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The Lady Grace Mysteries: Intrigue

Grace Cavendish



THE
LADY GRACE
MYSTERIES



INTRIGUE
Grace Cavendish

Jan Burchett and Sara Vogler are writing as Grace Cavendish

RED FOX



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For Eileen and Alan Barnes,
with thanks for all the wonderful
holidays, and all the ones to come.



For Mine Eyes Only

The most secrete Daybooke
of my Lady Grace Cavendish,
Maid of Honour to Her Gracious Majesty
Queen Elizabeth I of that name

At Her Majesty's Palace of
Whitehall, Westminster



Also available in
THE LADY GRACE MYSTERIES series

ASSASSIN
BETRAYAL
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DECEPTION
EXILE
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The Eleventh Day of August, in the Year of Our Lord 1570



In my bedchamber, early afternoon

I have a new daybooke. And I have something exciting to write in it. We are going to Southwark to see a play this very afternoon! The whole Court is in a rush to be ready, for we must leave within the hour. Mrs Champernowne, the Mistress of the Maids, has us all in a tizzy. Carmina Willoughby and Lady Jane Coningsby have scuttled to their bedchamber to change, and here in our chamber, Mary Shelton is choosing a hat to wear and the ever-so-modest Lady Sarah Bartelmy is flapping about which sleeves will best compliment her 'beautiful copper locks'.

Faith! I hope she does not look over my shoulder and see what I have written about her.



A few moments later

I stopped writing and announced that I am thinking of putting down prayers for special use before bedtime. Now no one will bother to look over my shoulder. In any case, Lady Sarah usually dismisses my writing as silly scribbling.

If she only knew some of the adventures I have recorded in my daybookes!

I am trying not to fidget with excitement about the play we are going to see. I have watched plays before, but always at Court and never at an inn, which is where most people see them. Today we go to the inn where the players are performing because Her Majesty is all impatience to see the play and will not wait for them to come to the palace and set everything up here. I think this play will have us all on the edge of our seats, for it deals with a murder. I can hardly wait!

I am sitting having my hair styled - by Ellie Bunting. I still cannot get used to the idea that my dear friend Ellie is now my tiring woman. I am more grateful than I can say that Her Majesty gave Ellie her new position last month and saved her from the drudgery of the laundry. It was no more than Ellie deserved for being most brave in helping to solve a mystery that had upset the whole Court.

I know Ellie is very happy too - especially as she has escaped the dreadful Mrs Fadget, deputy laundress and scourge of her life. It has only been a matter of weeks but already Ellie is less skinny now that she has enough food. She looks very fine today in my old blue kirtle. It is a relief that I can now give her clothes and no one will accuse her of stealing them.

Hell's teeth! Ellie has just mistaken my scalp for a pincushion! Luckily I only cried 'Ouch!' and nothing worse. There are some trials to having such a diligent tiring woman - although I must say that Ellie has taken to her new duties like a duck to water and wastes no time in getting me dressed. Today she chose my green gown with the ivy-leaf aiglets and said she knew just how she would adorn my hair. Ellie has developed a love of fashion. She takes more time over how I look than I would myself. She is forever talking to the other tiring women and committing

to memory all that they tell her. Then she improves upon their ideas. At least, she tells me they are improvements.

Last week she insisted upon trying to lighten my hair with a solution of lemon juice and lime wash. I could not see any difference in the colour of my mousy brown tresses, yet they did seem softer. And she never complains about my hair being shorter than it should. I suppose she would not dare. She was the one who cut it, after all! But it was all upon Her Majesty's service last year, when I had to be *incognito* and dress as a boy.

Faith, I have done many strange things since I took on the secret role of Her Majesty's Lady Pursuivant, seeking out all those who would trouble the Queen's peace. But I am going off the point again! Back to my news of the play - which is very exciting.

We first heard of it at the noontide meal not long since. Our goblets had just been refilled when Lady Ann Courtenay said the words that made me nearly jump off my chair with excitement.

'Has Your Majesty heard of the play that is to be performed at Southwark?'

'I have not, Lady Ann,' said the Queen, looking interested. 'What can you tell me of it?'

'The play has been performed in Kent and has now come to the Key Inn,' Lady Ann informed Her Majesty eagerly. 'It seems that the troupe are erecting a stage in the inn courtyard, and plan to put on their first performance this very afternoon. It is said to be a most unusual and fascinating play, but that is all I know.'

The Queen gave a laugh. 'I hope the good people of Southwark are better informed on the subject than you, my lady,' she said. 'Else no one will be interested enough to see this new play!'

I felt quite cross with Lady Ann for not knowing more, even though it was not really her fault. I had been hoping that a vivid description of the play would make the Queen want to see it without delay.

But Lord Robert, the Earl of Leicester, unknowingly came to my rescue. He leaned forward to Her Majesty, in that private way he has, just as if the two of them were alone. 'The play is called *Intrigue*,' he murmured, 'and is reported to have a stunning death scene at the end.'

There was a hubbub round the table at this and I wanted to shout, 'Please, please say we can go and see it, Your Majesty!' Of course, Lady Sarah and Lady Jane pretended to be unnerved by the mention of the word 'death' so that they could lean upon their gentleman neighbours and flutter their eyelashes at them. Jane and Sarah are the most competitive ladies at Court when it comes to men's attentions.

Lady Margaret Mortimer, who up till now has been one of the quietest Ladies-in-Waiting I have ever known, put down her goblet with a clatter. 'My Lord Robert!' she exclaimed. 'Is this not the play that sets up a puzzle for the audience?'

And then Lord Robert forgot his usual haughtiness and smiled. 'Yes, indeed. The play is well named, for it does sound intriguing. One of the characters is mysteriously killed and there is a prize for anyone who can guess the identity of the murderer.'

This sounded better and better! I love a good mystery, but the Queen was still unconvinced.

'But word will surely have been passed round by now,' she said, 'and many people will know the answer!'

'It seems not, My Liege,' replied Lord Robert. 'No one has managed to work the puzzle out yet. And, just to be

sure, the audience is sworn to secrecy at the end of every performance.'

Now at last I saw a sparkle in the Queen's eyes. 'How interesting!' she said. 'Why did nobody tell me? I can never resist a puzzle.' She paused, frowning in concentration. Then, 'We shall see this play!' she announced. 'We shall all go to the Key Inn this very afternoon!'

There is only one thing that worries me now: I fear Her Majesty might change her mind - she is famous for doing that. Immediately Mrs Champernowne got into such a fluster.

'We have little time for the Maids to be ready, My Liege,' she fretted.

'They will have as long as I,' said the Queen pointedly. 'And I will not be tardy.'

I breathed a sigh of relief. I knew I could be ready in time. But then Her Majesty's faithful councillor, Mr Secretary Cecil, put his oar in and began to deliver a veritable sermon on the evils of the village of Southwark.

'You will be venturing into a most unsavoury place, filled with all manner of low life and filth, Your Majesty,' he intoned. Ladies Jane and Sarah seized this opportunity to gasp and look frightened as he then expounded at length on the horrors of Southwark. Unfortunately he did not give any details. I bent towards Mary Shelton; she always knows everything.

'What horrors does he mean?' I whispered.

'I'll warrant he is thinking of the many gambling and drinking dens,' she whispered back.

'Oh.' I nodded.

'And the bull and bear-baiting rings that excite more gambling and drinking among the common folk!'

I shuddered; I hate seeing animals injured or killed for sport.

'And, of course, with all that gambling and drinking, the folk are fair prey to having their purses cut and stolen,' Mary told me. 'It is a paradise for thieves, by all accounts.'

'Oh, dear!' I murmured. But I was thinking that all this would be exciting to see - from the safety of the Queen's entourage, of course.

'I pray you reconsider, Your Majesty,' Secretary Cecil was saying. 'The players can be summoned here to Court to perform in a few days time.'

'Dear Mr Cecil,' said the Queen when he had finished, 'your concern for my wellbeing does you credit, but I would see this play without delay.'

I could have leaped from my seat and hugged her, but no one is allowed to do that to the Queen.

Secretary Cecil bowed his head and turned to Mr Hatton, the Captain of the Gentlemen of the Guard. 'We must send men to prepare,' he said. Mr Hatton nodded.

Ellie has just picked up a handful of trinkets which she is now weaving into my hair. She is determined to be the best tiring woman ever. I think she feels she owes it to Her Majesty for the trust the Queen has placed in her.

A funny thing happened just now. Olwen was lacing on Lady Sarah's wrist ruffs when Sarah exclaimed, 'I am so looking forward to this play!' and raised her hand dramatically to her brow as if she were on the stage herself. Poor Olwen was pulled forward so violently that she fell on top of her mistress!

'And to think,' added Mary Shelton, once everyone was on their feet again, 'if we were still on progress, as we should have been, we would have missed it altogether!'