

PROLOGUE

Dover, May 1522

Pietro Gonzaga's mind was a book thick with margins, daily increased and complicated by the dense, spidery notes one finds in any book worth reading. More writing was added every time he saw something worth recording. Separate chapters recorded everything, each with its own title: of kings; of nations; of the characters of men; of women; of London; of Paris; of Rome; of the Church; of religion; of wars. A historian required knowledge of all. A Mantuan by birth, Gonzaga had been drawn to England, as had many, by the golden world spoken of in Europe. It was a world made new, freshened and sweetened, by the young king, Henry. And, being an Italian and a scholar, Gonzaga had been preferred to courtly service.

As a scholar, too, it was his duty as well as his pleasure to look upon sovereigns. He had looked upon plenty of dead ones – at least, the records of their lives in books and chronicles – but a living one was a rare and glorious wonder.

Two of them was a miracle.

Two of them and a castle and a fleet of huge, hulking, many-sailed warships was Heaven itself.

Gonzaga stood in the crowd of spectators which had

gathered at the Dover quayside. His youngest son, Will, was on his shoulders, the boy's chubby little legs pressing into his neck. His wife stood beside him, clutching the hand of Peter, his elder boy. Bianca was a broad woman and still pretty. She had not, however, come to love England as he had. Its people, she said, were arrogant and haughty and disliked strangers. She had told him this often. Every slight was recorded: the turned back in the market at Smithfield; the kisses offered to every cheek but hers; the voices hurriedly stilled when she entered a shop on Cheapside.

'Are they not fine things?' he asked her. His voice was almost lost to the wind and the excited chatter of the other spectators. That same wind whipped the countless sails of the ships, which rode at anchor out by their jetties.

'No bigger than the one that brought us to this island. And its islanders,' said Signora Gonzaga.

He gave up trying to convince her. Instead, he returned his gaze over the rolling tide of hats and heads to the warships: the *Mary Rose* and *Henry Grace à Dieu* stood proud and tall, their forest of masts dwarfing the littler ships like parents whose chests stood out with pride.

'Well – do you wish to become a sailor, Peter?' he asked. The boy didn't look at him. He rarely looked at anyone directly. Instead, he turned his face into his mother's skirts. Gonzaga had brought his family down from London hoping to spark some interest in the lad. Useless. Peter had developed a love of horses and knew every breed and where they came from, whether Ireland or France or Barbary. He spoke of nothing else – would talk for hours on the subject of horses and no other, and would freeze if his father tried to draw him into some other conversation. 'Of horses,'

Gonzaga thought, was the only chapter in young Peter's mind.

Returning his attention to the ships, Gonzaga began counting the masts. The largest ship, the *Henry Grace à Dieu*, had five. His mind calculated quickly. About 600 mariners and soldiers – their tiny white and dun figures lined the decks. 140 guns, 40 light. Her gleaming brown hull sat too high in the water. One fewer mast might be an improvement. At present, the gargantuan monster of a ship would struggle in anything but the smoothest seas – might be felled by a ripple. He made a note in his mind and filed it alongside the cost of the ship – £14,000 – which his money-minded friend in the Cardinal's service had told him. He was no naval man, no shipwright, but he had accumulated enough knowledge of the history of sailing vessels – from honest history books – to consider himself a good hand.

He knew almost as much about the English ships out there as he did about England's kings.

As if in response to the thought, explosions rent the air. All heads turned from the port.

Dover Castle was a square block of a building with similarly square, turreted towers, all in neat grey stone and glass. It stood proudly on its hill above the port town, ringed by several thick grey walls matching the colour and quality of the castle's keep.

Some of those walls were now sending smudgy fingers up into the hard blue sky. The guns had been set off in announcement of the arrival of the royal party. As a further prelude, trumpets began blasting notes at intervals, growing louder each time.

The rumble of hooves soon made itself felt and heard, as

the standard bearers approached. On the long road down from the castle appeared two riders, one bearing the Tudor Rose on his flagstaff, the other the Imperial Eagle. The insistent trumpets grew more furious.

The two fore-riders passed on, before the crowd, which was separated from the road by wooden railings.

'I see him! Papa! I see him!' Will's thighs tightened, near choking his father. The crowd fell silent.

And then, as one, the cry went up. 'God save the king! God save his Grace!'

Gonzaga didn't join in. He rose up on his tiptoes just as King Henry's head appeared above the heads of the Hydra-like crowd. The king was mounted, of course, and he held up a hand gloved in white. A broad smile split his face and he shouted, 'You know me! I come!' His voice was high and excitable.

His head then turned away, so that Gonzaga could see only the back of a white hat, from which a yellow feather danced.

'Who is he?' asked his son. 'The other one?'

'He . . .' began Gonzaga. He forced himself up a little higher, just as King Henry's hand rose. A white finger jabbed the air ahead. He was eagerly pointing out his ships to the fellow riding beside him.

The Holy Roman Emperor, thought Gonzaga. Charles V. He told his boy this.

'A little man,' said Signora Gonzaga. She said this to the boy whose hand she was holding, but loud enough for her husband to hear.

And she was right.

King Henry rode ahead, turning his head from side to side

again, basking in the adulation of his people. The emperor, moving alone, his attendants keeping their distance behind the sovereigns, gave his uncle-king an odd look. The fellow's eyes narrowed, Gonzaga noticed, and his lips moved, though, if he were speaking aloud, his voice would never be heard by the crowd.

Interesting, Gonzaga thought.

All England was afire with news of the young emperor's coming. All talk was of the new friendship between Spain and its empire and England. But Charles did not look at his uncle with love. Behind his back, in fact, he'd given him a look that Gonzaga would have called unpleasant bemusement.

And then the royals were gone, riding off to board and inspect the great warships, whilst their bodies of gentlemen followed, to no particular acclaim.

It was a foolish thing, thought Gonzaga, for King Henry to show off his navy. If war should ever return between the two kings – and history dictated that it would, at some point – then the emperor would know every detail of England's capabilities.

Yet this King Henry, the ruler of the golden world that had brought the scholar to England, was a man of inordinate pride. The cardinal, too – Gonzaga's master – was a man of pride.

His wife was right, though he'd never admit it to her; the English were a prideful people.

Gonzaga slumped, squatting down just enough to let his boy slide easily to the ground. Excitement still shone on the lad's face. That was good. The emperor was nothing to look at, with his deformed jaw, but the sight of King Henry would

last the boy a lifetime. Because, Gonzaga thought, Henry VIII looked like a king.

He had mulled over this during his studies, pondered the question of kingship. He could detail the precise proportions and countenances of every English king, provided that king happened to have been described in a book. Edward IV was handsome and, ultimately, enormously fat; Richard III was plagued by a crooked back; Henry VII was thin and fair but grew wizened and lost his teeth in his dotage.

So what made a sovereign lord a sovereign lord?

A genius of the mind? No. There had been feeble-minded kings, and cruel ones.

A love of justice? The ideal king was a universal king, indifferent in matters of justice to the highest as the lowest. Few met that ideal.

The acceptance of his people? No. There had been unloved tyrants.

The proportions of the body? No. Charles V was misshapen and ugly.

God? Perhaps. Yes. There was certainly some design to it.

Descent from father to son to son to son? Not often in English history.

Descent from ancient blood? Now therein lay the rub, with so few kings descending directly from kingly fathers . . .

In practice, Gonzaga had concluded, it should not matter what a king looked like. What mattered was that his rule was just, his people and his territories protected, and his patronage well disbursed. An ugly, drooling wretch of a man might do all that, his appearance signifying nothing.

But, in truth, King Henry VIII had made it matter.

His Majesty, King Henry VIII, by the grace of God

sovereign lord of England, Wales, Ireland, and France, defender of the faith – he had made a king’s face, his mask – call it what you will – matter. His face – his mask – was one of goodly benevolence, of handsome features and generosity.

But Pietro Gonzaga suspected something about what lay behind that mask.

He knew – or soon he would know – the truth of the glorious King Henry’s history, from his father’s seizure of the throne at Bosworth to the long-dead Lady Margaret the king’s mother, through Edmund and Owen Tudor and the ancient high kings. He knew what the genealogists had been commissioned to discover: the descent from the greatest king in English history, Arthur, king of all the Britons. It was a great fantasy of Henry’s, proving that descent. Such proof . . . well, all of those who said the king’s father was a usurper of no great blood would be silenced. All those men who frowned at the king’s lack of a son and looked forward to the next line of kings – even they would not wish to see Arthur’s descendant fall from power. It was little wonder the English king had set a small army of scholars to wander storehouses of knowledge in search of some word, some scrap, that would prove Arthur had lived, breathed, and begat a royal line.

Gonzaga had filed away every step through every library which those men had taken. He’d followed their inky paths, had blinked and strained his eyes as they had, and was on the brink of a discovery about King Henry’s history which they, even in their zeal to find evidence of the ‘Tudors’ descent from Arthur, had missed.

It would take him only a few more weeks.

A few more weeks of following the notes left in faded ink in ever-narrowing margins in unread books in seldom-visited archives and libraries.

But he would do it. He would prove something the scholars had only dared whisper about.

King Henry would have the truth laid before him.

‘Let us go, husband.’

Gonzaga turned. His wife had gathered both their sons to her; they were hugging at her skirts. The crowd had thickened rather than thinned, as more people gathered to see the kings come out on the decks of the ships. Signora Gonzaga, scowling, was buffeted and shoved as people fought their way towards the railings by the path. A boy selling nuts bumped into her and spilled some. The little brown balls skittered, bounced, and disappeared among the thicket of hose and shoes. ‘Ere, watch it, woman!’ he piped.

‘Might we go?’ she asked, more insistently.

Gonzaga took a deep breath of air thickened and soured with sweat and musk. ‘Si. Back to London.’ He had done as he’d wished; he’d borne witness to a little corner of history. The chapter ‘Of Kings’ had had a little more added. As the *Henry’s* guns fired, sending more smoke into the air, he and his family elbowed their way through the people. Yes, he had just witnessed history.

Soon, he would make it.

Soon.