of classical Greek volumes next to early illustrated manuscripts and collections of the work of most of the modern poets. There were piles of books on his table and it was clear he was making a study of them. My mother, who was also my tutor, would have loved to see the duke's books if she had still been alive.

The duke was also a lover of music, as he retained a talented group of minstrels in his household and they would play for us in the evenings. I was surprised when I spoke to the musicians and found they were well educated scholars, fluent in several languages. Some had travelled to London from Italy and Spain and spoke highly of the duke, apparently more like companions of his household than simply the minstrels I had taken them for. As with all his servants, they seemed to hold the duke in great esteem and were proud to be in his service.

Most of all, I could see he had enormous wealth, as the furnishings were all of the finest quality, with ornaments of silver and gold. The walls of his mansion were covered with richly carved wooden panels. Rich tapestries were displayed in every room, with the whole wall of the banqueting hall covered by a dazzling depiction of the battle of Agincourt. The mansion had wonderful views of the busy river, with its own jetty where the duke had a fine golden barge, and there were extensive parks and gardens on all sides. I later found that the duke had many homes, including castles at Pembroke and Devizes and manor houses in Kent and St Albans.

We had been staying in his mansion for barely a week when the servants told us the duke had sent a messenger to say he was returning home. The countess was greatly

concerned to look her best and I could tell she saw him as more than simply her host in London. Jacqueline confided to me she considered Humphrey would make an eminently suitable husband and she intended to marry him. I asked if it was true she was already married but she waved her hand in the air and said she would have it annulled by the pope.

People have accused me of using witchcraft to secure Duke Humphrey's affection, that I seduced him through political ambition and even that I was paid by his enemies to come between him and the countess. As with most things, there is a simple explanation. I fell for him as soon as I saw him. I would not say he was particularly handsome. He was ten years older than me and tired from the long ride from Dover. He had the thin, clean shaven face of the House of Lancaster and was wearing ordinary riding clothes. Yet as he stepped into the room I sensed his power and intelligence. His keen eyes took in every detail of what I was wearing. He listened attentively to every word I said. I knew we would become lovers.



Looking back I can see how Jacqueline's deeply superstitious beliefs influenced me and might have brought about my downfall. She once told me how she had visited the capital city of Mons in splendour after inheriting her father's title. The people turned out in great numbers, cheering and celebrating, but at the height of the festivities the most severe hailstorm had deluged the city. The countess looked serious as she described how the sky grew black and the wind howled through the city, with hail so heavy it killed many cattle and ruined the harvest. The people of Mons had claimed it was of ill omen to Jacqueline, who had met misfortune beyond her years.

Jacqueline told me the sudden death of her father had been seen as a bad portent but when her husband also fell ill with a strange fever and died, the superstitious people of Hainault had said it was a sure sign there was a curse on the family. Jacqueline told me her mother suspected a servant, bribed by the Armagnacs, had found some way to poison him but I could tell from the haunted look on Jacqueline's face she still believed she was cursed.

Her next arranged marriage to the Duke of Brabant had led to three years of abject misery and she told me how she had many times wished him dead. This darker side to Jacqueline's stories emerged as I began to become her confidante. I could soon see why she had sought sanctuary in England and learned the truth of this through the letters which she sent to her mother. As there was a real risk of letters to France falling into the wrong hands, she taught me to write them for her in this special code, based on the old dialect known only to her family.



My father's plan to bring me to court as the lady of Countess Jacqueline proved better judgement than even he had hoped. Soon after I first met him, the Duke of Gloucester was sent back to Dover by the king to prepare his next campaign, procuring a fleet of ships to carry a thousand men to war in France. The king sailed with him to Calais as soon as the men were ready, so the countess was invited to join the queen at her confinement in Windsor Castle. Queen Catherine had only been crowned in February but was already expecting the next heir to the throne. We were all the same age and, as the daughter of King Charles of France, the queen was Jacqueline's sister-in-law through her first ill-fated marriage. They had many interests in common and quickly became close friends.

Thanks to Jacqueline's good word for me I also soon became part of the queen's inner circle at Windsor. It was difficult for me at first, as although my mother had taught me French she had barely prepared me for the rich sophistication of Queen Catherine's court. I learned to listen though, and observe. The complex intrigues of the queen's court fascinated me and it proved to be an excellent preparation for what was to come later. Most exciting of all was to be so close to the centre of power and wealth in the land. I longed to see the duke once more and felt a strange frisson of anticipation and excitement at the thought of his return.

There was a moment in November at Windsor I remember clearly. I was alone with the countess in her apartment, helping her to write another of her coded letters to the Dowager Margaret in France. She surprised me with her frank description of our situation, clearly placing much trust in my discretion and her certainty the letter would never be read by anyone other than her mother. She was telling her mother Humphrey was as good as betrothed to her and if the queen and the baby were not to survive the impending birth, he would become King of England, France and Holland, with her as his queen.

I must confess I was happy she was wrong, as I had grown to like Queen Catherine. The new heir to the throne, a strong and healthy boy, was born safely in the first week of December. By then the king and Duke Humphrey were embattled with their campaign in France and unable to return. An exhausted messenger eventually returned with the news that the king was engaged in the siege of Meaux, north of Paris.

Despite the freezing winter rains, the king was determined to defeat Jean de Gast, the Bastard de Vaurus, who had been capturing travellers on their way to Paris and

hanging them in the market-place if a ransom wasn't paid. The king's reputation in France depended on his success, so he had resolved to take Meaux whatever the cost. The king commanded the queen to bring the new prince to France once she was well enough. We had a joyous Christmas at Windsor and the countess was invited to be godmother to the new prince, holding him at the font as he was christened Henry, after his father and grandfather, next in the line of kings of England.



In the spring of 1422 the queen felt ready to make the long journey to France with her infant son and was to be escorted by John, Duke of Bedford, who had been acting as regent. This meant Duke Humphrey was commanded to replace his elder brother as the new Regent and Lord Protector in King Henry V's continued absence. I returned to Humphrey's London mansion by the Thames with the countess and was waiting there to welcome him on his arrival.

I was now truly close to the heart of power, as Humphrey was king in all but name, the most important person in the land. The countess now openly sought his attention and made no secret of her intention to marry him. She asked me to arrange a banquet fit for a king to celebrate his new appointment and safe return from the war in France. My time at the queen's court at Windsor Castle had been well spent, as I had attended many royal banquets and had no difficulty in fulfilling the wishes of the countess. I also had the advantage of having gained some insight into Duke Humphrey's tastes in music and the arts.

The king's own trumpeters played a rousing royal fanfare to herald the entry of the duke with the countess on his arm. The food was the finest ever seen in London, with

every type of wild bird and venison from the king's royal parks. At the beginning of each course minstrels and jugglers entertained the diners and for the highlight of the banquet I had arranged players to put on a pageant. They performed the tale of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, with expensive costumes and a golden crown for Duke Humphrey, who played the part of King Arthur of Camelot.

Countess Jacqueline chose for herself the role of the young Queen Guinevere but had little to do other than sit at King Arthur's side and remain silent. I chose to play Lady Bertilak, the flirtatious and intelligent young wife who tempts the chivalrous knight Sir Gawain. As required by the play, in each of my three seduction scenes I changed my costumes, from the elegant dress of a modest lady in the first, to voluptuous and revealing at the end. The effect was not wasted on the duke, and I watched his eyes as I recited my lines of courtly love.

As a finale, I arranged for the duke's talented minstrels to play his favourite songs, with dancing and music to end the evening. Much fine wine was drunk and the duke clearly enjoyed himself, joining in the rousing chorus and congratulating Countess Jacqueline on her success. She had never looked happier and had shown good judgement by her plan, as from that moment on it was clear they would marry.

Many years later I confessed to him she had almost no part in the arrangements, and that I had secretly managed to include amongst the specially invited guests my father and his new wife, as well as my sister and two brothers, who really had no place at court. I also took the opportunity to have the queen's own seamstress make me a gown of rare Persian silk edged with gold. Humphrey had admitted Jacqueline had taken credit for every detail of the

banquet, but he had hardly been able to take his eyes off me the entire evening. That was, he said, the moment he fell in love with me.

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