

YOUNG BESS

by Margaret Irwin



"Such incredible fierce desire"

NAN BULLEN

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A WARTIME BOOK

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To
LUCY BELL

My thanks, 'first and foremost on the list,'
to J. R. M. And to Lady Helen Seymour for
the lively help she gave me, with the papers
and household books of the Seymour family.

YOUNG BESS

Chapter One

SHE had been allowed to come out to the royal flagship, and had been eating cherries and strawberries dipped in wine. All round her the sea was a flaming white glitter, the air was hot high summer, the wind in a mad mood; she was twelve years old, and Tom Seymour, who was Admiral of the Fleet and her favourite step-uncle, was talking to her as though she were rather more; he was joking and chaffing her, but then he did that with all women, even with the Queen.

And he went on talking to her, looking down at her with wickedly merry eyes half shut against the sunlight, watching her as though he really wanted to know how she would answer.

"And what will you do when England is invaded?" he asked her. "Will you raise a regiment and ride at the head of it? Will you be Colonel Eliza or Captain Bess?"

"England won't be invaded. She never has been."

"Not by the Normans?"

"Five hundred years ago! And they were us, or they couldn't have done it."

"There speaks the proud Plantagenet!"

She stamped like a wilful pony and tossed her head, and the wind seized a strand of her smooth hair and pulled it out from under her little jewelled cap, tossing it like a wisp of flame, teasing her just as he was doing; but it was a bad joke to mock the thin strain of royal Plantagenet in the Tudor blood—and with her father on board.

"It's lucky for you I'm no tell-tale-tit."

"No, you'll never be that."

"How can you tell what I'll be?"

All her egoism was agog. What would she be? At twelve years old anything was possible. And so he seemed to think as he scanned her, and the wind flicked the wisp of hair into her eyes and made her blink.

"How can I tell what you'll be? You may become anything. Elizabeth the Enigma. Will you be beautiful? Will you be plain? You might so easily be either. Will you have a pinched whey-face and carrot-coloured hair and a big peeled forehead like a pale green cooking apple? Or will you suddenly be mysteriously lovely, with your hair aflame over that white face, and that quick secret look of yours? What *will* you become, you strange secret little thing?"

"*I will* be beautiful, *I will!*"

But how astonishing that he should dare to talk to her like this. The man could be afraid of nothing.

He saw her thought and laughed again. The light reflected from the sea rippled up and up over them in a ceaseless wavering pattern. Their faces were still in that moment of silence, and their eyes looked steadily at each other; but all the time the flickering movement went on, a current of sea-light weaving its web over them both, over their bright, stiff clothes, the golden point of his beard, the red lights in her hair, the soft gleam of her bare neck and shoulders. For the moment they seemed quite alone on board the *Great Harry* on the summer sea, the sails soaring above them like big white clouds, and the other ships careening and skimming past them, trailing their blue shadows over the sparkling water. They were here to defend the English shore, the long line of emerald downs behind them, and in front the golden shimmer of reeds that surrounded the Isle of Wight.

At any moment the enemy fleet might heave into sight out of the blue distance, the biggest fleet ever gathered together against this country. It was, as she had frequently heard of late, the most fateful moment in all their history. And she had been allowed on board the royal flagship! So great was the privilege, so lovely the day, so bright the air, so dangerous the moment, that perhaps it really did not matter what one said. She gave a swift glance behind her; no one was near. She said, very low, the thing she must not say; she spoke of the person who must never be mentioned.

"My mother—was she beautiful?"

The air still quivered in the sunlight, the deck shone smooth as satin; even the flighty wind had dropped for the moment as if to hold its breath. But her step-uncle still stood and looked at her; he did not turn away muttering some excuse to leave her as fast as

possible; he did not even turn pale nor pull at his elegant little foreign-looking beard. He answered, without even lowering his voice, as though it were quite natural that she should speak of her mother.

"No, she was not beautiful. But she was clever enough to make anyone think so whom she wished."

The child drew a deep breath as though they had stepped past a precipice.

"Well, I am clever, so all my tutors say. I too will make people think I am beautiful."

"Who do you want to think it?"

She looked up at him and a deep mischievous smile stole over her pale little face. Tom Seymour was certain that the answer would be one swift monosyllable—"You!" But it was not. With an odd mixture of childish coquetry and passionate sincerity she replied, "Everybody!"

"What! Do you want the whole world for your lover?"

"Yes, or at least the whole country. I don't mind so much about foreigners."

He flicked her cheek. "What a wanton! And I thought you a modest little maid. There's another puzzle. Will you be good? Or will you be naughty—like your mother?"

There again! Yet the deck did not open and let him fall straight into the sea.

"You remember her?" she just breathed.

"As if I had this moment heard her laugh. 'Ha ha!' that was how all the Londoners read it when your father had his initial and hers intertwined over the gateways. H.A.—HA HA! They read right, for she laughed at everything and everybody."

"Even at—"

"Yes, even at him. She was clever, but not wise. She danced herself into his favour and laughed herself out of it—to her death. And she went laughing to that death. The Sheriff was shocked."

He fell silent, hearing once again across the years an echo of the shrill mocking note, clear as the call of a bird, and as wild and void of human meaning, that had made men call Nan Bullen a witch. Well, she had used her witchcraft on the King, enslaved him, scorned him, held him off from her for six long years, while to suit

her plans he wrecked the whole structure of the English Church, and built it up anew with himself as Pope in England. The King himself said he had been seduced by her sorcery to marry her, but that was after little Bess was born and no boy for heir, and the King had by then turned to Tom Seymour's meek little sister Jane, Plain Jane her brother Tom rudely called her, though she was pretty enough, but with a prim mouth and pale eyes and no charms that could vie with Nan's, except the charm of being wholly unlike her. Unlike Nan, she was a gentlewoman by behaviour as well as by good, though not noble, solid county family birth.

That had brought Bess's first step-uncles on to the scene; the eldest, Edward Seymour, newly created Earl of Hertford, tall, sparsely built, keen-faced, of the kind that goes on being called a rising young man even when rising forty; fiercely and coldly intellectual in his pursuit of his ideals, or, some said, of his ambitions. He had married one sister to the King, another to the grandson of a blacksmith, but both, it was thought, to the same purpose, for the blacksmith's son had been Thomas Cromwell, the King's greatest minister, and his heir a catch even for a rising earl.

His second brother, Henry, flatly refused to rise. He had heard enough of public life to prefer to remain a simple country squire, declining all honours and even invitations to Court.

The youngest, Tom Seymour, acclaimed the handsomest man in England, was the complete opposite of Edward—a wild rascal whom no semi-royal responsibility could sober, and with a proficiency in swearing so picturesque that he had said it was his chief qualification for the post of Admiral of the Fleet. That he had others was evident from the work entrusted to him at this dangerous crisis; he and his ships had been stationed at Dover to defend the Kentish coast against the French invasion, and had now joined up with the main fleet, under his command, at Portsmouth. Soldier, sailor, and foreign diplomat, Tom Seymour had had a brilliant career in all three professions, and had started it well before his sisters' marriages had helped on the family. He had been abroad for the best part of the last seven years, on embassies to the French Court, to the King of Hungary, and to Nuremberg; he had been in Vienna for two years and seen a good deal of the war against the Turks; he had exchanged the job of Ambassador to the Netherlands for

that of Marshal of the English army fighting against Spain, and done it so well that he was appointed Master of the Ordnance for life in reward for his military services.

His reckless courage had given rise to a score of wild stories; so had his attraction for women. His good looks were the least part of that attraction; it was his careless talk, his great infectious laugh, his good-humoured gaiety and utter lack of premeditation or caution, in a Court growing paralysed with these things, that made him irresistible. Though nearing the middle thirties, he had managed to evade all his matrimonial pursuers, and they were many. The Duke of Norfolk's beautiful daughter had been desperately anxious to marry him for years, but her brother, the young Earl of Surrey, declared the Seymours were upstarts and wouldn't hear of it. His father, the old Duke, was as harsh and intolerant an aristocrat as his son, but not when it suited his self-interest, and he had rather favored the match, since the Seymour brothers were now the most powerful men in the country, next to the King; it was not merely that they had provided him with one of his wives, but that she had provided him with his only male heir, Edward, the little Prince of Wales. There were no 'steps' in that relationship; they were the flesh-and-blood uncles of the undoubted heir to the throne. Prince Edward was legitimate by all counts and all religions, whereas nobody could be quite sure how the King's two daughters stood; so often had their father bastardized and legitimized them by turns. 'The Little Bastard' had been the most frequent informal title given to the Princess Elizabeth at her birth; nearly three years later her father had himself endorsed it by Act of Parliament.

And now the Little Bastard herself asked about that title. Standing by Tom Seymour, leaning over the gunwale, the light from the water rippling up under the soft childish chin, her head turned sideways towards him, her eyes, so clear and light, taking their colour from the sea, fixed themselves upon his face. She said in a voice that he could only just hear above the creak of the ropes and the wash of the waves against the boat's side:

"The women are no use. They answer what they think one ought to think. Can you tell me who I am? I once heard my sister Mary say to another woman that she did not believe I was even the King's bastard—I was just like Mark Smeaton, the handsome musician that

was beheaded with my mother—and the woman laughed and said there was choice enough, since three other men had been beheaded too, and one of them her own brother.”

Tom Seymour gave a startling exhibition of his choice of oaths. “Your sister Mary is a sour old maid, poisoned with hate and jealousy of your mother.”

“But she doesn’t hate me—or at any rate she is very kind to me. She did not know I was listening.”

“And well whipped you should have been for it—and would have been, had I been there. But never mind that, or her. I tell you, by God’s most precious soul, you are the King’s daughter every inch of you, and none could doubt it who looks at you. Can you doubt it yourself, standing here on his flagship, the *Great Harry*? And by God,” he muttered on a sudden drop in tone, “here comes Great Harry himself.”

Yes, here he came, rather like his own ship, she thought, as he swung portentously into their line of vision, a ship with huge bellying sails (‘bellying’ is good, she thought, with a pert snigger concealed behind the grave mask of her face as she sank to the deck in a deep curtsy), his silks and jewels flashing in the sunlight and his great hot red face beaming and glistening like a painted block of wood carved on a ship, while beside him Edward Seymour, Earl of Hertford, stalked earnestly like a lean shadow.

Now the King was in front of her, towering over her, blocking out the sunlight, with his silly little flat cap squat on top of all that bulk, and his finger and thumb, hot and sticky as a pair of sausages and yet with surprising force beneath all their fat, pinched her chin and pulled her upright from her curtsy; now she must look him in the face and smile, for he couldn’t abide sullen, scared children; they should be frank and fearless as he had been himself. So she stood straight and looked him squarely in the eyes and gave him a charming, ingenuously admiring smile, while he playfully tugged at the loose strand of her hair, and tucked it back under her cap, and she thought: Was this enormous being before her, man or monster or god?

He himself did not quite know, for with his arm flung round the nervously smiling Chancellor Wriothesley he was talking of his last Chancellor, jolly Tom Cromwell, and lamenting that he had not

got him here now—a pack of rascals had schemed against ‘the best of his servants’ and so brought him to the block, the more’s the pity. Terrible, jovial, at his nod the greatest heads in the kingdom fell, struck by Jove’s thunderbolt,—and then he seemed astonished and annoyed that he was not sufficiently a god to put them on again. She had seen him weep broken-heartedly over his first wife, ‘the best of women,’ over his last one, Kat Howard, ‘the lovely little wretch’—he’d done them both to death but he still loved them. (But no one had ever heard him mention Nan Bullen since her death.)

His present wife, Catherine Parr, had been a widow almost as often and as briefly as King Henry had been a widower. One could not imagine her without a husband, it would have been such a waste of gentle, humorous, infinitely tolerant benevolence. She put a hand on Elizabeth’s arm as the child stood there watching the Ship of State surge on, having laid his grappling arms on Tom Seymour now; you could almost hear the young man’s wiry frame crack as that obese giant flung his free arm round his shoulders.

“Why so pensive, Bess, my sweetheart?” asked Queen Catherine’s pleasant smiling voice.

Bess said demurely, “I was thinking, Madam, of the story of the fisherman my nurse used to tell me.”

“And what was that?”

The royal procession was well past now.

“Oh, there was a flounder in the sea that promised the poor fisherman three wishes, and his wife made him go down night after night to ask them, though the wind rose and the waves roared and at the last he had to bellow through the storm:

*‘Flounder, flounder in the sea,
Come and listen unto me.
Come, for my wife Isabel
Wishes what I dare not tell.’*

For she made him ask first to be King, and then Pope, and then God.”

Catherine shook her head, but the little face remained as blankly innocent as a baby’s. You could not even see that she was frightened, but she was. (‘Dear God, have I gone too far this time again? No, not this time, not with nice soft Pussy-Cat Purr. She’ll see no further than’s good for me—or her.’)

The two were great friends. Elizabeth had a pretty knack with stepmothers. The four that she had known had all been fond of her, one after the other; she had written letters to them in French, Italian and Latin, and this present one made as much a companion of her as if she were grown up. They read French and Latin together, and with little Edward, so much younger than Elizabeth but already the cleverest of the family, and with Mary, so much older, but, in Elizabeth's opinion at any rate, so much the stupidest. Catherine Parr, a born home-maker, was in fact succeeding almost miraculously in making a real home for the King's three ill-assorted children by different mothers.

Family life was a difficult affair with a father who had repudiated two of his six wives, beheaded two others, and bastardized both his daughters; yet Catherine managed to bring to it some sense of coherence and even security. She rescued Edward on the one hand from being utterly overlaid by tutors; and on the other, instead of discouraging Mary from reading in bed at night as did everyone else because it was bad for her weak eyes, she suggested her translating Erasmus's Latin treatises. The poor girl, no longer a girl, badly needed other occupation than fussing over her clothes and other people's babies, and it might flick her pride to read in Udall's preface the praises of modern learning in 'gentlewomen who, instead of vain communication about the moon shining in the water, use grave and substantial talk in Greek or Latin.'

There had been no such need to flick little Bess's mental energy into action. Last New Year's Day the child had given her latest stepmother a present of a prose translation she had made herself of a very long religious poem by the present Queen Marguerite of Navarre, sister to King François I, that brilliantly learned and witty lady. Yet she could perpetrate the 'Mirrour of a Guilty Sowle,' which ran, or rather limped, to a hundred and twenty-eight pages of the Princess Elizabeth's childish but beautifully clear and regular handwriting, and of Queen Marguerite's edifying sentiments expressed in a profusion of confused dullness. But no one could doubt the suitability of the little girl's choice; it would never have done to present a new stepmother with a translation of one of the merry and improper stories in Marguerite's *Heptameron*. Nor were learning and propriety the only qualities displayed in the gift; Elizabeth

had made the canvas binding of the book and embroidered it with gold and silver braid and silken pansies, purple and yellow, and one tiny green leaf; it was the part she had most enjoyed doing—at first; though she got tired of it long before the end, and the stitches went straggly.

She liked to make her own presents, and had always insisted on her own choice in them. At six years old she had flatly refused to give her baby brother Edward any of the jewels or elaborate ornaments that were offered to her as suitable gifts for his second birthday; no, she would have none of them, though tempted momentarily by a bush of rosemary covered with gold spangles, which, however, on reflection she decided to keep for herself. And she carried out her determination of making the baby a cambric shirt.

A small girl so practical and independent was wasted in a royal household, the women decided; Bess was clearly cut out to be a good wife and mother in a poor household with a host of children. But Bess did not agree, though she did not say so. Even at six years old she had become something of an adept at not saying things, though she could not always keep it up, for she was also an adept at pert answers. And nothing could alter her quick and imperious temper, which had shown itself so masterfully before she was quite three years old that her distracted governess had written long garrulous letters to the Lords of the Council about the difficulty of controlling 'my lady's' princely demands for the same wines and meats that her grown-up companions were having at table. Bess's state had been far from princely then; her clothes were all outgrown and there were no new ones for her; she had been sent away into the country with no provision made for her, and her governess at her wits' end as to how to clothe and feed her.

Yet only a very short time before, her father had tossed her up in his arms, and crowds of gorgeous strangers had thronged round her, uttered ecstatic little cries at the sight of her, bowed down to her and pressed glittering toys into her hands.

There was a winter's evening when she was just two and a half years old (she always remembered it, though people said she could only have remembered hearing of it) when that enormous figure, not nearly as stout as now but seeming even taller, and dressed from top to toe in yellow satin like a monstrous giant toad, hoisted

her up on to a vast padded shoulder, where she clutched at the white feather in his flat cap, and carried her round at that dizzy height, showing her off to everybody, shouting, "Thank God the old harridan is dead! Here is your future Queen—Elizabeth!" And all the courtiers shouted back, and the dark crowds in the street below the window where he stood with her, in a terrifying exciting roar, "God save the King! God save the Princess Elizabeth!"

'The old harridan' was her father's first wife and her half-sister Mary's mother, Queen Katherine of Aragon, that noble Spanish princess who had been hounded to death at last by her husband's six-year persecution. That was at the end of January, and by the following May Bess's mother too was dead, her head cut off by her father's orders; and by the next morning he was wedded to Jane Seymour.

Bess did not know that at the time, only that she went away into the country, that there were no more crowds nor shouting for her, that her clothes grew shabby and uncomfortably small for her, and no one was in the least excited or pleased to see her.

*'Here we go up, up, up,
Here we go down, down, down,'*

so the children sang, playing on the see-saw on the village green, but she was not allowed to play with them either. The time of neglect and poverty passed; she went up again, though never to the dizzying height of her first two and a half years; she went back to Court, where, however, a new baby, a tiny boy, was now the centre of all the swaying, bowing crowds, carried aloft on that towering shoulder.

It was he now whom the giant King would dandle and toss in his arms by the hour together, and stand at a window showing him to the crowds below; and their roars would surge up in rugged waves of sound, "God save King Hal!" "God save the Prince!" "Long live Prince Edward!"

The baby's mother, Jane Seymour, was not there. She had died in giving birth to him,—'my poor little Jane,' the King said occasionally with a sob.

He did not seem to like Bess now, he was odd and uncomfortable with her; sometimes she would catch him looking at her with

a strange intent gaze, and then when she looked back he would turn away and talk to someone else. And he never again called her Elizabeth, but only Young Bess, which should have sounded more affectionate, but did not. Long afterwards she guessed that he had ceased to feel her worthy of the name, for he had bestowed it on her in memory of his mother, that gracious and beloved princess, last of the royal Plantagenets, who had given him his most legitimate claim to the throne.

But at the time Bess only knew that she must be very good and quiet and not thrust herself forward. Her half-sister Mary, a grown-up woman, said: "It is your turn now to learn to be silent, as I have done."

She said it on a note of acid triumph, for she had been forced to agree to the Act of Parliament that declared her mother's marriage illegal and herself illegitimate, forced to acknowledge this baby sister's prior right to the throne over herself, to let her take public precedence of her everywhere, and even to serve as maid-of-honour to her. That had been when Elizabeth was 'up, up, up'; now she too had been bastardized and was 'down, down, down,' where Mary had been for many years now. She looked cowed and dull. She was a good woman and did not seek to revenge herself on her small half-sister for the agonies and humiliations she had had to suffer on her behalf; instead she tried hard to be kind to her, but Bess knew she did not like her.

The King talked about finding a new mother for his poor motherless children, and then something opened in Mary's dull face: in one instant it had shut again, but in that instant Bess felt she had seen into hell.

It was not so easy a task by now to find a new Queen for England. The foreign princesses were growing wary. A Danish one said that if she had two heads she would be delighted to lay one at the English King's disposal; a French one, tall and stately, of the House of Guise, was told that Henry wished for her as he was so big himself, he needed a big wife; and she replied, "Ah, but my neck is small." And Mary of Guise had the effrontery to marry his nephew instead, that young whippersnapper King James V of Scotland. Then Tom Cromwell, the 'best of his servants,' engineered a German Protestant alliance and a marriage with the Bavarian prin-