The Red Queen

Philippa Gregory
The Cousins’ War

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QUEEN

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I go to bed uneasy, and the very next day, straight after matins, Dr. Lewis comes to my rooms, looking strained and anxious. At once I say I am feeling unwell, and send all my women away. We are alone in my privy chamber and I let him take a stool and sit opposite me, almost as an equal.

"The Queen Elizabeth summoned me to sanctuary last night and she was distraught," he says quietly.

"She was?"

"She had been told that the princes were dead, and she was begging me to tell her that it was not the case."

"What did you say?"

"I didn't know what you would have me say. So I told her what everyone in the City is saying: that they are dead. That Richard had them killed either on the day of his coronation or as he left London."

"And she?"

"She was deeply shocked; she could not believe it. But, Lady Margaret, she said a terrible thing—" He breaks off, as if he dare not name it.

"Go on," I say, but I can feel a cold shiver of dread creeping up my spine. I fear I have been betrayed. I fear that this has gone wrong.

"She cried out at first and then she said: ‘At least Richard is safe.’"
“She meant Prince Richard? The younger boy?”

“The one they took into the Tower to keep his brother company.”

“I know that! But what did she mean?”

“That’s what I asked her. I asked her at once what she meant, and she smiled at me in the most frightening way and said, ‘Doctor, if you had only two precious, rare jewels and you feared thieves, would you put your two treasures in the same box?’”

He nods at my aghast expression.

“What does she mean?” I repeat.

“She wouldn’t say more. I asked her if Prince Richard was not in the Tower when the two boys were killed. She just said that I was to ask you to put your own guards into the Tower to keep her son safe. She would say nothing more. She sent me away.”

I rise from my stool. This damned woman, this witch, has been in my light ever since I was a girl, and now, at this very moment when I am using her, using her own adoring family and loyal supporters to wrench the throne from her, to destroy her sons, she may yet win, she may have done something that will spoil everything for me. How does she always do it? How is it that when she is brought so low that I can even bring myself to pray for her, she manages to turn her fortunes around? It must be witchcraft; it can only be witchcraft. Her happiness and her success have haunted my life. I know her to be in league with the devil. I wish he would take her to hell.

“You will have to go back to her,” I say, turning to him.

He almost looks as if he would refuse.

“What?” I snap.

“Lady Margaret, I swear, I dread going to her. She is like a witch imprisoned in the cleft of a pine tree; she is like an entrapped spirit; she is like a water goddess on a frozen lake, waiting for spring. She lives in the gloom of sanctuary with the river flowing all the time beside their rooms and she listens to the babble as a counselor. She knows things that she cannot know by earthly means. She fills me with terror. And her daughter is as bad.”
“You will have to summon your courage,” I say briskly. “Be brave: you are doing God’s work. You have to go back to her and tell her to be of stout heart. Tell her that I am certain that the princes are alive. Remind her that when we attacked the Tower we heard the guards taking them back from the door. They were alive then—why would Richard kill them now? Richard has taken the throne without killing them—why would he put them to death now? Richard is a man who does his own work and he is hundreds of miles away from them now. Tell her I will double my people in the Tower and that I swear to her, on my honor, that I will protect them. Remind her that the uprising will start next month. As soon as we defeat Richard the king, we will set the boys free. Then, when she is reassured, when she is in her first moment of relief—when you see the color come to her face and you have convinced her—in that moment quickly ask her if she has her son Prince Richard in safety already. If she has him hidden away somewhere.”

He nods, but he is pale with fear. “And are they safe?” he asks. “Can I truly assure her that those poor boys are safe and we will rescue them? That the rumors, even in your own household, are false? Do you know if they are alive or dead, Lady Margaret? Can I tell their mother that they are alive and speak the truth?”

“They are in the hands of God,” I reply steadily, “as are we all. My son, too. These are dangerous times, and the princes are in the hands of God.”

That night we hear news of the first uprising. It is mistimed; it comes too early. The men of Kent are marching on London, calling on the Duke of Buckingham to take the throne. The men of Sussex get up in arms, believing they cannot delay a moment longer; and the men of Hampshire beside them rise up, too, as a fire will leap from one dry woodland to another. Richard’s most loyal commander, Thomas Howard, the brand-new Duke of
Norfolk, marches down the west road from London and occupies Guildford, fighting skirmishes to the west and to the east, but holding the rebels down in their own counties and sending a desperate warning to the king: the counties of the south are up in the name of the former queen and her imprisoned sons, the princes.

Richard, the battle-hardened leader of York, marches south at the fast speed of a York army, makes his center of command at Lincoln, and raises troops in every county, especially from those whose people greeted his progress with such joy. He hears of the betrayal of Henry Stafford, the Duke of Buckingham, when men come from Wales to tell him that the duke is already on the march, going north through the Welsh marches, recruiting men and clearly planning to cross at Gloucester, or perhaps Tewkesbury, to come into the heart of England with his own men and his Welsh recruits. His beloved friend is marching out under his standard, as proudly and as bravely as once he did for Richard; only now he is marching against him.

Richard goes white with rage and he grips his right arm, his sword arm, above the elbow, as if he were shaking with rage, as if to hold it steady. "A man with the best cause to be true," he exclaims. "The most untrue creature living. A man who had everything he asked for. Never was a false traitor better treated; a traitor, a traitor."

At once he sends out commissions of array to every county in England demanding their loyalty, demanding their arms and their men. This is the first and greatest crisis of his new reign. He summons them to support a York king; he demands the loyalty that they gave to his brother, which they have all promised to him. He warns those who cheered when he took the crown less than sixteen weeks ago that they must now stand by that decision or England will fall to an unholy alliance of the false Duke of Buckingham, the witch queen, and the Tudor pretender.

It is pouring with rain, and there is a strong wind blowing hard from the north. It is unnatural weather, witch's weather. My
son must set sail now, if he is to arrive while the queen’s supporters are up and while Buckingham is marching. But if it is so foul here, in the south of England, then I fear the weather in Brittany. He must come at exactly the right moment to catch the weary victor of the first battle and make them turn and fight again, while they are sick of fighting. But I stand at my window and watch the rain pouring down and the wind lashing the trees in our garden and I know he cannot set sail in this weather; the wind is howling toward the south. I cannot believe he will even be able to get out of port.

The next day the rains are worse and the river is starting to rise. It is over our landing steps at the foot of the garden and the boatmen drag the Stanley barge up the garden to the very orchard, out of the swirling flood, fearing that it will be torn from its moorings by the current. I can’t believe that Henry can set sail in this; and, even if he were to get out of the harbor, I can’t believe that he could safely get across the English seas to the south coast.

My web of informers, spies, and plotters are stunned by the ferocity of the rain, which is like a weapon against us. The roads into London are all but impassable; no one can get a message through. A horse and rider cannot get from London to Guildford, and as the river rises higher, there is news of flooding and drowning upstream and down. The tides are unnaturally high; and every day and night the floods from the river pour down to the intruding tide and there is a boiling surge of water that wipes out riverside houses, quays, piers, and docks. Nobody can remember weather like this—a rainstorm which lasts for days—and the rivers are bursting their banks all around England.

I have no one to talk to but my God, and I cannot always hear His voice, as if the rain is blotting out His face, and the wind blowing away His words. This is how I know for sure that it is a witch’s wind. I spend my day at the window overlooking the gar-
den, watching the river boil over the garden wall and come up through the orchard, lap by lap, till the trees themselves seem to be stretching up to the heavy clouds for help. Whenever one of my ladies comes to my side, or Dr. Lewis comes to my door, or any of the plotters in London ask for admittance, they all want to know what is happening: as if I know any more than them, when all I can hear is rain, as if I can foretell the future in the gale-ripped sky. But I know nothing—anything could be happening out there; a waterlogged massacre could be taking place even half a mile away, and none of us would know. We would hear no voices over the sound of the storm; no lights would show through the rain.

I spend my nights in my chapel, praying for the safety of my son and the success of our venture, and hearing no answer from God but only the steady hammer of the torrent on the roof and the whine of the wind lifting the slates above me, until I think that God Himself has been blotted from the heavens of England by the witch’s wind, and I will never hear Him again.

Finally, I get a letter from my husband at Coventry.

_The king has commanded my presence and I fear he doubts me. He has sent for my son Lord Strange, too, and was very dark when he learned that my son is from his home with an army of ten thousand men on the march; but my son has told nobody where he is going, and his servants only swear that he said he was raising his men for the true cause. I assure the king that my son will be marching to join us, loyal to the throne; but he has not yet arrived here at Coventry Castle._

_Buckingham is trapped in Wales by the rising of the River Severn. Your son, I believe, will be held in port by the storm on the seas. The queen’s men will be unable to march out on the drowned roads, and the Duke of Norfolk is waiting for them. I think your rebellion is over; you have been beaten by the rain and the rising of the waters. They are calling it the Duke of Buckingham’s Water and it has washed him and_
his ambition to hell along with your hopes. Nobody has seen
a storm like this since the Queen Elizabeth called up a mist
to hide her husband’s army at the battle of Barnet or
summoned snow for him at Tewkesbury. Nobody doubts she
can do such a thing and most of us only hope she will stop
before she washes us all away. But why? Can she be working
against you now? And, if so, why? Does she know, with her
inner sight, what has befallen her boys and who has done it?
Does she think you have done it? Is she drowning your son
in revenge?

Destroy what papers you have kept and deny whatever
you have done. Richard is coming to London for his revenge
and there will be a scaffold built on Tower Green. If he
believes half what he has heard, he will put you on it and I
will be unable to save you.

Stanley
OCTOBER 1483

I have been on my knees all night, but I don’t know if God can hear me through the hellish noise of the rain. My son sets sail from Brittany with fifteen valuable ships and an army of five thousand men and loses them all in the storm at sea. Only two ships struggle ashore on the south coast and learn at once that Buckingham has been defeated by the rising of the river, his rebellion is washed away by the waters, and Richard is waiting, dry-shod, to execute the survivors.

My son turns his back on the country that should have been his and sails for Brittany again, flying like a faint-heart, leaving me here, unprotected, and clearly guilty of plotting his rebellion. We are parted once more, my heir and me, this time without even meeting, and this time it feels as if it is forever. He and Jasper leave me to face the king, who marches vengefully on London like an invading enemy, mad with anger. Dr. Lewis vanishes off to Wales; Bishop Morton takes the first ship that can sail after the storms and goes to France; Buckingham’s men slip from the City in silence and under lowering skies; the queen’s kin make their way to Brittany and to the tattered remains of my son’s makeshift court; and my husband arrives in London in the train of King Richard, whose handsome face is dark with the sullen rage of a traitor betrayed.

“He knows,” my husband says shortly as he comes to my room, his traveling cape still around his shoulders, his sympathy
scant. "He knows you were working with the queen, and he will put you on trial. He has evidence from half a dozen witnesses. Rebels from Devon to East Anglia know your name and have letters from you."

"Husband, surely he will not."

"You are clearly guilty of treason and that is punishable by death."

"But if he thinks you are faithful..."

"I am faithful," he corrects me. "It is not a matter of opinion but of fact. Not what the king thinks—but what he can see. When Buckingham rode out, while you were summoning your son to invade England and paying rebels, while the queen was raising the southern counties, I was at his side, advising him, loaning him money, calling out my own affinity to defend him, faithful as any northerner. He trusts me now as he has never done before. My son raised an army for him."

"Your son's army was for me!" I interrupt.

"My son will deny that; I will deny that; we will call you a liar and nobody can prove anything, either way."

I pause. "Husband, you will intercede for me?"

He looks at me thoughtfully, as if the answer could be no. "Well, it is a consideration, Lady Margaret. My king Richard is bitter; he cannot believe that the Duke of Buckingham, his best friend, his only friend, could betray him. And you? He is astonished at your infidelity. You carried his wife's train at her coronation, you were her friend, you welcomed her to London. He feels you have betrayed him. Unforgivably. He thinks you as faithless as your kinsman Buckingham; and Buckingham was executed on the spot."

"Buckingham is dead?"

"They took off his head in Salisbury marketplace. The king would not even see him. He was too angry with him and he is filled with hate toward you. You said that Queen Anne was welcome to her city, that she had been missed. You bowed the knee to him and wished him well. And then you sent out messages to
every disaffected Lancastrian family in the country to tell them
the cousins' war had come again, and that this time you will
win.”

I grit my teeth. “Should I run away? Should I go to Brittany,
too?”

“My dear, how ever would you get there?”

“I have my money chest, I have my guard. I could bribe a ship
to take me. If I went down to the docks at London now, I could
get away. Or Greenwich. Or I could ride to Dover or Southam-
ton . . .”

He smiles at me and I remember they call him “the fox” for
his ability to survive, to double back, to escape the hounds. “Yes,
indeed, all that might have been possible; but I am sorry to tell
you, I am nominated as your jailer, and I cannot let you escape
me. King Richard has decided that all your lands and your
wealth will be mine, signed over to me, despite our marriage
contract. Everything you owned as a girl is mine; everything you
owned as a Tudor is mine; everything you gained from your
marriage to Stafford is now mine; everything you inherited from
your mother is mine. My men are in your chambers now collect-
ing your jewels, your papers, and your money chest. Your men
are already under arrest, and your women are locked in their
rooms. Your tenants and your affinity will learn you cannot sum-
mon them; they are all mine.”

I gasp. For a moment, I cannot speak, I just look at him. “You
have robbed me? You have taken this chance to betray me?”

“You are to live at the house at Woking, my house now; you
are not to leave the grounds. You will be served by my people—
your own servants will be turned away. You will see neither
ladies-in-waiting, servants, nor your confessor. You will meet
with no one and send no messages.”

I can hardly grasp the depth and breadth of his betrayal. He
has taken everything from me. “It is you who betrayed me to
Richard!” I fling at him. “You who betrayed the whole plot. It is
you, with an eye to my fortune, who led me on to do this and
now profit from my destruction. You told the Duke of Norfolk to
go down to Guildford and suppress the rebellion in Hampshire.
You told Richard to beware of the Duke of Buckingham. You
told him that the queen was rising against him and I with her!”

He shakes his head. “No. I am not your enemy, Margaret. I
have served you well as your husband. No one else could have
saved you from the traitor’s death that you deserve. This is the
best deal I could get for you. I have saved you from the Tower,
from the scaffold. I have saved your lands from sequestration—
he could have taken them outright. I have saved you to live in my
house, as my wife, in safety. And I am still placed at the heart of
things, where we can learn of his plans against your son. Richard
will seek to have Tudor killed now; he will send spies with orders
to murder Henry. You have signed your son’s death warrant with
your failure. Only I can save him. You should be grateful to me.”

I cannot think, I cannot think through this mixture of threats
and promises. “Henry?”

“Richard will not stop until he is dead. Only I can save him.”

“I am to be your prisoner?”

He nods. “And I am to have your fortune. It is nothing
between us, Margaret. Think of the safety of your son.”

“You will let me warn Henry of his danger?”

He rises to his feet. “Of course. You can write to him as you
wish. But all your letters are to come through me; they will be
carried by my men. I have to give the appearance of controlling
you completely.”

“The appearance?” I repeat. “If I know you at all, you will give
the appearance of being on both sides.”

He smiles in genuine amusement. “Always.”