

I
Falcons
Wiltshire, September 1535

His children are falling from the sky. He watches from horseback, acres of England stretching behind him; they drop, gilt-winged, each with a blood-filled gaze. Grace Cromwell hovers in thin air. She is silent when she takes her prey, silent as she glides to his fist. But the sounds she makes then, the rustle of feathers and the creak, the sigh and ruffle of pinion, the small cluck-cluck from her throat, these are sounds of recognition, intimate, daughterly, almost disapproving. Her breast is gore-streaked and flesh clings to her claws.

Later, Henry will say, ‘Your girls flew well today.’ The hawk Anne Cromwell bounces on the glove of Rafe Sadler, who rides by the king in easy conversation. They are tired; the sun is declining, and they ride back to Wolf Hall with the reins slack on the necks of their mounts. Tomorrow his wife and two sisters will go out. These dead women, their bones long sunk in London clay, are now transmigrated. Weightless, they glide on the upper currents of the air. They pity no one. They answer to no one. Their lives are simple. When they look down they see nothing but their prey, and the borrowed plumes of the hunters: they see a flittering, flinching universe, a universe filled with their dinner.

All summer has been like this, a riot of dismemberment, fur and feather flying; the beating off and the whipping in of hounds,

Bring Up the Bodies

the coddling of tired horses, the nursing, by the gentlemen, of contusions, sprains and blisters. And for a few days at least, the sun has shone on Henry. Sometime before noon, clouds scudded in from the west and rain fell in big scented drops; but the sun re-emerged with a scorching heat, and now the sky is so clear you can see into Heaven and spy on what the saints are doing.

As they dismount, handing their horses to the grooms and waiting on the king, his mind is already moving to paperwork: to dispatches from Whitehall, galloped down by the post routes that are laid wherever the court shifts. At supper with the Seymours, he will defer to any stories his hosts wish to tell: to anything the king may venture, tousled and happy and amiable as he seems tonight. When the king has gone to bed, his working night will begin.

Though the day is over, Henry seems disinclined to go indoors. He stands looking about him, inhaling horse sweat, a broad, brick-red streak of sunburn across his forehead. Early in the day he lost his hat, so by custom all the hunting party were obliged to take off theirs. The king refused all offers of substitutes. As dusk steals over the woods and fields, servants will be out looking for the stir of the black plume against darkening grass, or the glint of his hunter's badge, a gold St Hubert with sapphire eyes.

Already you can feel the autumn. You know there will not be many more days like these; so let us stand, the horseboys of Wolf Hall swarming around us, Wiltshire and the western counties stretching into a haze of blue; let us stand, the king's hand on his shoulder, Henry's face earnest as he talks his way back through the landscape of the day, the green copses and rushing streams, the alders by the water's edge, the early haze that lifted by nine; the brief shower, the small wind that died and settled; the stillness, the afternoon heat.

'Sir, how are you not burned?' Rafe Sadler demands. A redhead like the king, he has turned a mottled, freckled pink, and even his eyes look sore. He, Thomas Cromwell, shrugs; he hangs an arm

Falcons

around Rafe's shoulders as they drift indoors. He went through the whole of Italy – the battlefield as well as the shaded arena of the counting house – without losing his London pallor. His ruffian childhood, the days on the river, the days in the fields: they left him as white as God made him. 'Cromwell has the skin of a lily,' the king pronounces. 'The only particular in which he resembles that or any other blossom.' Teasing him, they amble towards supper.

The king had left Whitehall the week of Thomas More's death, a miserable dripping week in July, the hoof prints of the royal entourage sinking deep into the mud as they tacked their way across to Windsor. Since then the progress has taken in a swathe of the western counties; the Cromwell aides, having finished up the king's business at the London end, met up with the royal train in mid-August. The king and his companions sleep sound in new houses of rosy brick, in old houses whose fortifications have crumbled away or been pulled down, and in fantasy castles like toys, castles never capable of fortification, with walls a cannonball would punch in as if they were paper. England has enjoyed fifty years of peace. This is the Tudors' covenant; peace is what they offer. Every household strives to put forward its best show for the king, and we've seen some panic-stricken plastering these last weeks, some speedy stonework, as his hosts hurry to display the Tudor rose beside their own devices. They search out and obliterate any trace of Katherine, the queen that was, smashing with hammers the pomegranates of Aragon, their splitting segments and their squashed and flying seeds. Instead – if there is no time for carving – the falcon of Anne Boleyn is crudely painted up on hatchments.

Hans has joined them on the progress, and made a drawing of Anne the queen, but it did not please her; how do you please her, these days? He has drawn Rafe Sadler, with his neat little beard and his set mouth, his fashionable hat a feathered disc balanced

Bring Up the Bodies

precariously on his cropped head. 'Made my nose very flat, Master Holbein,' Rafe says, and Hans says, 'And how, Master Sadler, is it in my power to fix your nose?'

'He broke it as a child,' he says, 'running at the ring. I picked him up myself from under the horse's feet, and a sorry bundle he was, crying for his mother.' He squeezes the boy's shoulder. 'Now, Rafe, take heart. I think you look very handsome. Remember what Hans did to me.'

Thomas Cromwell is now about fifty years old. He has a labourer's body, stocky, useful, running to fat. He has black hair, greying now, and because of his pale impermeable skin, which seems designed to resist rain as well as sun, people sneer that his father was an Irishman, though really he was a brewer and a blacksmith at Putney, a shearsman too, a man with a finger in every pie, a scrapper and brawler, a drunk and a bully, a man often hauled before the justices for punching someone, for cheating someone. How the son of such a man has achieved his present eminence is a question all Europe asks. Some say he came up with the Boleyns, the queen's family. Some say it was wholly through the late Cardinal Wolsey, his patron; Cromwell was in his confidence and made money for him and knew his secrets. Others say he haunts the company of sorcerers. He was out of the realm from boyhood, a hired soldier, a wool trader, a banker. No one knows where he has been and who he has met, and he is in no hurry to tell them. He never spares himself in the king's service, he knows his worth and merits and makes sure of his reward: offices, perquisites and title deeds, manor houses and farms. He has a way of getting his way, he has a method; he will charm a man or bribe him, coax him or threaten him, he will explain to a man where his true interests lie, and he will introduce that same man to aspects of himself he didn't know existed. Every day Master Secretary deals with grandees who, if they could, would destroy him with one vindictive swipe, as if he were a fly. Knowing this, he is distinguished by his courtesy, his calmness

Falcons

and his indefatigable attention to England's business. He is not in the habit of explaining himself. He is not in the habit of discussing his successes. But whenever good fortune has called on him, he has been there, planted on the threshold, ready to fling open the door to her timid scratch on the wood.

At home in his city house at Austin Friars, his portrait broods on the wall; he is wrapped in wool and fur, his hand clenched around a document as if he were throttling it. Hans had pushed a table back to trap him and said, Thomas, you mustn't laugh; and they had proceeded on that basis, Hans humming as he worked and he staring ferociously into the middle distance. When he saw the portrait finished he had said, 'Christ, I look like a murderer'; and his son Gregory said, didn't you know? Copies are being made for his friends, and for his admirers among the evangelicals in Germany. He will not part with the original – not now I've got used to it, he says – and so he comes into his hall to find versions of himself in various stages of becoming: a tentative outline, partly inked in. Where to begin with Cromwell? Some start with his sharp little eyes, some start with his hat. Some evade the issue and paint his seal and scissors, others pick out the turquoise ring given him by the cardinal. Wherever they begin, the final impact is the same: if he had a grievance against you, you wouldn't like to meet him at the dark of the moon. His father Walter used to say, 'My boy Thomas, give him a dirty look and he'll gouge your eye out. Trip him, and he'll cut off your leg. But if you don't cut across him, he's a very gentleman. And he'll stand anybody a drink.'

Hans has drawn the king, benign in summer silks, seated after supper with his hosts, the casements open to late birdsong, the first tapers coming in with the candied fruits. At each stage of his progress Henry stops in the principal house, with Anne the queen; his entourage beds down with the local gentlefolk. It is usual for the king's hosts, once at least in the visit, to entertain these peripheral hosts by way of thanks, which places a strain on

Bring Up the Bodies

the housekeeping arrangements. He has counted the provision carts rolling in; he has seen kitchens thrown into turmoil, and he himself has been down in the grey-green hour before dawn, when the brick ovens are swabbed out ready for the first batch of loaves, as carcasses are spitted, pots set on trivets, poultry plucked and jointed. His uncle was a cook to an archbishop, and as a child he hung about the Lambeth Palace kitchens; he knows this business inside out, and nothing about the king's comfort must be left to chance.

These days are perfect. The clear untroubled light picks out each berry shimmering in a hedge. Each leaf of a tree, the sun behind it, hangs like a golden pear. Riding westward in high summer, we have dipped into sylvan chases and crested the downs, emerging into that high country where, even across two counties, you can sense the shifting presence of the sea. In this part of England our forefathers the giants left their earthworks, their barrows and standing stones. We still have, every Englishman and woman, some drops of giant blood in our veins. In those ancient times, in a land undespoiled by sheep or plough, they hunted the wild boar and the elk. The forest stretched ahead for days. Sometimes antique weapons are unearthed: axes that, wielded with double fist, could cut down horse and rider. Think of the great limbs of those dead men, stirring under the soil. War was their nature, and war is always keen to come again. It's not just the past you think of, as you ride these fields. It's what's latent in the soil, what's breeding; it's the days to come, the wars unfought, the injuries and deaths that, like seeds, the soil of England is keeping warm. You would think, to look at Henry laughing, to look at Henry praying, to look at him leading his men through the forest path, that he sits as secure on his throne as he does on his horse. Looks can deceive. By night, he lies awake; he stares at the carved roof beams; he numbers his days. He says, 'Cromwell, Cromwell, what shall I do?' Cromwell, save me from the Emperor. Cromwell, save me from the Pope. Then

Falcons

he calls in his Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer, and demands to know, 'Is my soul damned?'

Back in London, the Emperor's ambassador, Eustache Chapuys, waits daily for news that the people of England have risen against their cruel and ungodly king. It is news that he dearly wishes to hear, and he would spend labour and hard cash to make it come true. His master, the Emperor Charles, is lord of the Low Countries as well as Spain and her lands beyond the seas; Charles is rich and, from time to time, he is angry that Henry Tudor has dared to set aside his aunt, Katherine, to marry a woman whom the people on the streets call a goggle-eyed whore. Chapuys is exhorting his master in urgent dispatches to invade England, to join with the realm's rebels, pretenders and malcontents, and to conquer this unholy island where the king by an act of Parliament has settled his own divorce and declared himself God. The Pope does not take it kindly, that he is laughed at in England and called mere 'Bishop of Rome', that his revenues are cut off and channelled into Henry's coffers. A bull of excommunication, drawn up but not yet promulgated, hovers over Henry, making him an outcast among the Christian kings of Europe: who are invited, indeed, encouraged, to step across the Narrow Sea or the Scots border, and help themselves to anything that's his. Perhaps the Emperor will come. Perhaps the King of France will come. Perhaps they will come together. It would be pleasant to say we are ready for them, but the reality is otherwise. In the case of an armed incursion we may have to dig up the giants' bones to knock them around the head with, as we are short of ordnance, short of powder, short of steel. This is not Thomas Cromwell's fault; as Chapuys says, grimacing, Henry's kingdom would be in better order if Cromwell had been put in charge five years ago.

If you would defend England, and he would – for he would take the field himself, his sword in his hand – you must know what England is. In the August heat, he has stood bare-headed by the carved tombs of ancestors, men armoured *cap à pie* in plate

Bring Up the Bodies

and chain links, their gauntleted hands joined and perched stiffly on their surcoats, their mailed feet resting on stone lions, griffins, greyhounds: stone men, steel men, their soft wives encased beside them like snails in their shells. We think time cannot touch the dead, but it touches their monuments, leaving them snub-nosed and stub-fingered from the accidents and attrition of time. A tiny dismembered foot (as of a kneeling cherub) emerges from a swathe of drapery; the tip of a severed thumb lies on a carved cushion. 'We must get our forefathers mended next year,' the lords of the western counties say: but their shields and supporters, their achievements and bearings, are kept always paint-fresh, and in talk they embellish the deeds of their ancestors, who they were and what they held: the arms my forefather bore at Agincourt, the cup my forefather was given by John of Gaunt his own hand. If in the late wars of York and Lancaster, their fathers and grandfathers picked the wrong side, they keep quiet about it. A generation on, lapses must be forgiven, reputations remade; otherwise England cannot go forward, she will keep spiralling backwards into the dirty past.

He has no ancestors, of course: not the kind you'd boast about. There was once a noble family called Cromwell, and when he came up in the king's service the heralds had urged him for the sake of appearances to adopt their coat of arms; but I am none of theirs, he had said politely, and I do not want their achievements. He had run away from his father's fists when he was no older than fifteen; crossed the Channel, taken service in the French king's army. He had been fighting since he could walk; and if you're going to fight, why not be paid for it? There are more lucrative trades than soldiering, and he found them. So he decided not to hurry home.

And now, when his titled hosts want advice on the placement of a fountain, or a group of the Three Graces dancing, the king tells them, Cromwell here is your man; Cromwell, he has seen how they do things in Italy, and what will do for them will do for

Falcons

Wiltshire. Sometimes the king departs a place with just his riding household, the queen left behind with her ladies and musicians, as Henry and his favoured few hunt hard across the country. And that is how they come to Wolf Hall, where old Sir John Seymour is waiting to welcome them, in the midst of his flourishing family.

‘I don’t know, Cromwell,’ old Sir John says. He takes his arm, genial. ‘All these falcons named for dead women ... don’t they dishearten you?’

‘I’m never disheartened, Sir John. The world is too good to me.’

‘You should marry again, and have another family. Perhaps you will find a bride while you are with us. In the forest of Savernake there are many fresh young women.’

I still have Gregory, he says, looking back over his shoulder for his son; he is always somehow anxious about Gregory. ‘Ah,’ Seymour says, ‘boys are very well, but a man needs daughters too, daughters are a consolation. Look at Jane. Such a good girl.’

He looks at Jane Seymour, as her father directs him. He knows her well from the court, as she was lady-in-waiting to Katherine, the former queen, and to Anne, the queen that is now; she is a plain young woman with a silvery pallor, a habit of silence, and a trick of looking at men as if they represent an unpleasant surprise. She is wearing pearls, and white brocade embroidered with stiff little sprigs of carnations. He recognises considerable expenditure; leave the pearls aside, you couldn’t turn her out like that for much under thirty pounds. No wonder she moves with gingerly concern, like a child who’s been told not to spill something on herself.

The king says, ‘Jane, now we see you at home with your people, are you less shy?’ He takes her mouse-paw in his vast hand. ‘At court we never get a word from her.’

Jane is looking up at him, blushing from her neck to her hair-line. ‘Did you ever see such a blush?’ Henry asks. ‘Never unless with a little maid of twelve.’

Bring Up the Bodies

‘I cannot claim to be twelve,’ Jane says.

At supper the king sits next to Lady Margery, his hostess. She was a beauty in her day, and by the king’s exquisite attention you would think she was one still; she has had ten children, and six of them are living, and three are in this room. Edward Seymour, the heir, has a long head, a serious expression, a clean fierce profile: a handsome man. He is well-read if not scholarly, applies himself wisely to any office he is given; he has been to war, and while he is waiting to fight again he acquits himself well in the hunting field and tilt yard. The cardinal, in his day, marked him out as better than the usual run of Seymours; and he himself, Thomas Cromwell, has sounded him out and found him in every respect the king’s man. Tom Seymour, Edward’s younger brother, is noisy and boisterous and more of interest to women; when he comes into the room, virgins giggle, and young matrons dip their heads and examine him from under their lashes.

Old Sir John is a man of notorious family feeling. Two, three years back, the gossip at court was all of how he had tuppèd his son’s wife, not once in the heat of passion but repeatedly since she was a bride. The queen and her confidantes had spread the story about the court. ‘We’ve worked it out at 120 times,’ Anne had sniggered. ‘Well, Thomas Cromwell has, and he’s quick with figures. We suppose they abstained on a Sunday for shame’s sake, and eased off in Lent.’ The traitor wife gave birth to two boys, and when her conduct came to light Edward said he would not have them for his heirs, as he could not be sure if they were his sons or his half-brothers. The adulteress was locked up in a convent, and soon obliged him by dying; now he has a new wife, who cultivates a forbidding manner and keeps a bodkin in her pocket in case her father-in-law gets too close.

But it is forgiven, it is forgiven. The flesh is frail. This royal visit seals the old fellow’s pardon. John Seymour has 1,300 acres including his deer park, most of the rest under sheep and worth two shilling per acre per year, bringing him in a clear twenty-five

Falcons

per cent on what the same acreage would make under the plough. The sheep are little black-faced animals interbred with Welsh mountain stock, gristly mutton but good enough wool. When at their arrival, the king (he is in bucolic vein) says, 'Cromwell, what would that beast weigh?' he says, without picking it up, 'Thirty pounds, sir.' Francis Weston, a young courtier, says with a sneer, 'Master Cromwell used to be a shearsman. He wouldn't be wrong.'

The king says, 'We would be a poor country without our wool trade. That Master Cromwell knows the business is not to his discredit.'

But Francis Weston smirks behind his hand.

Tomorrow Jane Seymour is to hunt with the king. 'I thought it was gentlemen only,' he hears Weston whisper. 'The queen would be angry if she knew.' He murmurs, make sure she doesn't know then, there's a good boy.

'At Wolf Hall we are all great hunters,' Sir John boasts, 'my daughters too, you think Jane is timid but put her in the saddle and I assure you, sirs, she is the goddess Diana. I never troubled my girls in the schoolroom, you know. Sir James here taught them all they needed.'

The priest at the foot of the table nods, beaming: an old fool with a white poll, a bleared eye. He, Cromwell, turns to him: 'And was it you taught them to dance, Sir James? All praise to you. I have seen Jane's sister Elizabeth at court, partnered with the king.'

'Ah, they had a master for that,' old Seymour chuckles. 'Master for dancing, master for music, that's enough for them. They don't want foreign tongues. They're not going anywhere.'

'I think otherwise, sir,' he says. 'I had my daughters taught equal with my son.'

Sometimes he likes to talk about them, Anne and Grace: gone seven years now. Tom Seymour laughs. 'What, you had them in the tilt yard with Gregory and young Master Sadler?'

Bring Up the Bodies

He smiles. 'Except for that.'

Edward Seymour says, 'It is not uncommon for the daughters of a city household to learn their letters and a little beyond. You might have wanted them in the counting house. One hears of it. It would help them get good husbands, a merchant family would be glad of their training.'

'Imagine Master Cromwell's daughters,' Weston says. 'I dare not. I doubt a counting house could contain them. They would be a shrewd hand with a poleaxe, you would think. One look at them and a man's legs would go from under him. And I do not mean he would be stricken with love.'

Gregory stirs himself. He is such a dreamer you hardly think he has been following the conversation, but his tone is rippling with hurt. 'You insult my sisters and their memory, sir, and you never knew them. My sister Grace ...'

He sees Jane Seymour put out her little hand and touch Gregory's wrist: to save him, she will risk drawing the company's attention. 'I have lately,' she says, 'got some skill of the French tongue.'

'Have you, Jane?' Tom Seymour is smiling.

Jane dips her head. 'Mary Shelton is teaching me.'

'Mary Shelton is a kindly young woman,' the king says; and out of the corner of his eye, he sees Weston elbow his neighbour; they say Shelton has been kind to the king in bed.

'So you see,' Jane says to her brothers, 'we ladies, we do not spend all our time in idle calumny and scandal. Though God he knows, we have gossip enough to occupy a whole town of women.'

'Have you?' he says.

'We talk about who is in love with the queen. Who writes her verses.' She drops her eyes. 'I mean to say, who is in love with us all. This gentleman or that. We know all our suitors and we make inventory head to toe, they would blush if they knew. We say their acreage and how much they have a year, and then we decide

Falcons

if we will let them write us a sonnet. If we do not think they will keep us in fine style, we scorn their rhymes. It is cruel, I can tell you.'

He says, a little uneasy, it is no harm to write verses to ladies, even married ones, at court it is usual. Weston says, thank you for that kind word, Master Cromwell, we thought you might try and make us stop.

Tom Seymour leans forward, laughing. 'And who are your suitors, Jane?'

'If you want to know that, you must put on a gown, and take up your needlework, and come and join us.'

'Like Achilles among the women,' the king says. 'You must shave your fine beard, Seymour, and go and find out their lewd little secrets.' He is laughing, but he is not happy. 'Unless we find someone more maidenly for the task. Gregory, you are a pretty fellow, but I fear your great hands will give you away.'

'The blacksmith's grandson,' Weston says.

'That child Mark,' the king says. 'The musician, you know him? There is a smooth girlish countenance.'

'Oh,' Jane says, 'Mark's with us anyway. He's always loitering. We barely count him a man. If you want to know our secrets, ask Mark.'

The conversation canters off in some other direction; he thinks, I have never known Jane have anything to say for herself; he thinks, Weston is goading me, he knows that in Henry's presence I will not give him a check; he imagines what form the check may take, when he delivers it. Rafe Sadler looks at him out of the tail of his eye.

'So,' the king says to him, 'how will tomorrow be better than today?' To the supper table he explains, 'Master Cromwell cannot sleep unless he is amending something.'

'I will reform the conduct of Your Majesty's hat. And those clouds, before noon –'

'We wanted the shower. The rain cooled us.'

Bring Up the Bodies

‘God send Your Majesty no worse a drenching,’ says Edward Seymour.

Henry rubs his stripe of sunburn. ‘The cardinal, he reckoned he could change the weather. A good enough morning, he would say, but by ten it will be brighter. And it was.’

Henry does this sometimes; drops Wolsey’s name into conversation, as if it were not he, but some other monarch, who had hounded the cardinal to death.

‘Some men have a weather eye,’ Tom Seymour says. ‘That’s all it is, sir. It’s not special to cardinals.’

Henry nods, smiling. ‘That’s true, Tom. I should never have stood in awe of him, should I?’

‘He was too proud, for a subject,’ old Sir John says.

The king looks down the table at him, Thomas Cromwell. He loved the cardinal. Everyone here knows it. His expression is as carefully blank as a freshly painted wall.

After supper, old Sir John tells the story of Edgar the Peaceable. He was the ruler in these parts, many hundreds of years ago, before kings had numbers: when all maids were fair maids and all knights were gallant and life was simple and violent and usually brief. Edgar had in mind a bride for himself, and sent one of his earls to appraise her. The earl, who was both false and cunning, sent back word that her beauty had been much exaggerated by poets and painters; seen in real life, he said, she had a limp and a squint. His aim was to have the tender damsel for himself, and so he seduced and married her. Upon discovering the earl’s treachery Edgar ambushed him, in a grove not far from here, and rammed a javelin into him, killing him with one blow.

‘What a false knave he was, that earl!’ says the king. ‘He was paid out.’

‘Call him rather a churl than an earl,’ Tom Seymour says.

His brother sighs, as if distancing himself from the remark.

Falcons

‘And what did the lady say?’ he asks; he, Cromwell. ‘When she found the earl skewered?’

‘The damsel married Edgar,’ Sir John says. ‘They married in the greenwood, and lived happily ever after.’

‘I suppose she had no choice,’ Lady Margery sighs. ‘Women have to adapt themselves.’

‘And the country folk say,’ Sir John adds, ‘that the false earl walks the woods still, groaning, and trying to pull the lance out of his belly.’

‘Just imagine,’ Jane Seymour says. ‘Any night there is a moon, one might look out of the window and see him, tugging away and complaining all the while. Fortunately I do not believe in ghosts.’

‘More fool you, sister,’ Tom Seymour says. ‘They’ll creep up on you, my lass.’

‘Still,’ Henry says. He mimes a javelin throw: though in the restrained way one must, at a supper table. ‘One clean blow. He must have had a good throwing arm, King Edgar.’

He says – he, Cromwell: ‘I should like to know if this tale is written down, and if so, by whom, and was he on oath.’

The king says, ‘Cromwell would have had the earl before a judge and jury.’

‘Bless Your Majesty,’ Sir John chuckles, ‘I don’t think they had them in those days.’

‘Cromwell would have found one out.’ Young Weston leans forward to make his point. ‘He would dig out a jury, he would grub one from a mushroom patch. Then it would be all up with the earl, they would try him and march him out and hack off his head. They say that at Thomas More’s trial, Master Secretary here followed the jury to their deliberations, and when they were seated he closed the door behind him and he laid down the law. “Let me put you out of doubt,” he said to the jurymen. “Your task is to find Sir Thomas guilty, and you will have no dinner till you have done it.” Then out he went and shut the door again and stood outside it with a hatchet in his hand, in case they broke out

Bring Up the Bodies

in search of a boiled pudding; and being Londoners, they care about their bellies above all things, and as soon as they felt them rumbling they cried, “Guilty! He is as guilty as guilty can be!”

Eyes focus on him, Cromwell. Rafe Sadler, by his side, is tense with displeasure. ‘It is a pretty tale,’ Rafe tells Weston, ‘but I ask you in turn, where is it written down? I think you will find my master is always correct in his dealings with a court of law.’

‘You weren’t there,’ Francis Weston says. ‘I heard it from one of those same jurymen. They cried, “Away with him, take out the traitor and bring us in a leg of mutton.” And Thomas More was led to his death.’

‘You sound as if you regret it,’ Rafe says.

‘Not I.’ Weston holds up his hands. ‘Anne the queen says, let More’s death be a warning to all such traitors. Be their credit never so great, their treason never so veiled, Thomas Cromwell will find them out.’

There is a murmur of assent; for a moment, he thinks the company will turn to him and applaud. Then Lady Margery touches a finger to her lips, and nods towards the king. Seated at the head of the table, he has begun to incline to the right; his closed eyelids flutter, and his breathing is easeful and deep.

The company exchange smiles. ‘Drunk with fresh air,’ Tom Seymour whispers.

It makes a change from drunk with drink; the king, these days, calls for the wine jug more often than he did in his lean and sporting youth. He, Cromwell, watches as Henry tilts in his chair. First forward, as if to rest his forehead on the table. Then he starts and jerks backwards. A line of drool trickles down his beard.

This would be the moment for Harry Norris, the chief among the privy chamber gentlemen; Harry with his noiseless tread and his soft unjudging hand, murmuring his sovereign back to wakefulness. But Norris has gone across country, carrying the king’s love letter to Anne. So what to do? Henry does not look like a tired child, as five years ago he might have done. He looks like

Falcons

any man in mid-life, lapsed into torpor after too heavy a meal; he looks bloated and puffy, and a vein is burst here and there, and even by candlelight you can see that his faded hair is greying. He, Cromwell, nods to young Weston. 'Francis, your gentlemanly touch is required.'

Weston pretends not to hear him. His eyes are on the king and his face wears an unguarded expression of distaste. Tom Seymour whispers, 'I think we should make a noise. To wake him naturally.'

'What sort of noise?' his brother Edward mouths.

Tom mimes holding his ribs.

Edward's eyebrows shoot up. 'You laugh if you dare. He'll think you're laughing at his drooling.'

The king begins to snore. He lurches to the left. He tilts dangerously over the arm of his chair.

Weston says, 'You do it, Cromwell. No man so great with him as you are.'

He shakes his head, smiling.

'God save His Majesty,' says Sir John, piously. 'He's not as young as he was.'

Jane rises. A stiff rustle from the carnation sprigs. She leans over the king's chair and taps the back of his hand: briskly, as if she were testing a cheese. Henry jumps and his eyes flick open. 'I wasn't asleep,' he says. 'Really. I was just resting my eyes.'

When the king has gone upstairs, Edward Seymour says, 'Master Secretary, time for my revenge.'

Leaning back, glass in hand: 'What I have done to you?'

'A game of chess. Calais. I know you remember.'

Late autumn, the year 1532: the night the king first went to bed with the queen that is now. Before she lay down for him Anne made him swear an oath on the Bible, that he would marry her as soon as they were back on English soil; but the storms trapped them in port, and the king made good use of the time, trying to get a son on her.

Bring Up the Bodies

‘You checkmated me, Master Cromwell,’ Edward says. ‘But only because you distracted me.’

‘How did I?’

‘You asked me about my sister Jane. Her age, and so on.’

‘You thought I was interested in her.’

‘And are you?’ Edward smiles, to take the edge off the crude question. ‘She is not spoken for yet, you know.’

‘Set up the pieces,’ he says. ‘Would you like the board aligned as it was when you lost your train of thought?’

Edward looks at him, carefully expressionless. Incredible things are related of Cromwell’s memory. He smiles to himself. He could set up the board, with only a little guesswork; he knows the type of game a man like Seymour plays. ‘We should begin afresh,’ he suggests. ‘The world moves on. You are happy with Italian rules? I don’t like these contests that drag out for a week.’

Their opening moves see some boldness on Edward’s part. But then, a white pawn poised between his fingertips, Seymour leans back in his chair, frowning, and takes it into his head to talk about St Augustine; and from St Augustine moves to Martin Luther. ‘It is a teaching that brings terror to the heart,’ he says. ‘That God would make us only to damn us. That his poor creatures, except some few of them, are born only for a struggle in this world and then eternal fire. Sometimes I fear it is true. But I find I hope it is not.’

‘Fat Martin has modified his position. Or so I hear. And to our comfort.’

‘What, more of us are saved? Or our good works are not entirely useless in God’s sight?’

‘I should not speak for him. You should read Philip Melanchthon. I will send you his new book. I hope he will visit us in England. We are talking to his people.’

Edward presses the pawn’s little round head to his lips. He looks as if he might tap his teeth with it. ‘Will the king allow that?’

Falcons

‘He would not let in Brother Martin himself. He does not like his name mentioned. But Philip is an easier man, and it would be good for us, it would be very good for us, if we were to come into some helpful alliance with the German princes who favour the gospel. It would give the Emperor a fright, if we had friends and allies in his own domains.’

‘And that is all it means to you?’ Edward’s knight is skipping over the squares. ‘Diplomacy?’

‘I cherish diplomacy. It’s cheap.’

‘Yet they say you love the gospel yourself.’

‘It is no secret.’ He frowns. ‘Do you really mean to do that, Edward? I see my way to your queen. And I should not like to take advantage of you again, and have you say I spoiled your game with small talk about the state of your soul.’

A skewed smile. ‘And how is your queen these days?’

‘Anne? She is at outs with me. I feel my head wobble on my shoulders when she stares at me hard. She has heard that once or twice I spoke favourably of Katherine, the queen that was.’

‘And did you?’

‘Only to admire her spirit. Which, anyone must admit, is steadfast in adversity. And again, the queen thinks I am too favourable to the Princess Mary – I mean to say, to Lady Mary, as we should call her now. The king loves his elder daughter still, he says he cannot help it – and it grieves Anne, because she wants the Princess Elizabeth to be the only daughter he knows. She thinks we are too soft towards Mary and that we should tax her to admit her mother was never married lawfully to the king, and that she is a bastard.’

Edward twiddles the white pawn in his fingers, looks at it dubiously, sets it down on its square. ‘But is that not the state of affairs? I thought you had made her acknowledge it already.’

‘We solve the question by not raising it. She knows she is put out of the succession, and I do not think I should force her beyond a point. As the Emperor is Katherine’s nephew and Lady

Bring Up the Bodies

Mary's cousin, I try not to provoke him. Charles holds us in the palm of his hand, do you see? But Anne does not understand the need to placate people. She thinks if she speaks sweetly to Henry, that is enough to do.'

'Whereas you must speak sweetly to Europe.' Edward laughs. His laugh has a rusty sound. His eyes say, you are being very frank, Master Cromwell: why?

'Besides,' his fingers hover over the black knight, 'I am grown too great for the queen's liking, since the king made me his deputy in church affairs. She hates Henry to listen to anyone but herself and her brother George and Monseigneur her father, and even her father gets the rough side of her tongue, and gets called lily-liver and timewaster.'

'How does he take that?' Edward looks down at the board. 'Oh.'

'Now take a careful look,' he urges. 'Do you want to play it out?'

'I resign. I think.' A sigh. 'Yes. I resign.'

He, Cromwell, sweeps the pieces aside, stifling a yawn. 'And I never mentioned your sister Jane, did I? So what's your excuse now?'

When he goes upstairs he sees Rafe and Gregory jumping around near the great window. They are capering and scuffling, eyes on something invisible at their feet. At first he thinks they are playing football without a ball. But then they leap up like dancers and back-heel the thing, and he sees that it is long and thin, a fallen man. They lean down to tweak and jab, to apply torsion. 'Ease off,' Gregory says, 'don't snap his neck yet, I need to see him suffer.'

Rafe looks up, and affects to wipe his brow. Gregory rests hands on knees, getting his breath back, then nudges the victim with his foot. 'This is Francis Weston. You think he is helping put the king to bed, but in fact we have him here in ghostly form. We stood around a corner and waited for him with a magic net.'

Falcons

‘We are punishing him,’ Rafe leans down. ‘Ho, sir, are you sorry now?’ He spits on his palms. ‘What next with him, Gregory?’

‘Haul him up and out the window with him.’

‘Careful,’ he says. ‘The king favours Weston.’

‘Then he’ll favour him when he’s got a flat head,’ Rafe says. They scuffle and push each other out of the way, trying to be the first to stamp Francis flat. Rafe opens a window and both stoop for leverage, hoisting the phantom across the sill. Gregory helps it over, unsnagging its jacket where it catches, and with one shove drops it head first on the cobbles. They peer out after it. ‘He bounces,’ Rafe observes, and then they dust off their hands, smiling at him. ‘Give you good night, sir,’ Rafe says.

Later, Gregory sits at the foot of the bed in his shirt, his hair tousled, his shoes kicked off, one bare foot idly scuffing the matting: ‘So am I to be married? Am I to be married to Jane Seymour?’

‘Early in the summer you thought I was going to marry you to an old dowager with a deer park.’ People tease Gregory: Rafe Sadler, Thomas Wriothesley, the other young men of his house; his cousin, Richard Cromwell.

‘Yes, but why were you talking to her brother this last hour? First it was chess then it was talk, talk, talk. They say you liked Jane yourself.’

‘When?’

‘Last year. You liked her last year.’

‘If I did I’ve forgot.’

‘George Boleyn’s wife told me. Lady Rochford. She said, you may get a young stepmother from Wolf Hall, what will you think of that? So if you like Jane yourself,’ Gregory frowns, ‘she had better not be married to me.’

‘Do you think I’d steal your bride? Like old Sir John?’

Once his head is on the pillow, he says, ‘Hush, Gregory.’ He closes his eyes. Gregory is a good boy, though all the Latin he has

Bring Up the Bodies

learned, all the sonorous periods of the great authors, have rolled through his head and out again, like stones. Still, you think of Thomas More's boy: offspring of a scholar all Europe admired, and poor young John can barely stumble through his Pater Noster. Gregory is a fine archer, a fine horseman, a shining star in the tilt yard, and his manners cannot be faulted. He speaks reverently to his superiors, not scuffling his feet or standing on one leg, and he is mild and polite with those below him. He knows how to bow to foreign diplomats in the manner of their own countries, sits at table without fidgeting or feeding spaniels, can neatly carve and joint any fowl if requested to serve his elders. He doesn't slouch around with his jacket off one shoulder, or look in windows to admire himself, or stare around in church, or interrupt old men, or finish their stories for them. If anyone sneezes, he says, 'Christ help you!'

Christ help you, sir or madam.

Gregory raises his head. 'Thomas More,' he says. 'The jury. Is that truly what happened?'

He had recognised young Weston's story: in a broad sense, even if he didn't assent to the detail. He closes his eyes. 'I didn't have a hatchet,' he says.

He is tired: he speaks to God; he says: God guide me. Sometimes when he is on the verge of sleep the cardinal's large scarlet presence flits across his inner eye. He wishes the dead man would prophesy. But his old patron speaks only of domestic matters, office matters. Where did I put that letter from the Duke of Norfolk? he will ask the cardinal; and next day, early, it will come to his hand.

He speaks inwardly: not to Wolsey, but to George Boleyn's wife. 'I have no wish to marry. I have no time. I was happy with my wife but Liz is dead and that part of my life is dead with her. Who in the name of God gave you, Lady Rochford, a licence to speculate about my intentions? Madam, I have no time for wooing. I am fifty. At my age, one would be the loser on a

Falcons

long-term contract. If I want a woman, best to rent one by the hour.’

Yet he tries not to say ‘at my age’: not in his waking life. On a good day he thinks he has twenty years left. He often thinks he will see Henry out, though strictly it is not allowed to have that kind of thought; there is a law against speculating about the term of the king’s life, though Henry has been a life-long student of inventive ways to die. There have been several hunting accidents. When he was still a minor the council forbade him to joust, but he did it anyway, face hidden by his helmet and his armour without device, proving himself again and again the strongest man on the field. In battle against the French he has taken the honours, and his nature, as he often mentions, is warlike; no doubt he would be known as Henry the Valiant, except Thomas Cromwell says he can’t afford a war. Cost is not the whole consideration: what becomes of England if Henry dies? He was twenty years married to Katherine, this autumn it will be three with Anne, nothing to show but a daughter with each and a churchyard’s worth of dead babies, some half-formed and christened in blood, some born alive but dead within hours, within days, within weeks at most. All the turmoil, the scandal, to make the second marriage, and still. Still Henry has no son to follow him. He has a bastard, Harry Duke of Richmond, a fine boy of sixteen: but what use to him is a bastard? What use is Anne’s child, the infant Elizabeth? Some special mechanism may have to be created so Harry Richmond can reign, if anything but good should come to his father. He, Thomas Cromwell, stands very well with the young duke; but this dynasty, still new as kingship goes, is not secure enough to survive such a course. The Plantagenets were kings once and they think they will kings be again; they think the Tudors are an interlude. The old families of England are restless and ready to press their claim, especially since Henry broke with Rome; they bow the knee, but they are plotting. He can almost hear them, hidden among the trees.

Bring Up the Bodies

You may find a bride in the forest, old Seymour had said. When he closes his eyes she slides behind them, veiled in cobwebs and splashed with dew. Her feet are bare, entwined in roots, her feather hair flies into the branches; her finger, beckoning, is a curled leaf. She points to him, as sleep overtakes him. His inner voice mocks him now: you thought you were going to get a holiday at Wolf Hall. You thought there would be nothing to do here except the usual business, war and peace, famine, traitorous connivance; a failing harvest, a stubborn populace; plague ravaging London, and the king losing his shirt at cards. You were prepared for that.

At the edge of his inner vision, behind his closed eyes, he senses something in the act of becoming. It will arrive with morning light; something shifting and breathing, its form disguised in a copse or grove.

Before he sleeps he thinks of the king's hat on a midnight tree, roosting like a bird from paradise.

Next day, so as not to tire the ladies, they cut short the day's sport, and return early to Wolf Hall.

For him, it is a chance to put off his riding clothes and get among the dispatches. He has hopes that the king will sit for an hour and listen to what he needs to tell him. But Henry says, 'Lady Jane, will you walk in the garden with me?'

She is at once on her feet; but frowning, as if trying to make sense of it. Her lips move, she all but repeats his words: Walk ... Jane? ... In the garden?

Oh yes, of course, honoured. Her hand, a petal, hovers above his sleeve; then it descends, and flesh grazes embroidery.

There are three gardens at Wolf Hall, and they call them the great paled garden, the old lady's garden and the young lady's garden. When he asks who they were, no one remembers; the old lady and the young lady are dust long ago, no difference between them now. He remembers his dream: the bride made of root fibre, the bride made of mould.

Falcons

He reads. He writes. Something tugs at his attention. He gets up and glances from the window at the walks below. The panes are small and there is a wobble in the glass, so he has to crane his neck to get a proper view. He thinks, I could send my glaziers down, help the Seymours get a clearer idea of the world. He has a team of Hollanders who work for him at his various properties. They worked for the cardinal before him.

Henry and Jane are walking below. Henry is a massive figure and Jane is like a little jointed puppet, her head not up to the king's shoulders. A broad man, a high man, Henry dominates any room; he would do it even if God had not given him the gift of kingship.

Now Jane is behind a bush. Henry is nodding at her; he is speaking at her; he is impressing something on her, and he, Cromwell, watches, scratching his chin: is the king's head becoming bigger? Is that possible, in mid-life?

Hans will have noticed, he thinks, I'll ask him when I get back to London. Most likely I am under a mistake; probably it's just the glass.

Clouds are coming up. A heavy raindrop hits the pane; he blinks; the drop spreads, widens, trickles against the glazing bars. Jane bobs out into his sightline. Henry has her hand clamped firmly on his arm, trapping it with his other hand. He can see the king's mouth, still moving.

He resumes his seat. He reads that the builders working on the fortifications in Calais have downed tools and are demanding sixpence a day. That his new green velvet coat is coming down to Wiltshire by the next courier. That a Medici cardinal has been poisoned by his own brother. He yawns. He reads that hoarders on the Isle of Thanet are deliberately driving up the price of grain. Personally, he would hang hoarders, but the chief of them might be some little lordling who is promoting famine for fat profit, and so you have to tread carefully. Two years ago, at Southwark, seven Londoners were crushed to death in fighting for a dole of

Bring Up the Bodies

bread. It is a shame to England that the king's subjects should starve. He takes up his pen and makes a note.

Very soon – this is not a big house, you can hear everything – he hears a door below, and the king's voice, and a soft hum of solicitation around him ... wet feet, Majesty? He hears Henry's heavy tread approaching, but it seems Jane has melted away without a sound. No doubt her mother and her sisters have swept her aside, to hear all the king said to her.

As Henry comes in behind him, he pushes back his chair to rise. Henry waves a hand: carry on. 'Majesty, the Muscovites have taken three hundred miles of Polish territory. They say fifty thousand men are dead.'

'Oh,' Henry says.

'I hope they spare the libraries. The scholars. There are very fine scholars in Poland.'

'Mm? I hope so too.'

He returns to his dispatches. Plague in town and city ... the king is always very fearful of infection ... Letters from foreign rulers, wishing to know if it is true that Henry is planning to cut off the heads of all his bishops. Certainly not, he notes, we have excellent bishops now, all of them conformable to the king's wishes, all of them recognising him as head of the church in England; besides, what an uncivil question! How dare they imply that the King of England should account for himself to any foreign power? How dare they impugn his sovereign judgement? Bishop Fisher, it is true, is dead, and Thomas More, but Henry's treatment of them, before they drove him to an extremity, was mild to a fault; if they had not evinced a traitorous stubbornness, they would be alive now, alive like you and me.

He has written a lot of these letters, since July. He doesn't sound wholly convincing, even to himself; he finds himself repeating the same points, rather than advancing the argument into new territory. He needs new phrases ... Henry stumps about behind him. 'Majesty, the Imperial ambassador Chapuys

Falcons

asks may he ride up-country to visit your daughter, Lady Mary?’

‘No,’ Henry says.

He writes to Chapuys, *Wait, just wait, till I am back in London, when all will be arranged ...*

No word from the king: just breathing, pacing, a creak from a cupboard where he rests and leans on it.

‘Majesty, I hear the Lord Mayor of London scarcely leaves his house, he is so afflicted by migraine.’

‘Mm?’ Henry says.

‘They are bleeding him. Is that what Your Majesty would advise?’

A pause. Henry focuses on him, with some effort. ‘Bleeding him, I’m sorry, for what?’

This is strange. Much as he hates news of plague, Henry always enjoys hearing of other people’s minor ailments. Admit to a snuffle or a colic, and he will make up a herbal potion with his own hands, and stand over you while you swallow it.

He puts down his pen. Turns to look his monarch in the face. It is clear that Henry’s mind is back in the garden. The king is wearing an expression he has seen before, though on beast, rather than man. He looks stunned, like a veal calf knocked on the head by the butcher.

It is to be their last night at Wolf Hall. He comes down very early, his arms full of papers. Someone is up before him. Stock-still in the great hall, a pale presence in the milky light, Jane Seymour is dressed in her stiff finery. She does not turn her head to acknowledge him, but she sees him from the tail of her eye.

If he had any feeling for her, he cannot find traces of it now. The months run away from you like a flurry of autumn leaves bowling and skittering towards the winter; the summer has gone, Thomas More’s daughter has got his head back off London Bridge and is keeping it, God knows, in a dish or bowl, and

Bring Up the Bodies

saying her prayers to it. He is not the same man he was last year, and he doesn't acknowledge that man's feelings; he is starting afresh, always new thoughts, new feelings. Jane, he begins to say, you'll be able to get out of your best gown, will you be glad to see us on the road ...?

Jane is facing front, like a sentry. The clouds have blown away overnight. We may have one more fine day. The early sun touches the fields, rosy. Night vapours disperse. The forms of trees swim into particularity. The house is waking up. Unstalled horses tread and whinny. A back door slams. Footsteps creak above them. Jane hardly seems to breathe. No rise and fall discernible, of that flat bosom. He feels he should walk backwards, withdraw, fade back into the night, and leave her here in the moment she occupies: looking out into England.

