

THE TWO TOMS



Joan watched in horror as the small piglet ran under the grocer's feet, knocking both him and his tray of produce into the air.

"Curse you, you little swine."

The growing crowd of villagers burst into shameless laughter at the poor man's plight. The determined piglet screeched and squealed, running hither and thither, desperate in his latest bid for freedom. While Agnes chased it, the grocer, Able Withers scrambled to his feet, dusting the dirt off his clothes. His eyes were scathing, though more from shame than any real injury to his person.

"Damn you, Miss Joan Larke. Get that bloody pig under control or it won't be the only thing on the chopping block tonight."

"Sorry, sorry." She must have looked a picture herself, bent over and running in shallow circles in her attempt to get the creature back under her control. "It escaped its pen, you see."

More spontaneous laughter. Able Withers was as red as an apple, and looked like a pot about to boil. "I'll be talking to your brother, have no doubt about it. That was my best produce, that was. What will I tell the king's cook now?"

"Oh, save your breath to cool your porridge," said John Barrow, the fishmonger. "The girl couldn't help it. And you've plenty more stock to send King Hal's way, I've no doubt." He jumped, as the small creature circled round to his stall, and scurried under his feet. "What now? Heavens above, someone catch it!"

A well dressed clergyman appeared out of nowhere and, in an instant, had the screaming piglet safe in his arms.

"Such a raucous over such a trifle!" He turned the piglet about and stared in its face. The animal immediately became calm under his care. "Come, come, now there's a handsome fellow if ever I saw one. Whose pig is this?"

Joan stepped forward to claim her prize. For some reason she was suddenly uncomfortable, standing in front of this impeccably dressed man of clear means. Indeed, though they lived within a shadow of King Henry's court, she had rarely met someone with such commanding presence. He oozed authority from his buttoned cap to his cassocked toes. She was not the only one to feel thus, for the mob, who just a moment ago were a thriving mass, seemed to slip away into obscurity. Perhaps they knew who he was. She did not. She lowered her eyes, and brushing the loose cabbage leaves from her gown, blushed deeply.

"The pig is mine, sir."

"Indeed."

The stranger looked her up and down appraisingly. There was no shyness in his gaze, indeed, she thought him rather rude for it, churchman or no. Her courage rallied at his impertinence.

"I am Joan Larke, the daughter of Peter Larke of Huntingdonshire. To whom, sir, do I have the *honor* of addressing?"

"Tom Wolsey, at your most humble service."

"Well then, would you be so kind as to return my pig?"

"Oh, yes, of course."

He stepped forward, and ever so carefully transplanted the distressed animal into her arms. The once placid pig seemed none too eager to be so disposed, and at once set about kicking for

freedom with its hind legs. Whereas a moment ago she was calmly dignified, Joan at once bent double with the effort of keeping it under her control. A snicker went out among the crowd, who were primed and ready for a repeat performance of the animal's mischief.

The young man looked about them, a wicked leer on his face, and seemed eager to join in the frivolity. But then his good manners took charge, and he stepped forward once again and relieved her of her burden. At once the animal grew calm again.

"Perhaps you are not well adapted to animal husbandry, but it is of no consequence. I doubt a pretty face such as yours will spend too much time in squalor with pigs. Which is just as well, for the sake of the pig."

The crowd burst once more into laughter, and feeling the full shame of his impudence, she moved to recover the pig again. Tom stayed her with an outstretched arm. "Do not trouble yourself, madam. Clearly it is my destiny to save you from such a wild beast. Where were you headed?"

"It is no concern of yours."

"And yet I make it my business. Come, child. I am expected at court, but the hour is yet early and I have a little time to tarry. I assume you cannot have far to go, for I can't imagine you were long getting here with this little one."

The crowd waited with bated breath for her answer. Perhaps to argue with him might expose her to more censure. Her stance softened and she took a step back.

"I am staying at my brother's house under his protection. It is less than a mile away, near the palace of Whitehall. His name is Tom Larke."

"Ah, I know the man well. You are his sister you say? Then allow me the honor of walking you and your charge back home, since I head in that direction myself."

How could she refuse him? Indeed, almost the second the words escaped his lips, he turned westward and set off, and she had to

scramble to keep up with him. The amused crowd watched them leave, but soon resumed their daily business.

They walked in silence for a moment, but seeing as how he was doing her a service it seemed rude not to make some enquiry about him. She cleared her throat. "May I ask, what brings you to town?"

"I have business at court."

"You seek employment there? I understand the new king and queen are hiring many men at this time."

"No, not I. I am already acquainted with His Majesty. Indeed, it was his business that took me from court today."

Her eyes narrowed. *Is he trying to impress me?* "Pray tell me, what business might that be?"

He turned and looked her up and down once more, as if she were some object of disdain. His eyes were as hard as flint. *I hate how he does that.*

"Let us just say the king's business is his own. I can say no more than that." After a while he gazed up at the sky, and appeared to admire the gentle clouds as they drifted above them. "Forgive my lack of information. I mean no offense and I respect your politeness. You must understand that I believe the king values my discretion as much as my usefulness to him. That is the thought behind my silence, and nothing else, believe me."

As he gazed at her she thought that at this precise moment he had the most gentle, even playful, gray eyes. How changeable they were. And all in the space of a second. She wondered what kind of a man such as he might be.

"Have you been long at court?"

The pig shifted a little uncomfortably in his arms, then settled down again. "Several years. I was engaged by the late king as his royal chaplain."

She glared at him in surprise. "Oh, indeed. Should I be impressed?"

"Most are."

"And yet here you are, carrying my pig like any humble courtier."

If you are who you say you are, then would it not be beneath your dignity to carry on thus?"

"Perhaps. Or perhaps, like any red-blooded man, I am helpless under the spell of a pretty face."

She stopped and rounded on him. "Man of the cloth or no, do not forget yourself. I am no wench for the taking. My family is well-connected and respectable, and you will do well to remember that."

The corners of his mouth twitched in amusement. "Duly noted. Forgive me. I am your chastised humble servant. Will that do?"

The fire in her abated. "For the present." She resumed her pace beside him. Looking ahead, her brother's abode loomed just a little farther down the road. She pointed it out to him.

"I am there."

He nodded. "I am familiar with the place, though I have not had the honor of an invitation within its walls. Perhaps one day I may hope for such an invitation?"

Not if I can help it, fine eyes or no. "Perhaps."

As they reached her yard, she removed the animal from his arms and set it down in its pen. "No more escaping, you troublesome little swine, or I'll make sausages out of you before supper."

Tom laughed. "Tis a pity the way of things, for I have cause to thank the animal who has done me a great service."

"Oh? Pray, what service would that be?"

"He brought me to you."

Joan could not see her own face but she felt the glow of her cheeks. *Is there no end to this man's audacity?* "You are too free with your words, sir. I would forgive much of a man of the cloth, but not the liberties you take. Good day to you."

She was about to turn in, when the door to the house opened and her brother stepped outside and marched loudly across the graveled path to join them. Her brother was a slender man, with strawberry-blond hair and an easy, if somewhat effeminate

manner. Right now he had a broad grin on his face and seemed most eager to join them.

"Wolsey, my friend. To what do I owe the honor?"

"One of your piglets was a little too eager to get to market. And judging by his size I would say long before his time. I assisted your sister in returning him home."

Her brother's jaw dropped in wonder. Clearly he thought such a kindness beneath the man's dignity as well. He turned from one to the other in surprise. "Then it seems you have met my sister, Joan."

"I have indeed."

"Thank the man, Joan, for his kind attentions." Joan stood stubbornly silent. "Forgive my mule sibling, for she does not know the elevation of the man to whom she is indebted."

Tom Wolsey smiled his most disarming smile. "Believe me, it is no matter. I owe your sister an apology for the rudeness of my former address."

Her brother looked even more baffled than before. "Perhaps I could tempt you inside? My house boasts some fair mead and wine; the latter just arrived from Italy. I would welcome your discerning word on the vintage." He turned to Joan. "No man in England can boast a finer palette than my friend here. He is famed for his appreciation of all good things, and his cellar is reputed to be as well-stocked as even the king's."

"Idle talk, Tom, idle talk. But I say yes to your kind invitation. Though I can stay but an hour or so as the king expects me in court by midday."

"Wonderful." Her brother held out his arms, ushering them both back to the house. He looked at Joan appraisingly, in a way he had not done before, and his look left her unsettled. Her brother was an ambitious man, and she would do well not to get mixed up in his aspirations. He skipped around them both, and soon had the front door open wide to receive them. "Come in, come in."

Theirs was no grand house. Her brother kept few servants, but

he put them in such a spin it seemed there was twice as many as there really were.

"See at once to my Lord Wolsey's comfort."

"Bring the new wine and glasses."

"Add more wood to the fire."

"Make haste. Make haste!"

Joan went to assist them, but her brother called her back.

"Stay with us and entertain my dear friend."

Odd. He had never encouraged her so before. Quite the contrary. Usually when he had company, he preferred her immediate absence. And he called him his dear friend. It was strange then, that he had never mentioned him before this day.

She moved to a seat in the corner of the room, and took up her embroidery hoop, hoping they would soon forget she was there. The two men sat at her brother's table, and her brother began speaking most animatedly.

"How are things at court? I understand the new king is most enchanted with his beautiful queen, and cannot bear to be long from the bedchamber. The whole nation anticipates a quick heir. I almost pity the poor woman, for I fear she will not be often without a royal offspring in her belly. Still, I'm sure they are making the most of things as they are, before the royal nurseries are too swollen with heirs of the blood."

She lowered her eyes. It was not fitting for her to hear such a conversation. Her heart swelled with embarrassment, and though she willed her brother to stop, he would not.

"And we hear such jolly things of court. And of such licentious behavior! The king wanted a renaissance; well he has one, of sorts. I for one am glad of his policy on courtiers. Such handsome faces can only elevate the spirits, don't you think? And he has engaged the best musicians and poets. Truly gay times are ahead for all. It is especially pleasing considering the policy of the late king, who as we know, was as avaricious as they come."

The wine arrived, and the servant poured out three goblets.

Joan looked up, only to see Wolsey's eyes were burning into her. She was grateful for the distraction of the wine, and sipped it quietly.

"Still, with all this playfulness and gaiety, one wonders who exactly is managing the affairs of the kingdom."

Wolsey turned the conversation, almost as if he hadn't been listening at all. "I wonder that your sister sits so far off from us. Is she always this modest? Or does she have a particular aversion to me?"

Her brother, who had not stopped prattling from the moment they had stepped inside, laughed nervously, and shot her an imploring look. "No, no, of course not. She is merely a good example of modest femininity. She rarely speaks unless spoken to."

"Really?" He looked amused. "I did not find her so earlier. Indeed quite the opposite. When I met her in the market she was running around most decidedly."

"Oh, let me apologize to you on her behalf."

"There is no need. It was very diverting. And I am in ever great need of such sweet diversion."

Her brother's shrewd gaze narrowed. "Come, Joan. Join us at the table. I insist upon it."

What sister could disobey her brother? But how she wanted to disobey him at that moment. She put down her hoop most reluctantly, and sat down at the far end of the table.

"Good gracious, child. We don't bite. Come hither. Sit next to the good chaplain. He would like to converse with you."

Her cheeks were burning with shame, but what could she do, so directly summoned? *Why was I cursed with such a brother?* She was so close to Wolsey she could hear him breathe. He smelled strangely of oranges, but it was not an unpleasant smell.

"You never told me you had a sister, Tom."

Her brother looked lost for words, but then recovered them quickly. A false grin distorted his handsome features. "Was I supposed to? You're always so serious at court."

"I am a man of business, as you know. But as you also know, I have a reputation for enjoying the finer things." He held his goblet to his nose and sniffed it carefully. "And may I say your sister, rather like this wine, is exquisite."

She wished the ground would swallow her whole. *How could they be so uncouth and unfeeling?* Was she not sitting right there, inches from them both?

"Though I fancy she would taste more like French rosé than an Italian wine at this moment. Look at her blush."

She rose from her seat so quickly it scraped loudly across the stone floor. Her curtsy was awkward; she would run from the room if she could. "I beg your leave, sirs. I must go to my room." But she could not get away so easily.

"You will return to your seat until you are dismissed, Joan. And not a moment before. Do not embarrass me thus in front of the good chaplain. Remember where you are."

With a heavy heart she sat down again, but she could not look at either one of them. Instead her gaze remained fixed on the oak table. She folded her hands and toyed nervously with her late mother's ring. *Please, God, save me from the ambitions of men. Even the holy ones.*

"I fear we have made Miss Joan uneasy. Come, Tom, let us not be barbaric. Though we have grown used to the wickedness of court, it does not follow your sister appreciates the humor." He took another sip of his wine and closed his eyes in appreciation. "I must say I've rarely tasted a better. Such a vintage would do well in my cellars. Where did you acquire it?"

"There is a new merchant in Greenwich. I would gladly recommend him to you."

"Indeed, I would welcome it."

Though her eyes were lowered she could see her brother cast a cunning look in her direction. "Perhaps I could tempt you with an offer of dinner, when you are less engaged, perhaps? Then you may taste the hospitality of my home at your leisure."

Wolsey also glanced over her way, but whatever thought lurked behind those gray eyes was now much less fathomable. "I would be delighted. Though I can't vouch for my engagements now. Let me send a man to you this afternoon to name a suitable date. Regrettably I must take my leave now, the hour grows late and the king's business will not wait."

"Very good. I look forward to our next meeting."

"As do I."

They all rose from the table and the two men shook hands warmly. Joan kept her head down and hoped he would be in too much of a hurry to embrace her formally, as was the custom.

"God keep you, Mistress Joan," he said.

Then Wolsey clasped her shoulders, and kissed her on the mouth. She had been kissed thus many times before, but there was something in his manner of his parting that left her uneasy. Perhaps he had lingered on her lips a little longer than he should, or perhaps she simply imagined he had done so. Either way, she trembled from head to toe, and could not now raise her eyes, even if she wanted to.

She was aware of the two men brushing past, and somewhere in her brain she heard the door close, but she was not herself. She folded her hands nervously in front of her velvet gown and walked to the window. Though Wolsey looked anxious to leave, her brother could not stop his endless prattling, and she doubted he would ever let him go. But Wolsey's command of the situation was greater, and with a raise of his hand, halted her brother mid-sentence. She watched with wonder as he marched quickly up the lane. What a strange man. And then he turned a corner, and was gone.

Her brother waited until the good chaplain was out of sight before returning inside.

"Well, that was a fortunate encounter."

"Tom, how could you? I have never felt so ashamed in my life."

You practically threw me at him. Are you so determined to ruin my prospects for a respectable marriage?"

"Hold your tongue, sister. Do you not know who that great man is?"

"He is a chaplain, like yourself."

"Yes, but he also has the ear of the king. The whispers at court are that he trusts him with all his affairs. All of them."

"What of it?"

"Are you still such a child?" Her brother rolled his eyes, as if he were explaining the simplest of things to a total idiot. "Wolsey is a coming man. They say that despite his humble origins, his estate has grown rapidly, and that he is destined to be one of the most powerful men in all of England. They say he is a man to be reckoned with."

"They say, they say! Well, what is all this to me? He is a man of the church, a servant of God. He cannot marry me. So there is nothing to it, and you're wasting your time, brother."

"The Lord gave them eyes yet they do not see. Wake up, little sister. This is an opportunity for us all. We would be foolish to shirk it."

"We, we, we. What would it be to *you*? If I understand you correctly, there would be little for you to do at all."

Tom stepped over to the window, and though Wolsey was long gone, his eyes looked wistfully after him. "The Lord works in mysterious ways, my dear. And who are we to interfere?"