

IT would probably be frowned upon for the future queen of England to admit it, but Philippa was nervous. Everyone had been kind to her since she landed at Dover, but there was such a thing as too much kindness, and the public joy at her arrival had been somewhat overwhelming, although she'd managed to keep herself together: did everyone really expect such great things from her at fifteen? What was the queen of a nation – such an old and proud one as England, no less – supposed to do, to ensure the continued trust of her subjects?

On advice from the court of Hainault, she'd declined to bring her own attendants, and had had to say an emotional goodbye to the girls she knew so well. It would help the English public take to her, she had been told, if she employed a new staff once she arrived, and kept some of the natives of the country in employ. But going by the welcome she'd received, such a concession had hardly been necessary. Perhaps it would have been better to slight her new subjects in this small way, just so they would have more realistic expectations of her in the future.

She adjusted her dress. It was more opulent than usual, of course: inlaid with various precious stones that weighed her down uncomfortably. She would have to get used to it for the rest of the day, and so she practised walking up and down the length of the small room, trying to become familiar with the extra girth it added to her.

After a little while there was a rustle at the door, and her

breath caught momentarily as someone stepped in: it was the king, red-faced and smirking in the knowledge that he was breaking protocol. He'd grown since she'd last seen him, the previous year; back then he had still been a boy, resentful about his forced seclusion on the continent with his mother and her paramour, concerned about the future of the kingdom he was to inherit when his father's grip on the throne was weak and his mother seemed to have renounced any pretence at diplomacy. They'd got to know each other well, after learning that they were to be engaged: there'd been little to do that spring apart from walk in the grounds of Philippa's father's domain at Valenciennes and talk to each other at great length. He'd been strong-willed, and fiercely loyal to his country, but resentful at the same time of the position his mother and the man Mortimer were keeping him in.

She wondered if there would still be that easy familiarity between them: he was king now, after all, and, it seemed, more a man than before.

"My lord," she said demurely.

He approached her. "My lady. Forgive the intrusion –"

"You ought not to have come in here," she told him, and then hesitated: did she have the right to rebuke him, even as gently as that, now that he was king? Less than a minute in his presence, and she had disrespected the throne already. She was glad that none of her tutors from Valenciennes were here to see this.

“Nonsense,” he said. “Besides, we’re already married, from what I’ve heard. Wasn’t there a man we sent to your father’s court – some piddling provincial bishop?”

“There was,” she confirmed. It had been an odd occasion, which she hadn’t fully understood; her father had seemed slightly disgruntled, and there’d been more discussion of money than of the union that was supposedly being forged.

“Then stuff anyone who says we aren’t to see each other,” said Edward cheerfully. “I only wanted to catch a glimpse of my bride – and to talk to you again. It’s been nearly two years since we used to walk in your father’s forests.”

Philippa nodded. “I did enjoy those occasions. I had thought perhaps –” she eyed him warily – “I had feared that things might have changed since then. You’re king now, and we’ve both aged; the circumstances are quite different altogether.”

He moved towards her a little, as if to take her hand, and then drew back. “No,” he protested, waving his own hand in the air dismissively instead. “I know things are different, but I do remember our conversations fondly. We established quite a bond, and you were very helpful to me. I do hope we are able to resume that closeness.”

“I’m sure we will be,” she said, relieved.

He smiled. “I should go. I’ll see you at the ceremony. I look forward to it.”



Philippa was escorted to the gate of the minster in time for the ritual to begin, and stood with Edward before the archbishop. Now that they were in view of the public, the king was the model of regularity, not even sneaking a glance at her as he said his vows. He finally turned towards her to place the ring on her finger, and caught her eye with a brief reassuring grin, before facing away again, totally serious.

The rest of the ceremony passed uneventfully. They headed inside the minster and down the long aisle for the nuptial mass, taking up the usual kneeling position at the altar. Philippa tried her best to remember the meaning of the mass and her duties as a Christian wife, but it was difficult not to be distracted by the knowledge that the entire English royal court was sitting in the pews behind her. Edward's family were in the front seats; chief among them, his mother, who was Philippa's own mother's cousin. She had turned up in a dress even more splendid than the bridal gown that Philippa had been given, but seemed totally at ease in it. Beside her, there was her lover, Mortimer – who, from what she had heard, had taken to acting as if it were he who sat on the English throne. It was a complex situation to have found herself thrust into, she thought as she muttered the *Agnus Dei*.

The mass ended and Philippa stood stiffly – she still had the

lithe body of a young girl, but the hour of kneeling had taken its toll – and left the minster beside Edward, accompanied by the jubilant sounds of minstrels and the cheers from the waiting public outside. There had been an enormous turnout despite the cold weather; Philippa was glad of her dress for the insulating effect of its various layers, even if it was fairly unwieldy. She accompanied Edward to the royal coach. He lifted the canopy and ushered her in first; she remembered just in time to give a gracious wave to the crowd.

Edward stepped into the carriage next to her, followed by a knight who discreetly turned away as the king sat down and took his new wife's hand. "I hope you didn't mind the ceremony," he murmured. "The archbishop does have a reputation for interminable sermons. And my knees are aching after being against the ground so long."

She couldn't prevent herself from giggling. "Mine too!" she assured him, and after a quick glance at the knight, who was still studiously looking in a different direction, pressed a quick kiss to his lips.

He drew back a little, startled. "I –"

"I'm sorry," said Philippa, and she meant it; boldness had overcome her for a second, but she now recognised her folly. "I'm sure that was improper."

"No, no," said Edward, his cheeks flushed. "It was – I liked it. You are –" he lowered his voice – "very beautiful."

He was handsome, too: he had a commanding appearance,

even at fifteen, with strong features. He was tall, and had the same auburn hair that she had heard of in descriptions of his father – it was a colour not often seen on the continent. It was clear in his face that he was not yet a man, but then again, Philippa too was still a girl.

They sat in contented silence for a while, their hands still pressed together as the coach made its juddering way along the road. “Where are we heading?” she asked eventually.

“One of the local earls is lending his home for the festivities,” he told her. “I’ve been told it’s not too far.” He pushed the canopy aside slightly and let her look out.

She gazed at the hilly scene around them. The light snow that had been falling in York was a little heavier here, and it obscured the details of the landscape. Nonetheless, she could make out its general features enough to know that this part of the country was quite different from the south-eastern region in which she had spent a little time before the long journey north. She told Edward so.

“Yes,” he concurred, “the landscape is quite different here. And the climate. They tell me it snows for much of the winter in Yorkshire; we normally only get it for a few days in London. I suppose we’re lucky that the court’s based there. Although we do come north a lot to fight the Scots.” He paused. “This is your first time in England, isn’t it?”

Philippa nodded. “Have you seen a lot of it?”

“I have,” he said. “My father’s court used to travel a lot: we

were always moving around when I was a young boy. I feel like I've been to almost every part of England, although I've barely spent any time abroad. When I met you it was the first time I had set foot in Flanders, and France before that."

This time, she felt an unexpected prickle of unease at his mention of their first meeting. It had been an odd period that the two of them had spent together in Valenciennes, with little to do but wander her father's grounds and become acquainted with each other, with the strange unspoken knowledge that soon they were supposed to be spending the rest of their lives together. That proposition had seemed impossible to take in at the time; in fact, it had felt more like they would never see each other again when Edward returned to England, and it was perhaps for that reason that they had been able to develop such a remarkable bond in such a short time. By the time the prince departed, they had established a real connection, and when Edward left, Philippa had wept. It embarrassed her to remember it, and, in fact, to remember that whole period.

She changed the subject. "Will there be many people at the feast?"

"I'll say," said Edward cheerily. "As many of my courtiers as we could bring up here, and all the local gentry, of course. But never mind the people, wait until you see the food. Venison, hare, pigeon – my mouth's watering just thinking about it."

"It sounds delightful," she concurred.



The banqueting hall where the celebrations were held was small, but the feast, as Edward had predicted, was splendid. He was continuously accosted by an array of noblemen offering their congratulations on the marriage, so Philippa likewise allowed herself to be drawn into conversations of her own accord; there was no lack of well-wishers ready to talk to her. It was difficult to understand their accents at times, especially when, as she surmised, they came from the local region: the northerners seemed quite different from the southerners in that regard. She persisted though, with good humour, and made the rounds of the guests, all of whom seemed thrilled to have the opportunity to speak to her.

The festivities wore on, and eventually came to a point where most of the guests had left. Edward was still engaged in conversation on the other side of the hall, with an elderly man who was talking in an urgent, low voice; the king was nodding, his expression serious. Nobody else remained aside from Philippa and a small group of local earls, or perhaps barons – she wasn't sure whether there was a difference in England – who had commandeered the remainder of the wedding ale and were consuming it rather raucously, accompanied by a lively game of cards. They were jabbering in what seemed to be a mixture of French and English, which Philippa had long given up any hope of understanding. She watched them from a dis-



tance, gratified nonetheless that her arrival in England had facilitated their enjoyment.

Edward eventually approached her. "My lady," he murmured, still looking grave. "I'm sorry to have left you alone."

"Don't worry about it," she assured him. "I've been having a splendid time regardless. Although I am getting a little tired now."

"I'm sure you are," he said. "So am I, to tell the truth. Perhaps we should retire?"

She nodded, and they left the hall, making their way past the small cluster of remaining guests, one of whom noticed their exit and began to gesture at them excitedly. "To bed! To bed!" he called. His companions shushed him good-humouredly, and Philippa grinned at their merriment. She glanced sideways at Edward, expecting a similar reaction, but his face remained downcast.

They arrived at the landing outside the set of chambers they had been allocated and entered their separate dressing rooms. Two of the maids Philippa had contracted in London were waiting in hers, ready to help her undress. One of them asked shyly about the events of the day, and she began to regale them both with a detailed retelling. Soon enough, all three girls were in high spirits, giggling together about the excitement of the occasion as well as what was still to come.

Philippa headed into the bedroom and sat on the bed to wait for her husband. He appeared not long afterwards, and

carefully sat down next to her.

“My lady,” said Edward apprehensively, “I take it you know what is expected of us now.”

“Of course,” she replied. “My maids in Valenciennes made a point of telling me about it in great detail.”

“I’m sure they did,” he said, with a small smile that didn’t fully materialise, and leant towards her.

They shared a kiss, a longer one than that afternoon, and slowly, carefully, reached for each other. Philippa rubbed a hand across Edward’s thigh as he felt under her nightshirt. She had never done anything of the kind before, but there was, after all, that strange familiarity between the two of them: it was as if she already knew his body. She let herself relax into the connection, sighing with pleasure at their closeness, the warm, lively touch of his eager skin. Her head dropped into the crook of his neck, and she began to press small kisses to it as he caressed her breasts with a strong hand. She could feel his breath, hot and moist, against the side of her face.

After a short time, though, she became aware that he was drawing back. Gently, he extricated himself from her grip and shuffled across the bed until he was no longer touching her at all. She realised with embarrassment that her breathing had grown heavy, and attempted to compose herself while her husband sat on the edge of the bed, seemingly unwilling to meet her eye.

“I’m sorry,” he said finally. “It doesn’t look like I’ll be able.”

He looked straight at her then, his face twisted in regret. "I do apologise."

Her confusion must have been evident, because, apparently unable to explain any further, Edward pulled down his braies to reveal his member. It lay between his thighs, soft and shrivelled, a little darker than the surrounding skin – immobile and lifeless. It put Philippa in mind of a sleeping dormouse.

"It's supposed to swell," she said hesitantly, "isn't it?"

He nodded glumly. "I'm sorry –"

"Is it – am I –"

"No," he said at once. "It's not your fault. I meant it when I said you were beautiful earlier. I consider myself very fortunate to have you as my wife, especially given the circumstances of our marriage."

He fell silent again. Strangely, Philippa found herself more concerned now that she knew the situation wasn't her doing. The young king, famous across Europe already for his strength and his piety: the model of a monarch, something that England so sorely needed after the troubled reign of his father. His accession to the throne had been celebrated by the kingdom's allies all over the continent, and, from what she had gathered, regarded with considerable caution by the French. She had heard of nothing but Edward's excellent character and the promise he already showed as incipient king. Of course, there would have to be something that contradicted all that, some hidden

flaw; but she would never have guessed it might be a problem of this nature. Had the Lord punished him, and all of his race, by deciding that a man of such qualities would be cursed never to be able to pass them onto offspring? Was this the great secret of the English crown, that the king was afflicted with a trouble of the reproductive organs? And what of her role as mother to future kings – would she have to bear other men’s children and raise them as princes, pretending to all the world that they were the issue of the love between her and her royal husband?

“Is it – a medical condition?” she asked eventually.

“What?” said Edward. “Oh – no – I’m usually very – it’s just tonight. I’m sorry. I find myself rather preoccupied.”

Philippa tried not to let her relief show itself too blatantly. Her mind had immediately leapt to what she now recognised as a rather far-fetched scenario, and she felt a little foolish. But now there seemed to be a more urgent matter at hand: she could see, at last, that Edward was upset by something. She recalled his glum expression at the feast – she had momentarily believed it to indicate apprehension before the wedding night, but now she was beginning to understand that it must have been for a different reason.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“I was speaking to a gentleman at the banquet,” he said, “and he told me my father was murdered.”

“Murdered?!” Philippa couldn’t help echoing. “I didn’t

know your father was dead –”

“Oh, that news didn’t reach you? Yes. In September. He died in exile in Gloucestershire.” His voice was a little stiff.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “And all the talk at that time was about our wedding. You must have found that terribly hard –”

“Well, that’s how it works, isn’t it?” Edward protested, the edge in his voice more prominent. “The old king dies, the new one is crowned.”

“Yes, but you’re just a boy.”

“They all know that well enough,” he said bitterly. “Keeping me away from everything – one would think they’d use this time to instruct me on how to govern a kingdom, how not to make a mess of it like my father did – but they insist on keeping me away from all that, shunting me around the country to these obscure provincial stately homes while that vile cur acts as if he’s in charge.” He fixed her with a stare. “He’s the one who had my father killed, you know.”

“Mortimer,” she guessed. Edward’s animosity towards the man had been quite clear ever since she had first met both of them back in Valenciennes.

“Yes.”

“How can you be sure? Did that old fellow prove it to you?”

“He knew all the details. Everything about my father’s removal to Berkeley, who his wardens were there. And I should have suspected. I knew that wretch wanted my father gone – I should have stopped him –”

“He’s a grown man. You’re fifteen years old,” said Philippa.

“And I’m the king of England. If I can’t –” He sighed. “My father was a weak man. You must have heard about that.”

“I have,” she admitted.

“He had no skill in battle. Or in diplomacy. He let the gentry ride roughshod over this country. And he – he lay with men –”

That seemed to be what Edward found most upsetting; Philippa considered how she might comfort him. “The Lord loves us all in manifold ways,” she said finally. “Our earthly love for one another can only be an imperfect reflection of His.”

“It’s unnatural,” said Edward, his voice choked. “And my mother. Going about with that scoundrel, making fools of us all in Paris. Widow’s weeds – that was a ridiculous stunt. And you know she’s refusing to have you crowned queen?”

Philippa shook her head.

“It’s an embarrassment for both of us,” he concluded. “I’m sorry, my lady – that you find yourself caught up in this, and that I’ve ruined your wedding night with all this vexation –”

“It’s your wedding night too,” she said.

“Yes,” he said. “I’m sorry. I – I have to get rid of him. I just don’t know how to do it. I don’t –” He buried his face in his hands.

She studied him for a while. “You must have allies at court.”

“I think so,” he said, slowly looking up. “But it’s always so hard to tell with these people. They change their allegiance faster than the wind turns. I’ve been king a year, and even that doesn’t seem long enough to tell properly when they really are on my side, or if they’re just favouring me because they think it’ll benefit them in the long run. I’m still not ready. I still don’t feel like a man.”

“Then wait until you do,” she said. “See which alliances prove themselves true. Nobody expects you to do anything yet – you’re still a boy. Wait until you feel ready.”

He nodded.

“And remember,” said Philippa. “There is one person whose support you can rely on. We are bonded now, in the eyes of God.”

Edward smiled, and shuffled closer to her. “I really am very fortunate to have you,” he murmured. “Mortimer – he was one of those who engineered our betrothal. But I think he’ll regret it soon enough. You’re the best wife I could have hoped for.”

“So great a king deserves no less,” she replied.

They moved closer together, and lay in each other’s arms as the night drew on.



*“At the birth of his son and heir (June 1330) Edward was still a boy in years, but from this moment he would seem to have thrown off*

*the dependence and simplicity of boyhood, and to have awakened to a keen and painful consciousness of the contemptible position to which he had suffered himself to be brought by an arrogant subject and a depraved mother. Relying on the universal hatred of which Mortimer was the object, he resolved to get possession of his person and bring him to justice for his crimes ... On the evening of October 19 the King and his associates rode out of Nottingham into the country to divert suspicion, but at midnight they returned, crept through the subterranean passage, overpowered the guards, and broke into a chamber adjoining that of the ex-Queen, in which Mortimer was holding consultation with the Bishop of Lincoln. A struggle ensued, in which he was soon overpowered and made a prisoner, the Queen meanwhile shrieking from her chamber, 'Fair son, fair son, O spare the gentle Mortimer!'"*

– Rev. W. Warburton, *Edward III*, 1876.