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Not a Drop of Doubtful Royal Blood

In early September 1497, two Italian ambassadors left London and, accompanied by a group of English dignitaries and a heavily armed escort in the quartered white-and-green Tudor livery, headed west along the Thames Valley and into Oxfordshire. One was the secretary of the duke of Milan Ludovico Sforza, the other a special envoy from the republic of Venice. The previous June, both men had set out from Italy on the long journey north. Crossing the Alps into the lands of Maximilian, the Holy Roman Emperor, they made their ways along the broad expanse of the Rhine – the river's toll-booths clotted with mercantile traffic and the roads, with their laden mule-trains, just as bad – through the rich trading centres of Speyer and Cologne and west, into the broad river delta of the Low Countries, northern Europe's financial and commercial heart, the patchwork territories ruled over by Maximilian's young, precocious son, Archduke Philip of Burgundy.[1] Meeting in the teeming port-city of Antwerp, the ambassadors swapped notes.

Three years previously, the duke of Milan had allied himself with Charles VIII of France, hoping to harness the might of Europe's most powerful country in the warring that had re-erupted between Italy's city-states. As contemporaries put it, 'he turned a lion loose in his house to catch a mouse'. Aiming to conquer the Spanish-ruled kingdom of Naples, the French army swept down the peninsula, igniting terror, pestilence – a ghastly new venereal disease called syphilis – and revolution. Desperate to halt France's seemingly inexorable advance, Italian states and European powers had overcome their mutual antagonism to form a coalition, a Holy League brokered by the pope,

Alexander VI. The English king Henry VII's inclusion in the coalition was critical to its success, for with its own claims to the French crown, England could menace France's exposed northern border from across the Channel. A dutiful son of the church, Henry had joined the League and France had indeed retreated. But in the face of exhortations to go further, Henry was resolute. He had invaded France once already, five years previously, and the consequences had been disastrous. He was not about to do so again.

The other members of the Holy League were not to be put off so easily. Together with a stream of other European diplomats beating a petitioning path to the English king's door were Sforza's secretary, Raimondo da Soncino, and the Venetian envoy Andrea Trevisano.[2] They had other business, too. As one of England's biggest trading partners, Venice sent galleys packed with wines, spices, silks and other commodities, carrying away English wool and cloth for processing and selling in its vast textile industry in return. It was keen to cement economic and political relations with this English king who, it was rumoured, was enormously rich. He was also, they had heard, in trouble. As all Europe knew, Henry had had his problems. In recent years, his reign had been menaced by a pretender to the throne, a ghost of the English civil wars, who was still at large.

On 22 July, Soncino and Trevisano reached the Flemish city of Bruges. There, amid its canals, markets and counting-houses, they stopped and waited.[3]

The onward journey looked precarious. Their road west to the English enclave of Calais lay through the militarized borderlands of Flanders, over which France and Burgundy had struggled for decades. As it periodically tended to be, the road was closed and reports flooded in of roaming gangs of Frenchmen, plundering and looting.

The ambassadors had also been receiving regular updates from England, dispatches sent via the letter-bags couriered from the London branches of Italian merchant-banks back to their continental headquarters. In these dispatches, rumour and counter-rumour mingled. That June, there had been an uprising against Henry VII. Twenty thousand men had marched the length of the country – from the north, perhaps, or the far southwest – on London, demanding the surrender of the king and his close counsellors, and the king had been

beaten and had fled. Then again, a great battle had been fought outside the city, and the king had won. Meanwhile, there was war in the north. The king of Scotland had invaded England – or perhaps it was Henry doing the invading, his armies advancing in the other direction. Throughout the dispatches, one name was mentioned over and over again: that of Richard duke of York, the 'White Rose' who, many claimed, was the younger of the two princes in the Tower, the sons of the Yorkist king Edward IV, otherwise missing, presumed dead. 'Some say', one dispatch hedged, that the duke of York was in England, 'but no one knew for sure'. One thing alone was certain, it continued. Catastrophe would soon befall England.[4]

By early August Soncino and Trevisano had made it to Calais, accompanied by a detachment of English soldiers. There they waited for the unseasonal storms to abate and for the commander of Calais to check the coast was clear of pirates, before making the short journey across the English Channel. At Dover, a royal reception awaited them: progressing through Kent, they entered London accompanied by two senior officials sent by King Henry himself, and a troop of two hundred horsemen. Days later, summoned by the king, they journeyed to Oxford, where they overnighted in the students' colleges; then, the following morning, they made the short journey to the royal manor of Woodstock, where the king's household was in residence for the summer.[5]

Approaching the house across rolling parkland well stocked with game, the ambassadors were escorted through gatehouses freshly painted with red roses, portcullises, greyhounds and rougedragons, the heraldic devices of Henry VII's dynasty. Dismounting, they were led deep into the house, through a succession of galleries and richly decorated apartments, to a 'small chamber'. At the far end of this room, hung with exquisite tapestry, were a cluster of advisers in their robes of estate – silks and satins of crimson and purple, trimmed with fur and ermine – among them leading members of the nobility, including six bishops, 'lords spiritual'. In their midst stood the king.

What the ambassadors noted first was his stillness, standing, fingertips resting lightly on the gilt chair beside him. As they approached, bowing and scraping, the details came into focus. Spare, high-cheekboned, with dark hair faintly greying around the temples, Henry VII

was dressed in a long violet, gold-lined cloak and, around his neck, a collar comprising four rows of 'great pearls' and many other jewels. On his head he wore a black felt cap studded with a pear-shaped pearl which, said Soncino fascinatedly, 'seemed to me something most rich'. As the ambassadors delivered their diplomatic orations, carefully turned in the most fashionable Ciceronian Latin, the king's eyes, small, blue and penetrating, remained fixed on them.[6]

Only when they had finished did Henry stir. Turning aside to a small group of counsellors, he conferred with them intently. A man then stepped forward to give a Latin speech in reply: the king's wizened éminence grise, instantly recognizable in his scarlet robes – the chancellor and archbishop of Canterbury, Cardinal John Morton. Also by the king's side was Prince Arthur, his first-born son and heir. Soncino studied him keenly: this was the boy in whom the future of the English dynasty lay and who was due to marry Catherine, daughter of the Spanish monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella – a sweetener, they hoped, which would induce Henry to ally with them in war against France. The betrothal ceremony, the heart of a new Anglo-Spanish treaty, had been performed only the previous month. With Catherine, aged twelve, still in Spain, the corpulent Spanish ambassador Rodrigo de Puebla had stood in for her. Prince Arthur himself was a year younger but, thought Soncino, tall for his age and of 'singular beauty and grace'. While his father spoke little, the prince was eloquent, 'very ready' in speaking Latin in front of the assembled dignitaries – 'a distinguished son-in-law' for the Catholic monarchs, Soncino opined.[7]

Following the exchange of orations and diplomatic compliments, the ambassadors kissed the hands of Henry and the prince. After dining in state – with 'four lords', said Trevisano, impressed – they were led further into the house, to a smaller, more private room for a confidential chat with the king, servants hovering discreetly in the background. The king talked with deliberation in clear, fluent French, fully in control. As the conversation progressed, the ambassadors, who had come to brief him on Italian affairs, were astonished. He seemed to know all the news even before they had told him: indeed, Soncino reported to his master Sforza that Henry spoke about him

as if with the knowledge of an old, familiar friend – except that the two had never met. The ambassadors concurred that the king was wise, 'gracious' and 'grave' with a 'wonderful presence', everything a king should be. 'He evidently has', Soncino concluded, 'a most quiet spirit.'

Before their departure, the ambassadors had time to pay their respects to the queen, Elizabeth. They found her in a small hall, surrounded by ladies and gentlewomen, dressed in cloth-of-gold that offset her mass of strawberry-blonde hair – 'a handsome woman', Trevisano remarked. At her side were the king's mother Lady Margaret Beaufort, a diminutive, sharp-eyed presence, and a six-year-old boy. That Henry and Elizabeth's second son merited barely a footnote in the ambassadors' dispatches was hardly surprising. After all, they could hardly have foreseen the events that would eventually lead him to the English throne.

The Italians were whisked away back to Oxford, where they were 'lavishly entertained' at the king's personal command, and then to London, to await the court's return later that autumn. The whole visit had gone smoothly, and the ambassadors had been flattered, charmed and impressed. The only sign that anything was untoward was the uncharacteristic brevity of their visit to Woodstock.

In fact, the rumours heard by the ambassadors had been true. Fourteen ninety-seven was proving a terrible year for Henry VII. Two months before, thousands of Cornishmen, in protest against swingeing taxation and corrupt officialdom, had swarmed through southern England and had almost reached London's gates, before being defeated at Blackheath. Now, Henry was preparing for what he hoped would be the endgame to another, far more protracted episode. Massing in the grounds at Woodstock, out of sight of the ambassadors' diplomatic visit, were thousands of troops, men and materiel. Throughout his summer hunting and hawking, Henry had been waiting for this spectre to make his rumoured appearance, and indeed, a week after the ambassadors had returned to London, news arrived from the far southwest. A ship bearing the youth who claimed to be Richard duke of York had landed in Cornwall, and he was now marching towards Henry to claim his throne. It was twelve years, almost to the day, since

Henry had won his kingdom, and he had barely had a moment's peace.[8]

At Westminster in autumn 1485, the new regime was moving in. An army of craftsmen set about carving and painting its badges and arms on walls and roofs, moulding them on ceilings and glazing scutcheons in windows. In London, Lady Margaret renovated the sprawling Thamesside house of Coldharbour, which her son had presented to her. In it, she installed the eighteen-year-old Elizabeth of York, the daughter of Edward IV and Elizabeth Woodville, whose impending marriage to Henry lay at the heart of England's new political settlement. As Henry courted his future wife – chaperoned by her future mother-in-law – he set about creating his government.[9]

Henry was determined to do things by the book. He would follow rigidly the 'due course and order of his laws', which would allow him to impose his authority swiftly and decisively, to snuff out potential trouble before it could snowball into civil conflict; and also to define and gather the 'rights and revenues' due him, in order to avoid the disaster of having to levy taxes in peacetime. He would reach for the symbols of his royal authority, from proclamations, statutes and newly minted coinage, to the pope's sanction and blessing of his reign, and the papal anathemas that rained down on his enemies. And he would maintain a magnificent household.

The royal household was the regime in microcosm, its beating heart. Below stairs it functioned unseen, a well-oiled machine. Above stairs, awe-inspiring in its spectacular, minutely ordered opulence, was its public face: the hall, and the chamber, with its procession of lobbies, antechambers, closets and galleries. The members of the household were the king's men, their loyalties to him overriding any knotty affinities to noblemen. That, at least, was the theory. During Henry VI's disastrous reign, people had seen in his dysfunctional, spendthrift, faction-riven household all that was rotten about his rule. But the Yorkists had put their house in order and Henry was determined to do the same, while adding some touches of his own. One of his first acts was to create a new French-style security force, three hundred strong: the yeomen of the guard.

At the core of his government, Henry installed his small band of loyalists, those who had proved themselves in exile, from lawyer-clergymen like the experienced Morton and the narrow-eyed Richard Fox – a visiting scholar at the University of Paris when he met Henry, who instantly saw something in him – to the veteran Lancastrian military commander John de Vere, earl of Oxford. But Henry could not rely solely on partisan political loyalties: that way disaster lay, as Richard III's rule had shown. Henry's 'new foundation' had to accommodate everybody: his Stanley relations, whose last-minute arrival at Bosworth had been crucial; those of Richard's men prepared to accept pardons; and the Woodville Yorkists. These last presented a particular problem for Henry. As their support for him rested on their loyalties to his wife-to-be – who, as Edward IV's daughter, had her own claim to the throne – their backing contained a potential threat. If Henry's claim depended on that of his wife, he could effectively be held to ransom. And he had no intention of letting that happen.

That November at Westminster, Henry's first parliament held all these strands in delicate balance. He had extended pardons to all prepared to acknowledge his rule and, at his coronation the previous month, had sworn the usual oaths to be a just king. Now, in parliament, Henry backdated his reign to the day before Bosworth. At a stroke, he had rewritten history: when the battle was fought, Henry was the king and Richard III the usurper; all those who had backed Richard were by definition traitors. If this sent a palpable tremor of unease through the commons, so too did Henry's assertion of his own claim to the throne – in which he sidestepped the delicate issues of blood and lineage and made no mention of the right of his future wife. Woodville supporters found the whole thing overcooked. Rather than citing 'many titles' in support of his claim, wrote one, surely Henry could simply find whatever 'appeared to be missing' – rather a lot, was the implication – in the person of Elizabeth of York, whom the commons petitioned him to marry.[10] Having confirmed the illegitimacy of Richard's reign, however unconvincingly, Henry married Elizabeth the following January. Days after the wedding, 'great enjoyment filled the queen'. She had fallen pregnant.[11]

Henry, it seems, always knew the child would be a son. Invoking the mythical British king from whom both Lancaster and York had

liked to trace their descent – the prophet Merlin, no less, had described King Arthur as the fruit of the union of a red king and a white queen – Henry would call his son Arthur, and he would be born in Winchester, the legendary seat of Camelot.[12] In Winchester Castle, at 1 a.m. on 20 September 1486, a squally, windswept night, Elizabeth gave birth. Her son was a month premature – but he was healthy. A *Te Deum* was sung, bonfires were lit in the streets, and yeomen of the crown galloped hard into the provinces with printed proclamations to be read aloud and affixed to church doors up and down the country.

The baby Arthur was the new dynasty incorporated. 'Joyed may we be', minstrels sang, 'Our prince to see, and roses three': red for Lancaster, white for York, and a new rose in which the two colours were intermingled, a rose both red and white.[13]

As the dynasty took its first, uncertain steps, conspiracy had already seeded itself. The signs of instability had come soon after Henry's arrival in London. That September, the sweating sickness, a strange and virulent disease causing 'pain as never was suffered before' – and brought, it was widely believed, by the new king's army – had decimated the city's population. Rumour and ill portents were rife. As one correspondent, writing to his master from court in the wake of Henry's first parliament, noted anxiously, there was 'much running among the lords, but no-one knows what it is. It is said that all is not well among them.'[14] In spring 1486, news came from the heartlands of the old king's support in the north – 'whence all evil spreads', noted a Woodvillite chronicler with a southerner's mixture of contempt and fear – and of noble retinues assembling and arming. But as the caravan of the royal household progressed north, the rebels melted away in the face of overwhelming royal force. It was to be in the following year that Richard III's loyalists found their figurehead.[15]

John de la Pole, earl of Lincoln, was a Plantagenet. His mother was sister to both Edward IV and Richard III, and Richard had apparently named him his heir – and then Bosworth happened. Lincoln remained unreconciled to the new regime. Early in 1487, he fled to the Low Countries, to the Flemish town of Malines and the court of his

aunt, Margaret of York, duchess of Burgundy. A focus for disaffected Ricardians, Margaret hated Henry and she detested the new political settlement. The house of York, she felt, could only be restored through a 'male remnant'.

While Lincoln's own claim to the throne was reasonable, he and Margaret knew that the claim of another living Yorkist was better still. In the weeks after Bosworth, Henry's agents had arrested another nephew of Edward IV and immured him in the Tower of London. The last surviving Plantagenet prince descended in the male line, Edward earl of Warwick was a touchstone for Yorkist affections – people still provocatively wore his badge of the bear and ragged staff – and Lincoln understood the galvanizing effect of Warwick's presence at the head of any uprising. Warwick, however, was twelve years old, simple-minded, and inaccessible. Unable to get his hands on him, Lincoln conjured up another Warwick, grooming another young boy to impersonate him.[16]

With an army of German mercenaries, Lincoln sailed to Ireland, which remained a hotbed of Yorkist support, to raise more aid. There, the boy was paraded as the earl of Warwick, newly escaped from the Tower; on 24 May, Whit Sunday, he was crowned king of England in Dublin Cathedral. The following month, Lincoln's invasion force crossed the Irish Sea and landed on the Cumbrian coast, advancing south into the midlands, the child at its head. As England baked under a hot sun, Henry's disciplined, battle-hardened retinues confronted the rebels outside the Nottinghamshire village of East Stoke. Outnumbered and disordered, Lincoln's troops were massacred and Lincoln himself killed, to Henry's frustration. With Lincoln alive, Henry felt, he would have been able to get 'the bottom of his danger', the root of the conspiracy.[17] The young boy, though, was found. He was no earl of Warwick, said Henry's agents, but a fake: the son of an Oxford joiner who went by the name of Lambert Simnel. After the battle, Henry set him to work in an occupation befitting his menial status, as a spit-turner in the royal kitchens.

The battle of Stoke marked an end, of sorts. With the death of Lincoln, a genuine Yorkist contender for the throne, and a decisive victory for Henry, it seemed to draw a line under the resistance of

Richard III's supporters. But old loyalties simmered, and the aftershocks of rebellion rippled on.

In late 1491, a Breton merchant-ship had docked at the southern Irish port of Cork. Among the crew that spilled onto the quayside was a handsome, blond, sixteen-year-old boy dressed, rather incongruously for a ship's hand, in rich silks. It was here, so his confession later had it, that Perkin Warbeck, son of a boatman from the Flemish city of Tournai, was stopped by a group of renegade Yorkists who had returned to southern Ireland to try to revive the plot around the earl of Warwick. They were backed by the French king Charles VIII, who was desperate for a lever to use against an increasingly aggressive Henry – just as some six years previously he had made a show of backing Henry against Richard III. But in Warbeck, who they discovered swanning through the streets of Cork in his borrowed finery, the conspirators found something else altogether. Accosting him, they flattered him and promised to make him a Yorkist prince.

Warbeck later described how the men had tried out a number of identities on him: the earl of Warwick – Lambert Simnel, all over again – and then an illegitimate son of Richard III. Discarding both ideas, they then struck gold. They would groom him to become another kind of Yorkist: Richard duke of York, the second son of Edward IV, the younger of the princes whose disappearance into the Tower had transformed Henry's own prospects from that of fugitive into claimant to the throne.[18]

The reappearance, or re-creation, of Richard duke of York was a masterstroke. The bodies of the princes had never been found. While Henry could take the earl of Warwick out of the Tower and parade him through the streets of London – the same reason that he kept Simnel to hand in the royal kitchens – he could hardly do the same with Edward IV's young sons. Provided he looked and behaved like him, Richard duke of York's second coming could hardly be denied. Turning the political clock back to April 1483, to a time before Richard III's usurpation, it took a wrecking ball to the political settlement that Henry and Elizabeth's marriage represented.

Not only would Richard duke of York be indisputably heir to the

throne, but he would also have an undeniable claim on the loyalty of all those who had subsequently transferred their allegiance to his oldest sister Elizabeth and had accepted Henry's rule. Now, they would look again at their genealogical charts and their pedigree rolls, and their loyalties would be torn. The entwined red-and-white roses would be ripped apart. The phantom duke of York's existence, the simple 'what if?', attacked the foundations of everything that Henry was trying to build.

But the full impact of Warbeck, who after his grooming in Ireland had been carried off to the French court, took some time to emerge. In mid-1492, French intelligence officials, quizzing merchants from England on the impact of the 'White Rose', were disappointed at English indifference. Then, that autumn, Henry invaded France.

As he looked outward to Europe, and to the fluctuating dynastic power politics in which as an exile he had once been helplessly thrown about, Henry had followed with concern France's mounting aggression in the constant struggles for domination of the northern European coast. He had been unable to prevent it from swallowing up his former ally, the duchy of Brittany. But he had slowly built an understanding with France's perennial enemy on its eastern border, the tricksy Habsburg king, Maximilian.[19]

War was something the nobility expected of monarchs, and war with France was a rite of passage for English kings who were expected to lay claim to the kingdom they felt was theirs by right.[20] But Henry's abortive expedition of 1492 was a strange episode. The biggest invasion force of the century, involving fifteen thousand troops and seven hundred ships, was assembled, its mobilization had taken much of the year. By the time his armies had crossed the English Channel, however, the campaigning season was all but over. Citing all manner of excuses, from fickle allies – which, given Maximilian's track record, was hardly unreasonable – to their surprise at Boulogne's bristling fortifications, Henry and his counsellors quickly sealed a peace treaty with Charles VIII, who agreed to pay a massive annual pension of 50,000 French crowns. But if Henry felt he had won the peace, he was deceiving himself.

To the English soldiers that trudged back home with barely a shot fired, and then sat grumbling in taverns throughout the country, and

to the commons, who continued to pay extortionate taxes for a non-existent campaign, the settlement did not feel remotely honourable. Maximilian, who had been cut out of the Anglo-French treaty and was 'left sitting between two chairs', as one of his commanders put it, was apoplectic with humiliated rage. Little did Henry realize, but Maximilian's means of revenge – and, he hoped, the possibility of placing a rather more compliant English king on the throne – was already at hand.[21]

In the new Anglo-French détente, Warbeck, fearing extradition to England, had fled to Malines in a curious mirror-image of Henry's own flight from Brittany to France. He had been well groomed in his role – well enough, at any rate, for the childless Margaret of Burgundy, desperate for revenge against Henry VII, to accept it wholeheartedly: 'I believed it immediately', she wrote to Isabella of Castile. Maximilian, who was close to the dowager-duchess, was equally enthusiastic. Early in 1493, news of the Yorkist pretender was carried 'blazing and thundering' into England by the merchant ships that coasted around the entrepôts of the Low Countries, and spread like a cancer.

Henry scrambled to make sense of the threat. It was, he stated, beyond all logic, 'completely absurd', 'the height of madness' that people should believe that this 'feigned lad' was who he said he was. Diplomatic efforts with Burgundy and Maximilian were stepped up in order to secure the pretender's extradition, but without success. Relations between England and the Low Countries deteriorated. Henry imposed economic sanctions, refusing to let English merchants trade with Flanders; Maximilian retaliated in kind. In Bruges, the headquarters of the English 'nation' of resident merchants was boarded up; in London, warehouses were piled high with wool and cloth ready for export, gathering dust. Riots broke out; enclaves of foreign merchants, their ships not subject to the embargo, were attacked. Political and economic discontent mingled, and rumour abounded.

Warbeck, it was widely believed, was about to invade. Cells of his supporters were scattered throughout the country. On the road, those who had good reason to travel – merchants of all kinds, pedlars, friars, musicians and performers journeying from town to town and

house to house – were suspected of linking up with them, 'artfully and subtly'. There were reported plots to assassinate Henry and his family, including a plan to daub the doorframes and handles of the royal household with a lethal poison. Flybills detailing 'seditions and treacheries and uprisings' were passed from hand to hand. In London, there were co-ordinated flypostings urging the city to revolt; overnight, placards would appear fixed to church doors, including those of St Paul's itself.[22]

Meanwhile, Warbeck's profile continued to grow. In the summer of 1494, Maximilian's father, the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick, died. At his funeral in Vienna Cathedral, in front of the representatives of Europe's foremost dynasties, Warbeck was paraded as the king of England and then brought back through the cities of the Low Countries on a triumphal progress alongside Maximilian's teenage son and heir, Archduke Philip of Burgundy. Henry desperately needed another focus for English loyalties, one which would allow him to take back the title of duke of York and enfold the dangerous Yorkist sentiments within the narrative of his own emerging dynasty. He found this figure in his three-year-old second son, to whom he had given the name of the great kings of Lancaster and his own.

Prince Henry was born on 28 June 1491 at Queen Elizabeth's favourite house of Greenwich, which dominated the expanse of the Thames as it opened out towards the estuary. The family had been fortunate in a succession of healthy births and Henry was their third child, after his sister Margaret. Custom dictated that while the heir was brought up in his father's world, groomed for kingship, the remaining royal children – male and female – were entrusted to the care of their mother. At Greenwich, Elizabeth's household servants organized Prince Henry's baptism in the nearby church of the Friars Observant. Her wardrobers furnished the tapestries that swathed the walls and floors, built a tiered wooden stage, hung it with fine textiles – cloth-of-gold, damask, cypress linens – and placed on it the solid silver font brought from Canterbury Cathedral for the occasion. In front of an audience of dignitaries crammed into the church, the lord privy seal Richard Fox, now bishop of Exeter, immersed the baby boy three

times then, as trumpets blared out and torchbearers lit their tapers, swathed him in a mantle of ermine-trimmed cloth-of-gold.[23] With his cluster of wet-nurses and cradle-rockers, the infant prince was moved into the nearby manor house of Eltham. There he spent his childhood with his sister Margaret and the younger siblings, Mary and the short-lived Elizabeth, who would join them soon after.

But by autumn 1494, the three-year-old prince had a new role to play: that of a real, palpable duke of York, in the face of Warbeck's nebulous threat. On 29 October, he rode – unaided, to the astonishment of onlookers – through London's teeming streets to Westminster. The following day, in Westminster Hall, his father dubbed him knight, then lifted him up proudly and 'set him upon the table', in full view of the assembled court. On All Hallows' Day, 1 November, Prince Henry was created duke of York. The heavy formality of his investiture with his symbols of office, cap, sword, rod and coronet, was followed by a celebratory mass in the adjoining chapel of St Stephen's, taken by Archbishop Morton surrounded by eight mitred bishops, to the soaring accompaniment of the Chapel Royal choir. Next came the procession in state in the wavering torchlight, a profusion of purple and crimson silks, jewelled collars, cloth-of-gold. Henry VII, in his robes of estate, was imperious; his small son, tired, had to be carried for much of the time. On the first day of the celebratory jousts that followed, combatants wore the regime's green and white; on the second, they wore blue and tawny, for the young new duke of York.[24]

Amid the feasting and tourneying, Henry had been closing in on Warbeck's English support. His tireless monitoring of networks of retainers – embedding spies in suspects' households, interviewing their servants and the chaplains and confessors to whom they opened their souls – had led him, to his horror, back into the heart of the royal household itself. At the centre of the conspiracy were his two most powerful household officials, the head of the 'below stairs', his lord steward Lord Fitzwalter, and, most disturbingly of all, his lord chamberlain, the man who controlled access to the chamber, the public and private apartments, Sir William Stanley.[25]

Brother to Lady Margaret Beaufort's husband Lord Stanley, Sir William and his men had turned the tide for Henry at Bosworth. But he was a former loyalist of Edward IV and for him, as for so many,

questions of allegiance and self-interest mingled. Moreover, despite the recognition he had received under Henry, Sir William had never felt entirely settled in his favour. For his own part, Henry was all too aware of the Stanleys' history of changing sides, while their family retinues, who provided his military backbone, tended to arrive late to the party – as indeed they had done at Bosworth and Stoke. When Sir William was arrested and brought before the king in the first days of 1495, Henry's display of wounded astonishment masked the fact that, as both men knew, he had been watching Stanley's retainers for well over a year. Stanley was tried and beheaded. When Henry's men arrived to take possession of his castle of Holt, among the stuff they inventoried was a Yorkist livery collar studded with white roses and sunbursts, and £10,000 in cash: enough to bankroll an army.[26]

As the Stanley plot unfolded, the royal household became more rigorously controlled. Officials carrying lists of servants receiving 'bouge of court' – wages and board – carried out identity checks; at night, heavily armed yeomen paced the household's galleries and chambers with extra vigilance. The king, hedged about by security, became more distant, more remote. People were increasingly afraid to talk openly, looking over their shoulders, lowering their voices. Henry's relationship with his leading subjects began to change.

Warbeck was still at large. The next years saw him flitting around England's borders, moth-like, never settling. In June 1495, his invasion force, backed by Maximilian, finally materialized off the coast of east Kent. Henry's men were waiting, hidden in the sand dunes of Deal Beach, and an advance party of Warbeck's soldiers, lured ashore, were massacred in the shallows. But the pretender himself stayed on board ship and Henry's grasp closed around thin air.[27]

For several months his trail went cold. Neither his sponsors nor Henry, whose ships ceaselessly patrolled the western reaches of the Channel and the Irish Sea, knew of his whereabouts. Then, late in the year, he resurfaced at the court of James IV of Scotland. At twenty-two, a year older than Warbeck, James was ambitious and adventurous, desperate to impose himself and his nation on the European stage – and he had plans for the pretender. Lavishing on him attention, gifts

and a wife – Katherine Gordon, the beautiful young daughter of a Scottish nobleman, whom Warbeck married with all the splendour of a royal wedding – James set him up as the king of England and, in September 1496, the men moved southwards at the head of an army, crossing the border together. But the incursion into England was neither the triumphal progress of a returning Yorkist prince nor a Scottish invasion – though to English eyes, the burning, plundering and pillaging made it look suspiciously like the latter. Encountering resolute resistance, it petered out after six days. Henry, however, was on the warpath. His prolonged and excessive response would result in the biggest crisis of his reign to date.

The following month, his council started drawing up meticulous plans for a military offensive and authorized a loan of £120,000, to be repaid by general taxation, a decision ratified by an anxious parliament.[28] Meanwhile, border garrisons were bolstered and martial law declared, arms dumps overhauled and, in the fertile recruiting grounds of Flanders, Henry's agents indentured battalions of Swiss and German mercenaries. Out at the firing ranges of Mile End, east of London, expert Dutch gunners put the latest European artillery and handguns through their paces. In the late spring of 1497 columns of men, horses, carts and munitions streamed north towards the Scottish border. All the while, Henry's tax collectors continued to work zealously, in the face of widespread resentment, and nowhere more so than in the deep southwest of England in the small Cornish parish of St Keverne, where Michael Joseph – known locally as An Gof, the Blacksmith – rounded on one of the king's tax collectors, accusing him of corruption and refusing to pay.

Headed by An Gof and Thomas Flamank, a local lawyer, rebellion exploded out of Cornwall, just as retinues loyal to Henry were heading north. Thousands strong, the insurgents moved through southern England with frightening speed. London, terrified by reports of the ravaging Cornishmen, bolstered its defences; Queen Elizabeth, Lady Margaret and the royal children were moved into the Tower. Skirting the city to the southeast, the rebels made their camp at Blackheath, the time-honoured ground of popular rebellion, and prepared for a final assault. The whole kingdom was in chaos, reported one ambassador: if the king had lost, he would have been 'finished off and beheaded'.[29]

But London clung on. Royal troops frantically recalled from their northern deployment arrived. Torn between confrontation and negotiation the rebels hesitated, and their cause was lost. An Gof and Flamank were hanged, drawn and quartered. Their heads, boiled and tarred, were jammed on spikes on London Bridge; their body parts were dismembered, some nailed to the city gates, others sent southwest to be displayed in towns of dubious loyalty.[30]

That summer, James and Warbeck planned another assault. This time, Warbeck would sail from Scotland to the southwest of England to capitalize on inflamed Cornish resentments; James, meanwhile, would co-ordinate his attack with another cross-border invasion. But James's military campaign, menaced by an English army sent north to confront him, hit the buffers. As Soncino and Trevisano arrived at Woodstock, the Scots and English diplomats were seated round the negotiating table. Warbeck was on his own.

In the end, it was no contest. Although sympathies still lingered and Warbeck, amassing Cornish support, swept out of the peninsula, Henry's vastly superior forces were prepared. Outside Taunton, the pretender's army scattered, and he fled to sanctuary at Beaulieu on the south coast, from where he was extracted. Finally, Henry had the 'feigned lad' in his hands. But while Warbeck had failed to bring down the dynasty, he had, inadvertently, succeeded in transforming its nature.

That autumn, the Italian ambassadors settled into a comfortable life in London. In a stream of confidential dispatches, they painted a picture of a kingdom that was calm and tranquil. Henry, Soncino wrote, had been extraordinarily merciful. His dealings with Warbeck bespoke a regal confidence. Rather than lock him up, Henry put the pretender on display at court, a curio, a plaything for people to marvel and point at, and make fun of: *levissimus*, the least of men.[31]

Further acquaintance with the king and his court only impressed the visitors more. He was surrounded by finely dressed nobles and intellectual, politically sophisticated advisers whose knowledge of foreign affairs was so impressive that, Soncino wrote, 'I fancy myself in Rome'. Henry cultivated Italian merchant-bankers – the Florentines, in particular, 'never stop giving the king advices' – and loved to

employ foreigners, from high-ranking Italian diplomats and Dutch craftsmen to the French and Breton servants who hovered around him, much to the 'diabolical' envy of the English.[32] Then there was the other talking-point that autumn, besides Warbeck. Sailing west into uncharted seas with a group of Bristol merchants, the Venetian fugitive-adventurer Zoane Caboto, John Cabot, had returned to England with reports of a New Found Land, a discovery that, as Henry hoped – and as the Spanish feared, writing agitated dispatches to Columbus himself about the arrival in London of '*uno como Colon*' – would rival recent Spanish discoveries of a New World. At court, Cabot rustled about in silks, armed with rolls of maps, followed by a trail of admirers who 'run after him like mad'. Henry had plans for Cabot. He would fund a fleet of ships and pack them with 'all the malefactors' in English prisons. Then, they would cross the Atlantic and form a colony.[33]

Money seemed no object to Henry. His Thamesside houses, renovated in the latest Burgundian fashions, were visions in red brick, imported glazing and gleaming cupolas; inside, their chambers and galleries were well ordered and opulent. He knew how to entertain 'magnificently', and Soncino took full advantage: 'I put in three hours at table twice a day for the love of your excellency', he wrote to Sforza. But as he grew acquainted with the English court, his view of the king began to change: still 'most wise', but 'suspicious of everything'. Yes, he was rich, but he had built up an 'immense treasure' because 'he has no one he can trust, except his paid men at arms'. Beneath the poised regality was not the 'quiet spirit' that Soncino had originally divined.[34] To those foreign observers who bothered to raise their heads from the loaded plates in front of them and look behind the ostentatious wealth and the carefully ordered ceremonial, there seemed something distinctly odd in the state of Henry VII's England.

One such was Pedro de Ayala. Previously the Spanish envoy to Scotland, he had arrived at the English court in late 1497, as Anglo-Scottish relations had begun to thaw. Henry, he wrote, liked to give the impression of being very rich, but he was not as rich as he said he was. He liked to be much spoken of, 'highly appreciated by the whole world', and to be thought of as a 'great man' – although in de Ayala's opinion he wasn't, because his love of money was 'too great'. People

didn't love him, either: they feared him. Henry's government, too, appeared strange. It was neither one thing nor the other, a kind of halfway house. He was 'subject to his council', but he had 'already shaken off some, and got rid of some part of this subjection'. His rule was, de Ayala thought, remarkably hands-on. When not in public, indulging his passions of hunting and hawking or in discussions with his counsellors, he was closeted away, 'writing the accounts of his expenses with his own hand'. Searching for a way to sum up what he found, he wrote that Henry wanted to govern 'in the French fashion' – but that he could not. De Ayala had expressed it imperfectly, but he was right. Henry was not playing by the rules people expected; or, rather, he was trying to change them to suit himself.[35]

Increasingly private and distant, Henry's rule was taking on his own character. At the centre of the glittering carapace of the royal household lay an institutional black hole: a complex of private apartments known as the 'secret' or privy chamber, which was separated from the presence chamber, where the king's throne stood under its cloth of estate, by a heavily guarded door. Earlier in the decade, when Henry discovered that conspiracy had penetrated to the core of the household, the privy chamber's functioning had changed. Previously, its workings had been laid out as part of the meticulous 'ordinances' or protocols that ordered the wider household, and its servants had shuttled easily between the public and private worlds. But from 1494, all reference to the privy chamber was eradicated from official directives. Written rules no longer governed it. Its servants were specified simply as men who would 'best content the king'. Serving his meals, bathing him, strewing fresh rushes on the floor, making the royal bed and rolling on it to check there was 'none untruth therein', these most select of personal servants, answerable directly and only to the king, handled his personal expenses and undertook confidential missions. They were also Henry's first line of security, discreet, watchful, ever present.[36] Their relationship with the king was encapsulated by the secret chamber's head, an imperturbable west-countryman named Hugh Denys. As 'groom of the stool', Denys looked after the king's commode, presiding over him while he sat. As close to the king as he could possibly be, his position gave him an unparalleled, intimate perspective on the realities of power.[37]

From his privy chamber, Henry presided over another change, one that was entirely characteristic of the way he had started to govern. Traditionally, the chamber treasury controlled the king's private wealth – which was, more or less, income from his lands. But Henry was obsessed with having quantities of ready cash to bolster the regime's security and authority. During the emergencies of the 1490s, the chamber treasury's remit had started to creep inexorably into the realm of public finance and the exchequer offices, channelling and rerouting public income – taxation and customs – into the king's own coffers. All of this was facilitated by a coterie of servants and counsellors that, as Perkin Warbeck had pointed out in a proclamation that accompanied his invasion, were not noblemen but 'caitiffs and villains of simple birth', and who, as de Ayala said, had a 'wonderful dexterity in getting other people's money'.[38]

Accusations of low-born, venal administrators clustering round the king were as old as the hills; besides which, Warbeck had particular reasons for fuelling nobles' grudges and resentments against the king. Henry certainly needed noblemen and their retinues, and he counted them among his trusted advisers: men like the earl of Oxford, Thomas Howard, earl of Surrey, and his new chamberlain Giles lord Daubeney. But Warbeck did have a point. Traditionally, the 'might of the land' rested in the 'great lords', and then the king's officers. But Henry's natural suspicion of great lords, intensified by the events of the 1490s, had changed all this. In his regime, as people were discovering to their bewilderment, power and status were not the same thing at all.

As everybody from Soncino to Warbeck discerned, Henry was surrounded by a small circle of men: the likes of Cardinal-chancellor Morton and Richard Fox, now bishop of Durham; the king's bruising chief financial administrator Sir Reynold Bray, and Sir Thomas Lovell, the square-jawed treasurer of the king's household.[39] These were men whose wealth and power derived entirely from their service and loyalty to Henry. So too did their identity: some, like Lovell and the king's jewel-house keeper Sir Henry Wyatt, even dressed like him, in sober but costly black. They formed the small, informal councils in which Henry liked to do business, and they were at the centre of a practice that he was increasingly using to define his relationship with the country: the rigorous enforcement of his prerogative rights and

powers through a system of suspended financial penalties or bonds. Such bonds were part of the fabric of life, used to guarantee business deals, to acknowledge debts owed and to ensure good behaviour. But during the upheavals of Warbeck, Henry and his agents had started to reach for them instinctively, at the first sign of disorder.

It was in the king's account books – the same accounts that de Ayala had spotted him spending so much time with, closeted away in his secret chamber – that everything came together. They listed income and expenditure, but they also listed bonds and debts, painstakingly entered by the king's accountants under the practised eye of his chamber treasurer, John Heron, and countersigned with the king's spindly monogram. The chamber accounts were turning into a tool of surveillance, of political control: as Henry totted up his books, he was mapping and monitoring the offences, and the loyalties, of his subjects. After the near-disaster of the Cornish uprising, Soncino had remarked on the king's 'clement' response to the rebels. If he had seen Henry's account books, he might have thought otherwise. In one of them was neatly listed the dedicated network of spies that Henry had deployed in the region, gathering intelligence on potential troublemakers and providing a flow of information on which his law-enforcers could act.[40]

During the civil wars, back in the 1460s, the chief justice and political commentator Sir John Fortescue had described the difference between English rule – which he extolled – and the 'evil things' of French rule. In France, Fortescue explained, the king's will was law. In England, however, the king was bound by law. He was part of a 'body politic' – the 'ruling part' to be sure, but nevertheless still a part – a compact between the king and his subjects that Magna Carta had formalized back in the early thirteenth century. But Henry's rule, based on a relentless gathering of information and forensic interpretation of the law, was centred increasingly on his personal control. It was not exactly French – but it was hardly surprising if, to the likes of de Ayala, it looked like it.[41]

Running through all this was the perpetual question of legitimacy and loyalty. In the aftermath of Blackheath, an intelligence report landed on the desk of Henry's administrator Sir Reynold Bray. Reporting an exchange between two men who had fought for Henry against the Cornish rebels, it revealed the unease that permeated the minds

even of those loyal to the regime. One had urged the other to pray for Henry VII. The reply was evasive: 'we need not pray for the king by name', he said, 'but *pro rege nostro tunc*' – just, 'for our king'. Asked to explain what he meant, he elaborated: ''tis hard to know who is righteous king.' His dilemma summed up Henry's deepest fear. Even those keen to uphold the status quo didn't know, deep down, who should embody it.[42]

Late in the evening of 9 June 1498, Trinity Sunday, Warbeck climbed through an unlocked window in Westminster Palace and fled upstream to the Charterhouse at Sheen, where he claimed sanctuary. The following day he was turned over to royal guards. The circumstances of his escape were puzzling. A Venetian dispatch probably came closest, reasoning that it was a put-up job, and that Henry's own servants had seeded the idea of escape in Warbeck's mind. Warbeck's living quarters had been in the wardrobe of robes, which housed the king's clothes and personal belongings, and which was sited directly below the privy chamber. His gaolers were two of the king's privy servants, William Smith and James Braybroke and, in the resulting inquiry into Warbeck's flight, both got off scot-free. Henry wanted a reason to move him out of sight and – he hoped – out of mind; so he created one.[43]

After his recapture, Warbeck's treatment changed. Publicly pilloried in London, he was then moved into the Tower and locked in a windowless cell. Towards the end of July, Henry took ambassadors from Flanders, sent to agree newly normalized trade relations between England and the Low Countries, to visit the prisoner; also present was the Spanish ambassador, Rodrigo de Puebla. When Warbeck was brought in, shackled and chained, his appearance had, de Puebla reported, been 'much altered', his princely good looks so savagely disfigured 'that I, and all other persons here, believed his life will be very short'. That, de Puebla concluded briskly, was that: 'He must pay for what he has done.'[44]

But the disturbances continued. The simple fact of Warbeck's existence, and that of Edward earl of Warwick, now in his early twenties,

seemed to be motivation enough. In January 1499 a fresh plot was uncovered in Cambridge. It involved a young university student named Ralph Wilford who, groomed by a local priest to believe that he too was the earl of Warwick, had experienced a series of dream-visions in which he was anointed king. Brought to London, Wilford was hanged the following month, his body left on a gibbet on the Old Kent Road, the main south-eastern approach to London. For Henry the episode, which bore so many hallmarks of the Lambert Simnel case twelve years before, was traumatic. Outwardly calm, his body betrayed him. He seemed to age twenty years in two weeks.

Henry's preoccupation with what the future held began to seem coloured by his own ill-health. There were telltale signs, such as the £2 paid to 'a stranger of Perpignan that showed quintessentia', the fabled water of life that could cure everything from gout to tuberculosis, poisoning and 'troubles from devils' – and, into the bargain, restore youth to old men and convert base metals into gold. He frequently resorted to prophecy, the practice that he himself had made illegal in one of the first acts of his reign, and whose ban was stringently enforced. In the months after Wilford's execution, he summoned a Welsh priest who had foretold the deaths of Edward IV and Richard III and who, among 'many other unpleasant things', advised Henry that his life was in danger and that there were 'two parties of very different political creeds' in the kingdom. Yorkist conspiracy, in other words, was alive.[45]

In the middle of the year, royal agents began to pick up whispers of old plots, resurrected in a sequence of meetings in secret houses across London, involving an assortment of city merchants, opportunist hangers-on looking for a chance to make money and, disturbingly, four of Warbeck and Warwick's warders, who acted as go-betweens with their two charges. Fuelled by the inevitable astrological consultations, the plot coalesced into a plan to seize the Tower, steal its treasure, blow up the magazine of explosives there, and smuggle the pair out of the country in a ship filled with a cargo of woolcloth. The conspirators would make their move that summer when the city was quiet and the king and his household on progress in the country; he would, they swore, never return to London alive.

Oddly, neither Warbeck nor Warwick seemed particularly engaged. Warbeck, very probably, had been tortured to the point of uninterest; either way, after a lifetime of assumed identities, he barely seemed to know who he was any more. Indeed, it was Warwick, the gentle, bewildered prince who it was said could not tell a goose from a capon and who had spent the last fourteen years in the Tower, who was the more enthusiastic: he simply seemed glad of the attention. The two were given pep talks and constantly prompted with encouraging news and the small change of conspiracy: secret tokens, a book of cipher, and a file and hammer for Warbeck to break his shackles. Mingling with the genuine conspirators were royal agents provocateurs, pushing and shaping the plot, incriminating the two prisoners, giving them enough rope to hang themselves. In early August, one of the plotters, filled with a sense of creeping unease, got cold feet and, announcing that Henry knew everything, bolted to the safety of sanctuary. Still the king and his counsellors waited, for another three weeks. On 25 August, the conspirators met for a final time. Then the net closed.[46]

That October, an Italian astrologer known by his anglicized name of William Parron presented to Henry his prognostication for the year ahead. *De Astrorum vi fatali*, *The Fateful Meaning of the Stars*, concerned why it was that the innocent should die – indeed, why sometimes it was necessary for them to do so. If people were born under bad stars, natural law decreed that, even if they were utterly innocent of any crime, they were destined to die unnatural deaths of one kind or another: beheading, hanging, poverty or disease. Parron's treatise went on to demonstrate how unlucky were the stars of two men and, although the pair were not named, the reference was clearly to Warbeck and Warwick. These ill-starred people infected the country and, until they died, they would continue to be a focus for revolt – but die they surely would, because they were ill-starred. It was a satisfyingly closed logic, and it satisfied Henry's conscience.

Saturday 23 November 1499, St Clement's Day, was the first day of winter. That year, autumn had blown itself out with gales and storms, but even the foulest weather could not prevent Londoners from turning out in numbers for an execution. Lining the badly paved streets, out through the suburbs of Holborn and west through the fields, they watched as the twenty-five-year-old Warbeck bumped along behind a

horse, lashed to a wooden hurdle. At Tyburn, amid the crowds and assembled dignitaries, he was hauled up a ladder to the scaffold. There, with the noose round his neck, he confessed. He was not Edward IV's second son – in fact, he had no Yorkist blood at all – but was just a 'stranger', a foreigner, the son of a boatman from Tournai. Begging absolution from the king and 'all others he had offended', he composed himself 'meekly'. Then the ladder was whipped away and he jerked downwards, his body convulsing violently, then twitching, then limp.[47]

Five days later, on the other side of the city, the ambassadors were present at another execution, this one a private affair, as befitted a true nobleman. If Warbeck's trial had been perfunctory, Warwick's was a farce. At his hearing in London's Guildhall, as utterly confused now as he had been by the plot to free him, the earl had to be 'compelled to answer'. The records of his trial were locked away in a cupboard with three locks, the keys allocated separately to three unnamed royal officers. Under louring skies, lightning and thunder, with rain driving in off the Thames, Warwick was led out to his place of execution on Tower Green, and beheaded.

Henry VII had been on the throne for fifteen years and three months. Only now, with these two executions, did he feel safe.[48]

As the new century began, the Spanish ambassador Rodrigo de Puebla posted a dispatch from London to Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain. He expatiated on England's tranquillity and obedience. There had, he wrote, 'always been Pretenders to the crown'; more than that, there had been a number of contesting claims to the English throne, 'and of such quality that the matter could be disputed between the two sides'. Now, however, 'it has pleased God that all should be thoroughly and duly purged and cleansed'. There remained 'not a drop of doubtful royal blood'. The only royal blood in the kingdom was the 'true blood' of Henry VII, his queen, Elizabeth, and 'above all' their first-born son Arthur, prince of Wales and heir to the throne. The civil wars, he said, were over.

De Puebla's mood was skittish; he really should, he added breezily, stop harping on about the two executions, as he was aware that he

had written 'so often' about them recently. The way was now paved for a spectacular royal wedding between England and Spain, one which would set the seal on Henry VII's dynastic ambitions. It was a dispatch intended specifically to communicate a sense of closure to the Spanish monarchs, to show that England possessed a dynasty fit for an infanta of Spain. The wedding preparations could begin.[49]