CHAPTER XIII

COMEDY

THE Queen's Maids of Honour were all daughters of gentlemen of good birth and generally of title too. They must be decorative, because they could not be allowed to mar state processions and pageants and the Queen hated ugly people, besides you could not have foreign ambassadors writing home that noblemen's daughters in England all weighed fourteen stone and looked best back view. But they must not wish for love. Young, lithe and witty they must not seek husbands at Court, where all the husbands worth trying for in England congregated. Occasionally a maid of honour might leave to get married, the kind of marriage arranged by relations and not much relished by either bride or bridegroom. The Queen had been known to attend an approved wedding and return in a frightful temper. Otherwise the maids would have been obliged to solve the problem of eternal youth like their mistress.

If she had cared for young girls she might have won some measure of obedience by setting in authority over them some soft likeable older woman who could have worked upon their feelings. Unfortunately she refused to use her brains in this matter. She knew that she disliked girls, and the Mother of the Maids, appointed by her, was such a dragon that it had become a matter of honour amongst her charges to deceive her whenever possible.

Men were this old duenna's nightmare. She was always looking for men, even in the smelly little cupboard on the stairs, where the grooms kept their dusters and faggots. "Come out," she would screech, pulling open doors with a jump. "Ha! ha! I see you." She demanded to read all letters brought to the maids and asked how ruffs had got crumpled like that and how they had spent every moment of their free time. Once when she drew a man's long black yarn hose out of her spectacle pocket (a good idea) she had threatened a fit. She didn't trust one of the footmen or porters or the window catches or the door bolts.

The Palace of Whitehall was an irregular and extensive building covering many acres, or rather a collection of buildings so large and loosely strung together that you could get wet to the skin carrying a message from one to another of them on a rainy day, and perhaps never find the person for whom you searched although she was sitting wringing her hands waiting for you. It had been the palace of the Archbishops of York, and Cardinal Wolsey, from whom the late king had taken it, had rebuilt most of it in fine rose-red brick. Traces of an earlier mansion bequeathed by a Norman earl to Dominican friars (grey stone Gothic stuff, much in the style of Westminster) still existed in places, and there were modern additions, for instance a mammoth timber banqueting hall, which had been run up for some foreign royalties' visit and never used since. Birds nested in its beamed roof and flew about screaming if you got a yeoman to unlock its shuddering warped door for you.

Through the centre of Whitehall ran the highway from London to Westminster, which in the close vicinity of the palace suddenly became a golden stretch

of gravel carefully rolled, and shaded by waving trees. It was pierced by two arched gateways, one the work of Holbein and really beautiful.

Inside on the east came the ramping mass of State Apartments, the great Hall and the chapel, with a privy garden behind them and privy stairs to the river; on the west, reached by galleries grouped around a cockpit and a tilt yard, rambled the lodgings of the royal household, including those of the maids-in-waiting.

The view from their back windows was of St. James's Park and the shadowy courtyard into which their front windows looked was on the direct route to the tennis courts. When one of the yeomen found an old tennis racket lying inside the window at the bottom of the back stairs leading up the maids' apartments, he might easily think that some gentleman had brought this up from the courts by mistake and thrust it in here not having the time to go back. But if he was a sensible man he would not touch it. That old tennis racket was wiser than it looked. When one of the maids saw it she knew that a visitor wanted to come this evening. If the evening was unsuitable she would take the racket by the handle and drop it out of the open window onto the narrow flower-bed below. If all was well she would stand it up on end so that anyone passing would be able to read his welcome.

They had parties up in the maids' quarters after the old dragon had gone to bed. (By a quite inept arrangement her sleeping chamber was round the other side of the yard.) Men! Forbidden fruit! You could hardly blame them. All day while they attended the Queen upon public expeditions, stood to attention in her Privy Chamber, walked behind her in her garden and

danced and sang for her pleasure in her galleries they had to pretend to be unaware of the thrilling and thrilled partners who were their escort.

It was wonderful how they got to know one another all the same, truly a revelation to hear the well-barbered full-blooded visitors who arrived on tiptoe after lights were out, whispering "How's Moll this eve?" "Did Crow get my message?" "Where's Little Bess?" Little Bess was Elizabeth Brydges, so called to distinguish between her and Big Bess, who was Elizabeth Russell. They were nearly all called Elizabeth, of course, and nearly all adored Lord Essex, that great charmer, but there conventionality ended. Bess Vernon was Black Bess or Crow, Bess Southwell was Dove and the Ladies Mary Howard, Bridget Manners and Blanche Somerset were Moll, Budge and Pippin to one another and the large good-humoured guests who lounged in their arm-chairs and amongst their silk skirts by the light of a discreetly dying fire.

Only gentlemen voted amusing were admitted to the sitting-chamber which still bore the name of the Coffer Chamber, a relic of the Cardinal's days. It did not matter if a gallant was married or well stricken in years or even of quite bad reputation, so long as he could entertain these bored beauties (for even those who were not true beauties soon learnt how to catch the eye).

Very few courtiers could bring their wives to Whitehall and very few could resist an invitation to the Coffer Chamber and forbidden fruit. There were six maids of honour and their appointments were supposed to be for life, but their faces and names were always changing after frightful scandals, and although they got no salary there were always applicants pressing for the vacant post. A poor nobleman with many daughters could

wash his hands of the one he had placed in the Coffer Chamber. It would be her own fault if she ever needed to come home again. They got the elaborate white dresses which were their invariable wear, expensive food and drink of which they soon wearied and a never-ending succession of excitements and alarms. They were theoretically unapproachable and admittedly fair game. Most of them knew how to take care of themselves and had nothing to learn. It was considered bad behaviour for a gentleman to arrive in the Coffer Chamber actually drunk, but nobody objected to a slurred accent and a tendency to love-making, and when some first favourite like Lord Essex entered he kissed all round as a matter of course. The gentlemen got ample attention, for there were seldom more than two of them at a time to the six maids. It was dangerous, it was fashionable and it was flattering to be an accepted visitor to the Coffer Chamber. If you did not mean to fall love's victim you might as well stroll into a den of lions. You need not mean marriage, but you must have at least a scrap of your old heart left for an adventure.

Its arrangements, like most of those in palaces, were a mixture of squalor and luxury. Firing was provided, so the room was always warm and generally over-heated, and since the maids breakfasted and sometimes, when they were not on duty, supped there, there was always food obtainable. But the servants were continually being changed, and it was miles to the kitchens. Soiled dishes lay piled in the staircase window outside half a day, and whole meals dumped by scullions cooled under their covers because nobody came to serve them.

The walls were decorated by a set of large figured

allegorical tapestries which had been pronounced too faded for the State apartments and ruthlessly cut down for use here. Their greens were all gone to cracknel yellows and kingfisher blues, and where there had been silk shading for flesh tints it shone pearl grey. They were splashed with wax, because candles in silver brackets were nailed upon them, and the metal braid at their borders was tarnished and hanging in loops because it was nobody's business to sew it up. The ceiling was decorated with the long fallen Cardinal's arms and hat, there were rush mats with holes in them on the floor, and the furniture was a medley of arm-chairs and stools of the old-fashioned x-shape, some of cowhide and others upholstered in wine-coloured velvet with most of the nap worn off. Quite the best seat in the room was a full length daybed with a mattress covered in yellow satin sewn with damask roses. A gentleman could loll back upon it in comfort with a maid sitting forward on either side of his outstretched arms, or two maids could sit upon it with a gentleman propped against their knees. This room had seen more diligent love-making than any other in the palace, and some gentleman said that more state secrets were known there than in the Privy Council Chamber. The maids were all quick-witted, they liked to know what was going on in the world, and nearly every one of them was in the middle of at least one love affair, the best means of getting information. Until a new arrival had been fitted up with some sort of an admirer she was a danger. Self-preservation was amongst the strongest instincts in court life.

Maids used to be appointed as young as twelve and fourteen, but eighteen was now the usual age. Mary Fitton was seventeen, and her father Sir Edward had

written to his old friend Sir William Knollys to ask him to play the good shepherd to an innocent lamb. Sir William had written back that he would be a second parent to her and defend her with his sword if need be from the wolfish cruelty and fox-like subtleties of this place. As things had fallen out he had hardly played the father, but she said that she had his word to marry her as soon as his wife died, and even if there was trouble before that he would probably give her a house of her own in the country, as Sir Henry Lee had done by Anne Vavasour when she had got dismissal.

Bess Vernon had no accepted lover. It was generally imagined that she was another hopeless victim of Lord Essex her cousin, and that she dared not say so because she had to keep upon terms with his wife and sister, not that his sister would have cared, bearing as she was child after child to her lover Sir Charles Blount.

Vernon was lucky in having Essex House to go to whenever she liked. Girls who had no powerful friends in London lay awake o' nights when they knew the game was up and they must go back to some sombre gabled manor-house embowered amongst mournful trees in the silent countryside, with no incident in its days save rain driving across its face or sun baking up its strong-scented herb garden—a home whose picture had grown dim in memory as if seen reflected in a dark spotted mirror. The dismissed maid of honour who had failed to catch her bird went trudging home fetched by long-faced servants, with the knowledge that there was nothing of the past left to her but a bundle of gilt ribbons pressed flat at the bottom of her luggage—once her breast knot carried as favour in the tilt yard—and nothing in the future but to lead apes in hell. They said that when old maids died that was the work they got to

do. Not a player in the Theatre feared the basket more than a maid of honour, and the overcharged humour of the Coffer Chamber somewhat resembled that of the playhouse.

Vernon was black-haired, black as ebony, a thing unfashionable. She had bought a very costly fair wig which she sometimes wore, and did not know whether she liked or no. She had plucked out most of her eyebrows, producing an expression of unvarying surprise which irritated herself. In the frizzed wig of dead fair hair with her mouth well reddened, she looked startling and unearthly, which was better than running the chance of being overlooked, but she fancied that it did not suit her complexion which was pale and must not be meddled with (pink on her cheeks made her the downright wanton she knew); also the Queen had noticed and commended it; it must be unbecoming.

She was cold and tired. Fitton and she had attended their mistress to a banquet at the Lord Admiral's house in Chelsea, and she had got next her at board the French Ambassador who made you say things you did not mean if you were not careful. Directly after dinner the Queen had leapt up and asked to see her host's tapestries depicting the defeat of the Armada, a command which had meant a long halting progress down a chilly gallery. The Lord Admiral had no intention of presenting them to her, however fiercely she hinted. He had decided that as he took his last look at the table set for the banquet before she arrived, and he was not one to change his mind, this sound old gentleman with a snowy head covered by an oyster-coloured brocade skull cap, an alabaster face and eyes dark as his own polished oak table. He carried, with a great air, an ivory wand shoulder tall, and his courtly dress was of

white satin and blood-red Genoa velvet garnished with many bunches of ribbon. All that the Queen had got out of him as a gift was another silver-gilt standing cup set with crystals and pendant pearls, and she had gone home in dudgeon leaving her maids to follow.

They had made their journey by water and had to hang about the foggy landing stage in a draughty tilt-wherry while the Royal Barge unloaded first. Both girls walked with dragging steps huddling into their black satin cloaks rayed with silver tinsel—the court's winter livery. They were longing to get into the Coffer Chamber, where they could drop into chairs kick off their shoes and cry "Ugh!"

On the way upstairs they noticed the tennis racket and became alert. Hanging over the banisters Fitton whistled for the groom at the entrance to ask who had put that there, while Vernon leant back against the staircase wall with a hand at her heart. She was not a beauty but her youthful features had a disarming simplicity which contrasted in a piquant way with her court manners and elaborate dress. Just now in her black and silver cloak hiding her from head to heels, with a mask with glass eye-holes covering her face, and the hand which touched her breast decorated with a ring of value through which she had threaded a narrow black silk ribbon knotted round the wrist for safety, she looked something sinister.

"Southampton," hissed Fitton, "and he's brought the player!"

It was a triumph to have snared so shy a bird as the young earl. Five years ago when he had first come to London he had avoided the Court and all its works. Since his stern grandfather had died and his gentle widowed mother suddenly married an elderly invalid,

he had been living alone at his great house in Holborn, and begun to show promising signs of growing much more like everyone else. He had recently lost at cards an enormous sum about which there was a tale so discreditable that you must rejoice. It was said that Lord Burleigh had paid over five thousand pounds as dowry for his granddaughter. The lady had married another nobleman, Lord Derby, who had come into his title unexpectedly owing to the death of a father and an elder brother. When the lady's relations had asked Harry Southampton to refund the portion of her dowry already paid to him and release her from her engagement, Harry had relinquished the bride with grace but been obliged to confess that he had spent the money.

It had been Vernon's inspiration to ask him to bring to the Coffer Chamber someone of whom he was known to be proud, besides the maids of honour liked meeting players. Fitton had once got Kempe the best clown from the Rose smuggled in—a great surprise to find the fellow without his dog and rustical dialect actually a small and very polite person with a look of great age and a close-shaven poll of silvery hair. He had written his hostess a poem of thanks for his entertainment which had not been polite or even seemly, although probably he had meant well and merely mistaken how far one of his class had licence to go.

Enough of Kempe. Get Harry to bring us Shakespeare. Even if the player proves another disappointment the patron is worth having. The young Earl's shy disdain had provoked the fair herd. He had taken part in the pageant on the anniversary of the Queen's Accession a fortnight ago and tilted notably well disguised as Bevis of Hampton in silver armour with his long gold hair hanging down under a helmet decorated with

green leaves. Vernon with one of her wild bursts of mocking laughter had told him that he looked more like Eve than Bevis, and he had not been near them since.

Patron and poet had arrived, so no doubt the Coffer Chamber had been hastily dealt with so as to look its best. The shutters would be in and the mouse-coloured velvet curtains drawn so that no chink of light should be visible from outside. It was not so desperately rash as it sounded to entertain visitors here after lights out, for the maids had got a key made for the only door that gave onto the stairhead. The old dragon locked up solemnly before she went to bed. If she dreamt she heard men's voices and came to find out, the yeoman at the foot of the stairs would always whistle long before she had made her way round three galleries. Then the guests could be hurried through the other door into somebody's bedchamber—this could not be helped—that opened on to a roof from which it was an easy leap into a flower bed. If anybody officious challenged a stranger wandering behind the maids' lodgings, well, the captain of the Guard, Sir Walter Raleigh, had himself more than once used that window.

There would be a generous fire in the chimney and a pool of bright colour on the floor where a pile of silk cushions had been flung to hide the holes in the matting. The faded arras when not overlit shone with the flasked-up radiance of a spring woodland.

A man's voice which had been sounding regularly within broke off as Vernon smote on the door, giving the three knocks which are the sign that a play is about to begin.