

CHAPTER THREE:

THE QUEEN'S LOVER

Gladys' son Roger fought valiantly and with distinction in the civil wars that racked England during the reign of Henry III, and showed himself a stalwart supporter of the crown. He even gave his son the Saxon name of Edmund in imitation of the new monarch who succeeded Henry in 1272—King Edward I. Edmund Mortimer helped the new king pacify Wales and was a favored member of the court at London. So his own son, another Roger, born in 1287, was in a potentially strategic position in royal circles in 1307 when Edward I died and his son Edward II took over.

It was easy to imagine my ambitious young ancestor at the age of twenty, as he took the stage as a supernumerary at the big coronation.

February 23, 1308: A King Is Crowned

Roger Mortimer lifted his end of the jewel-studded pallet bearing the royal robes. Old Edward's handsome young son, the new king, stood waiting for the procession to move forward. Now might be the time, Roger thought, maybe today, tomorrow, definitely soon. The old king had had his favorites, his own men; it hadn't been easy for a young man from the marches of Wales to make his mark. But the new king, this young blonde god now waiting to have a crown placed on his head, would still be looking around for people to form his own court. He already had a best friend, Piers Gaveston, the fellow

from Gascony—but quite likely he would be open to making new acquaintances.

Roger and the other honorary bearers deposited their rich burden at the altar. Then the service proceeded, and the coronation continued on to its final moment. As the archbishop bowed and backed away from his new sovereign, Edward II smiled uncertainly, his head nodding under the weight of the giant crown, his hands awkwardly balancing the gleaming gold orb and scepter.

Roger's father had always told him: "Stick with the king!" Others of the barons had turned to rebellion, intrigue: "But the Mortimers have always been loyal to the crown." And, his father would point out that, though his grandfather Ralph had originally been merely one of many marcher barons, over the past decades the ever-loyal Mortimers had become royal advisers and even regents.

Roger eyed the partial profile of Joan de Geneville, the girl in the violet headdress who stood next to the Countess of Sussex. Estates. Many, many estates. In England, Wales, France. A fine prospect for some lucky fellow. She wasn't bad-looking either. He stared as she turned and caught his eye. Her eyes dropped and she looked away. Aha! he thought.

That night, as he was fucking away determinedly, his pelvis whomping into the nice plump belly of the red-haired serving-girl, he fantasized about Joan. Land, he must have land. Then perhaps offices, and another, more magnificent title.

The girl grunted and moaned. "Oh, oh!"

He stopped his stroking to recover sensation and then began again more furiously.

"Yes, milord. Yes, yes." Her small teeth glinted in a tight smile, like some kind of animal.

Herds of cattle, broad acres of forest and meadow.

His mind expanded into some cool clear paradisiacal place. Then suddenly he came with a searing burst of heat, trembling all over; he let himself collapse, falling into a doze. Awakening shortly afterward, he restrained his impatience. He

patted the girl on the behind. "Oh, it's so good to lie here in bed with my sweet girl!"

She giggled.

"But you have to go now." He prodded her out of the bed. As she dressed, he fished in his purse and gave her three silver pennies. As the girl closed the door behind her, he wondered if after all, the marriage might be possible. The new king must have influence with the Genevilles. Now he, Roger, needed to develop some influence with Edward. Perhaps through the people around the king. Piers Gaveston, for example. Hmm. He didn't know Piers—not yet.

After dessert at the feast the next afternoon celebrating the coronation, there was a place empty next to Gaveston, and Roger eased himself into it. Gaveston turned to him at once.

"Well," he said, "I was wondering when I would have a chance to meet the charming young fellow with the black curly hair."

"I'm most honored, milord."

Gaveston smoothed down his own long brown tresses with one languid hand. "One meets so few interesting people at this court."

"I'm just a run-of-the-mill fellow from the Welsh marches."

Gaveston reached over and patted his hand. "Don't be modest, Lord Mortimer. One should know one's own worth—always!" And he smiled broadly. "Do you play chess, milord?"

Piers Gaveston's chambers in the palace were furnished sparsely, but with expensive plate, silk cushions, glass lamps, and a few pieces of fine old oak furniture, stained dark to show the grain. Gaveston moved the bishop along the black diagonal,

seeming to threaten Roger's queen. Roger sat a moment, thinking. Was he the kind to lose a game to? Or would he appreciate a strong opponent? Roger took a guess and moved his queen three spaces.

"Check!" he said.

Gaveston's eyes opened wide. "Oh, you devil!" He clucked. "You mean 'Mate,' you tricky fellow." He reached under the table and grasped Roger's thigh gently.

Roger thought: I was afraid of this. But he steeled himself and held himself absolutely still. When Gaveston moved his hand higher, he took his own hand and patted Gaveston on the arm.

"You're a devilishly attractive fellow," said Gaveston.

"I like you too, milord."

Gaveston smiled. "You'd better call me 'Piers,' Roger."

"Piers," said Roger firmly.

"Dear Roger," whispered Gaveston, leaning over and putting his face close to his.

Roger lay back; after a good deal of effort, he had finally succeeded in making Gaveston come. Well, he supposed he could get used to all this. Already at his age, life was turning out to be not such a straightforward business.

"Are you happy, darling?" said Gaveston.

"Yes, of course."

"I'm sorry, I must rush, the king is waiting for me." He kissed Roger.

"Oh—yes." Roger frowned.

Gaveston looked concerned. "Are you all right? Do you need anything?"

"No. Well. Only a wife, milord—Piers."

"A wife? How droll!" He laughed. "Ask me about it again sometime."

"I will. I will—dear. You can count on it."

A Word from King John

After I had posted this much to the website, I received another of the dreaded e-mails:

William:

I really wish that you wouldn't play up all this Sodom-and-Gomorrah type material. Homosexuality is a fact of life; I had to deal with it as a boy, watching my brother make a fool of himself with a repulsive string of catamites. It's in all family trees, including ours, but let's not emphasize it unduly "Finally succeeded in making Gaveston come"! After all! Just the facts, please, not so much disgusting description!

Besides, all of this is wrong, anyway!

JR, Rex

Well. There was obviously no point in trying to bring the king up to date on the gay scene—the world had changed a bit in over seven hundred years. Imagine even trying to explain the change in meaning of the adjective "gay" since his time! I wasn't in the political correctness game, anyway. Maybe, I thought, it would help if I moved on in the narrative to the more heterosexual parts of the plot. How about the Isabella factor, for instance?

But what did he mean by saying that "all of this was wrong"?

March, 1308: The Young Queen

"And who is that dark young man with the blonde lady, Your Grace?" Queen Isabella, thirteen years old and a brand-new bride newly arrived from France, indicated with a movement of her head the couple at the upper end of the line of dancers.

The king peered shortsightedly toward the end of the hall. “Oh, that’s Mortimer and his wife Joan. One of the marcher barons.”

“‘Marcher baron’—what is that?”

“They protect the border with Wales. It’s very important to have good men out there.”

Gaveston leaned forward from his place just behind her and the king. “And this Roger Mortimer is an especially good one. For years and years, the Mortimers have been staunch in support of the crown.” His mouth almost touched her ear.

“Really?” she said sharply. She pulled forward, away from him, annoyed. She thought she could not seem to escape this man Gaveston: he was always at one’s elbow.

When the movements of the dance figure brought her up face-to-face with Roger Mortimer, she curtsied to him. “I understand you are from Wales, Lord Mortimer.”

“Ah no, I don’t actually live in Wales, but the Welsh border is quite nearby. If you would care to so favor us with a visit sometime, Your Grace, Lady Mortimer and I would be happy to show you the Welsh mountains—they are quite magnificent.”

“Oh,” she said. “What a lovely idea.”

Mortimer bowed low and then straightened up and looked her right in the eye. “We would be so honored.” He smiled, bowed very low, and kissed her hand.

“Milord,” she said.

At least he doesn’t treat me like a child, she thought. She looked at her new husband and frowned.

Queen Isabella and her Thoughts

Ah, the plot is thickening. The very young Queen Isabella is already casting her eye on our hero. But perhaps you might be thinking that she would soon be distracted from our hero by the Scottish patriot William Wallace, as Mel Gibson has it in his jolly film *Braveheart*, where she was shown dallying with Wallace, and bearing his child, the future Edward III. But

no, that couldn't possibly have happened in real life: Wallace was dead before Isabella even arrived in England. On the other hand, though it's evident Isabella had to have met Roger early on, history isn't clear on when she took up with the young Lord Mortimer; and I for one was not going to try to guess what went on in her heart in those years immediately following the coronation. But still, I could imagine the young girl, a teenager, filing away the memory of the handsome dark man who looked on her as a woman. As opposed to that smirking sycophant Gaveston, who treated her like an annoying obstacle to his own loving friendship with her royal husband!

Hunting for Men: Summer, 1309

The falcon alighted on Roger's wrist, still holding the crane, which was so heavy that it flopped over his arm. He eased the crane, one wing still weakly flapping, out of the falcon's grip. The huntsman drew his dagger and stabbed the crane. He extracted the tiny throbbing heart and fed it to the falcon.

"A nice kill," said the earl of Lancaster, smiling. His dark curly beard partially hid his repulsively pock-marked face.

Roger gazed out over the wide meadows going down to the river and into the elm woods on the other side. He felt a vast pleasure from looking over his new property of Wembley. The king had been gracious with his presents.

"Yes, Lord Lancaster."

Lancaster rode somewhat apart from the rest and motioned for Roger to join him.

"Things are coming to a head on this Gaveston business," he said.

Roger nodded. "Aha."

"We *would* like to know that you're with us."

Roger pursed his lips. "Why should I go against the wishes of the king?"

Lancaster shook his head irritably. "The king has brought this on himself. This favoritism is ruining England."

“I suppose my friend Piers has overreached himself.”
Mortimer threw up his hands. “But still!”

“You know all of the nobles who are with us.”

“Including Pembroke?”

Lancaster frowned. “No. Not yet, anyway.”

“I see.” Roger’s friend the earl of Pembroke was a moderate, and very influential among the peerage. If Lancaster hadn’t gotten his cooperation, well.

Lancaster looked annoyed. “We *will* succeed, and *then* we’ll know who our friends are.”

Roger stopped himself a moment before answering. He didn’t like to respond in anger. Even if he had trusted in Lancaster’s schemes, he would have resented being threatened.

“You must know Gaveston has been my friend,” he said. But, he thought, he *was* glad that the handsome and lascivious Piers had long ago decided to seek his caresses elsewhere.

“Oh, ‘friend.’ Milord, eventually Gaveston will forget all about friendship and will manage to cheat you out of your lands too, the way he has done to me and all the others.”

Roger shrugged and pointed toward the river. “Shall we set the falcons loose again, milord?”

Lancaster shook his head. “No, I must go. Time presses.”

He took his leave.

“Time presses,” indeed! Roger thought Lancaster and his friends would probably succeed in getting rid of Gaveston. Eventually. Poor Piers! But then what? A new king? Who? Not clumsy, undiplomatic Lancaster, even if he was the king’s uncle.

So if they succeeded in destroying Gaveston, all they would have at the end was an unhappy King Edward. No thank you! Loyalty made much more sense. “Stick with the crown.” His father had been dead right.

Wigmore (Shropshire), Fall, 1310

The new tapestries depicting the blue owls with yellow eyes glowed in the candlelight. Joan leaned over and ran her hands through his hair. “Are we going to have fun in Ireland, sweetheart?”

Roger made a face. “That depends on the Irish.”

She sat up and examined her face in a hand mirror. “You don’t seem very happy about going over there.”

“I’m not. Not particularly.”

She pouted. “Do you think I’m putting on weight?”

“Lord, no. Let’s go back to sleep.”

“Do we *have* to go over there? I hate to be away from the children. And I thought the king had sent you a writ to join him for the Scottish expedition.”

“I’m pretending I never got that writ. The vultures, my dear, are gathering around Gaveston. Now Pembroke’s joined them too; and he’s hinted to me that far-off Ireland would be a good place to be for a while—especially for an extremely loyal subject of the king like me.”

“But Piers is your friend, Roger.”

“I like kissing you better than him, my dear.”

“Idiot! You know what I mean.”

“My ‘friend’ is going around calling Lancaster ‘The Fiddler’ and Pembroke ‘Joseph the Jew.’ God knows what he’s decided to call me behind my back. His head’s gotten much too big for his neck, and someone’s going to cut it off for him.”

“But you always say, ‘Stick with the crown.’”

“All other things being equal, right now I’d rather be a loyal subject from the safe distance of Ireland.”

“Oh.” Joan nodded.

“In Ireland,” he said, tickling her ribs. “Lying in bed with my sweet wife.”

“Oh, Roger!” she said, licking his ear. “You fool!”

Outside London, August, 1321

The table in front of Roger was piled high with rolls of parchment. He had been in Ireland when Piers Gaveston was finally killed by his enemies, and the king and the rebels had been temporarily reconciled. But since Roger's triumphal return to England after successfully pacifying Ireland, the king had acquired a new favorite, Hugh Despenser. As a result of Despenser's arrogance and greed, open hostilities had once again broken out between the king and the rebel nobles; and now all England was in turmoil.

At last everything seemed to be coming to a head, Roger thought, in this one dank room in the main hall of the priory of St. John at Clerkenwell, where the rebel lords had their headquarters. London was entirely surrounded. The king was essentially a prisoner of Lancaster, Hereford and Mortimer himself.

Lord Richmond entered. He had come to negotiate for the king. "I never expected to see you a rebel, Lord Mortimer."

"We wear the king's livery, Lord Richmond." Roger felt self-conscious. He knew his answer ignored the fact that the king was virtually a prisoner of theirs, trapped inside the city walls of London. The royal forces had essentially lost the struggle. The king had to be made to see reason, Roger thought.

Lord Richmond shook his head. "Give up on this, Mortimer. You can't win in the long run."

"You've known me a long time, Richmond. I've always stuck with the king. I stuck with him through the struggle over Gaveston. But now, he's let Hugh Despenser ruin the kingdom."

"If you held with him through the trouble with Gaveston, why not in this business with Despenser?"

Roger smiled. "Perhaps because at the battle of Evesham, my grandfather killed Despenser's grandfather with his own hands; your friend Hugh Despenser has made it clear that he hasn't forgotten that fact. I'm sticking with my king as much as I can; but Hugh Despenser is getting in the way. Our quarrel is with Despenser, not with King Edward."

"You can't question a monarch's choice of advisers."

Roger nodded. “We’ll see about that. Just take the king our ultimatum, Richmond. We insist on the banishment of Lord Despenser. And when I say ‘we,’ you know how many of the barons of England are behind me. Most of them. Strictly for your sake, I hope you and I don’t meet next with swords in hand.”

Richmond bowed and left. Roger Mortimer felt a sickening fear rising in him. He suspected he might shortly find himself without a king. He had certainly gone a step or two beyond any position his father and grandfather had been in. But how could he stick to the king when the king only listened to the Mortimers’ mortal enemy, Despenser? It was lonely in this new status—but at least he was in charge of his own fate. Die free—or be a slave, he told himself.

Pitfalls of Success

Shortly after the preceding scene, the king saw he was faced with losing the city of London, and he capitulated to the rebels. He sent the Depensers into exile and gave full pardons to Roger Mortimer and his allies. But hatred and fear of Hugh Despenser and his uncle had been the glue that had held the alliance of the rebel lords together. Within two years, Lancaster, Pembroke, and Mortimer started to quarrel among themselves, and their cooperative efforts against the king faltered; meantime, the king had had gained time and collected money to develop new friends among the nobility. He not only raised a formidable army, he also achieved some success in making his enemies look like mere disloyal malcontents. By the summer of 1323, Roger Mortimer found himself unable to resist the royal forces any longer; he was taken prisoner and sent to the Tower of London.

Tower of London, August 1, 1323

Richard de Monmouth, Roger’s right-hand man and fellow prisoner, cocked an ear. “Do you hear something, Lord Mortimer?”

“I’m not sure. I think it’s early yet. Gerard said he’d have to wait until everything was quiet.”

The cell-like chamber was situated high up in the Tower of London. The moon would not rise for hours yet, and the tiny corner of the sky visible through the smoke vent was quite dark. A single candle lit Monmouth’s face.

“Don’t be afraid, Richard,” said Roger. “He’ll be here. Gerard d’Alspey is tired of working as a flunkey in a prison for traitors.”

Just then they heard a scraping sound.

“There he is!” said Richard. The scraping continued.

Roger began praying to St. Peter—it was the feast day of St. Peter ad Vinculum. In his prayer, he promised to build a chapel in St. Peter’s honor at Ludlow.

A long hour later, a stone in the wall trembled, there came thumps and rumbles, then the stone pushed out and fell forward onto the floor. A crowbar poked through.

“Milord,” came a voice.

“Thank God,” said Roger.

Soon they were helping Gerard d’Alspey haul more stones out of the way.

Finally they crawled out through the widened passage, coming out with their clothes covered in the crumbled mortar. “The others are all asleep, I put the powder in their wine,” said Gerard.

The three of them made their way down the stairs and into the kitchen. The cook pretended not to see them as they climbed up through the huge chimney and onto the roof. They had to work their way across to the inner wall. Gerard had brought a rope ladder, and they let themselves down and made their way across the yard to the outer wall. They climbed that, descending on the other side into the stinking marshes along the Thames. Two boatmen were waiting for them, and, in the darkness, they crossed over to Greenwich.

“Greetings, milord!” said one of Roger’s men from Ludlow, leading him to the horses. They rode toward

Portchester. Twice they had to stop and hide themselves as riders, probably the king's soldiers in pursuit, passed. At Portchester they took a boat to the Isle of Wight and then boarded the merchant ship of one of Roger's friends and set sail immediately for France.

Roger was a free man again. Now what? He was an exile, a fugitive. He needed new friends on the continent. He also needed a way to get back to England safely, and a means of scotching the power of his enemies there. His enemies had the all-important support of the king. But there was another king—in France. Maybe King Charles could be someone Roger could stick to—at least in this critical moment.

The Queen's Troubles

King Edward and his henchman Despenser, unable after some months to catch up with Mortimer, vented their anger on his friends and family. Now, we don't know if Isabella and Roger already had established some kind of relationship at this point, but it is evident that Edward suspected that they did. He confiscated all of Isabella's lands and sources of income; he also took her children from her. He replaced all the members of her household with his own spies. Isabella understandably reacted badly to this shabby treatment.

Her resentment backfired on the king two years later when Isabella's brother, Charles, the king of France, threatened to confiscate Gascony—unless Isabella came over to France to arrange a new treaty between France and England. Rather than lose his duchy in France, Edward apprehensively sent his angry wife to Paris—accompanied by a retinue of his toadies and spies. The king did take the precaution of asking Charles to expel Roger Mortimer from France, and Roger found refuge in Hainault in the Low Countries.

Once safely in Paris, Isabella refused to return to England and her husband. Isabella took charge of her son and settled down at her brother's court.

Roger Mortimer was soon able to return to France from Hainault; he encountered Isabella at the court in Paris in December, 1325.

Fontainebleau, January, 1326

“Oh God, that felt good,” said Queen Isabella. Her head hung down and she eased herself down off her knees and cuddled up to him.

Roger laughed and looked down at his limp prick. “King Edward hasn’t been too much of a husband lately, I take it.” Roger had heard that Edward’s homosexuality had become more flagrant than ever during the past year.

“For years he had enough vigor to be a husband to me and also to Gaveston and Amory and Despenser and all his other boy friends. But lately...” She shook her head. “I have to get dressed.”

“Must you leave right away? I wouldn’t mind a little more.”

She kissed him. “Sorry, my dear.”

“Oh, I so wanted to lie for a while longer in bed with my lovely queen.”

“You sweet thing. No, I have to meet my son; he has an audience with my brother this afternoon. I need Charles’ help in arranging the Hainault marriage.”

“Splendid! If we have the count and the rest of the Hainaulters with us, I’ll damned well take back England from Despenser and his gang.”

“Yes.” Isabella smiled. “My Edward’s such a good boy.”

“A fine, handsome youth,” said Roger. And he thought: with a little bit of luck, I’ll be able to stick with the king again, even if he is but a thirteen-year-old king. “Edward III.” A nice ring to it. And my good friend his mother as regent. Yes!

Hainault (Flanders), Summer, 1326

Outside, the gardens of the Count’s palace ran down the slope of the hill toward the canal. Roger gazed out the distorted glass of the window toward the yew maze. Sir John of Hainault waved away the servant and poured out another cup of wine.

“We can hire over a hundred ships, if King Charles comes through with the money.”

Roger smiled. “He will, he just can’t be seen to be doing it. King Edward wouldn’t approve.”

“What about the queen?”

“Oh her. She’s wearing black, bless her. She says she’s in mourning until Despenser is exiled. And she won’t return to England, either, or send the heir to the throne back home. No matter, she says, how many bishops King Edward sends over here to try to bring them home.”

“So the invasion is on.”

“And the marriage of your niece to the boy.”

Sir John nodded. “All right. My men will do their part.” He sighed. “But—you know—an invasion of England!”

“It’s just an island, like any other.”

“The king will send thousands of troops out to stop you.”

Roger hit the table with his fist. “Listen, Sir John, you understand where you and I stand now, right? You leave the strategy to me. Just show up—just show up with your men, ready to fight!”

Sir John held up both hands. “Of course, of course, milord. Whatever you say. It’s all about you, Mortimer.”

After Sir John had left, Roger thought: yes, it’s all about me. I’m my own man now; there’s no king to fall back on any more. No real king, anyway.

North of London, September, 1326

The remains of an English morning mist lay over the castle at Pedlow. Roger with his English volunteers, together with Sir John with the Hainulters, had landed on the east coast near Orwell. Just over two weeks later, the invasion force had advanced all the way to Dunstable, in the home counties.

“The king is falling back on Gloucester, milord.” Roger’s aide, Henry, was trembling with excitement.

“That won’t be far enough. Let him try Cardiff, or Cardigan.”

“Amazing! The king was all set to send a large force against us in Norfolk.”

“Large force,’ what ‘large force,’ Henry?”

“Well, they say he called up Robert de Waterville, Thomas Wake, many of the nobility.”

“Robert is my lifelong friend, and Thomas is my cousin. And you didn’t see Henry of Lancaster there, did you?”

“No, milord.”

“The king could have called up a thousand barons, and only five would have showed up. The king has only one true friend, and that’s Hugh Despenser. As for Hugh Despenser, he has no friends at all.”

“I see,” said Henry.

“It isn’t really so complicated, Henry. Power isn’t some words written down on a piece of paper. Power is friendships. Power is fear. Power is what you’re used to. Power is usually something that only really works if you don’t push it too hard—like a bent willow branch. Bend it too much, and snap! It’s broken and useless.” He raised one finger. “Remember that, Henry.”

“I will, milord, I will.” Henry left the chamber.

Roger shook his head. “Ahh! I’m surrounded by idiots!” He ran his finger along the table. He thought: it would after all be a shame to have to be restricted to sticking to something so *inadequate* as a king.

I Have a Dream

Just after I had finished the manuscript up to this point, I had another dream visitation from my collaborator. For some reason he appeared to me dressed in a monk’s robe.

“Ah, Isabella,” he said, “a beautiful name.” He sighed. “All this reminds me of my Isabelle, that glorious bitch. Oh, what times we had.”

“Yes, your Grace. They say you spent too much time in bed with her, in fact.”

He waved his brown-sleeved arm. “Idiots! And you! You’re supposed to be scotching such calumnies, not spreading them about, Bill. Please!”

“Well, in the interests of accuracy...”

“‘Accuracy’! You talk about ‘accuracy’! How can you say that when you should know that in actuality, it was Mortimer’s father who secured Joan for him as a wife? When he was only fourteen, in fact!”

“Oh,” I said. “I must have missed the reference on that.” I felt aggrieved at having to wake up—at least conceptually—in the middle of the night in order to deal with fact checking.

“And furthermore,” he said. “Piers Gaveston was his guardian when he was a minor after his father’s death—hardly some fellow he picked up at a dinner.”

“Oh well,” I said, looking at my feet. “I don’t claim, you know, to reproduce every historical detail correctly; I mean...” I must, I thought, have missed some important books on the history of the early fourteenth century. Or did the king just have special knowledge from his sources on the Other Side?

I stole a look at the king. He seemed to have calmed down. He nodded. “Of course, we’re only talking about the historical facts for the universe in which my line of descent led down to a person just like you,” he said.

“Oh?” I said.

“Yes. In some other fifer-plain, historical events could have been different. You could have turned out to be this fellow Mel Gibson, for example.”

“‘Fifer-plain’?” I said. “Oh, ‘hyperplane.’” I was on the qui vive now. And Mel Gibson, of all people!

“Yes, ‘hyper-plane.’ That’s the word the astrologers use. So you know what I’m talking about.”

“You mean ‘scientists,’ not ‘astrologers,’” I said. “And I’m not sure what you mean about hyperplanes.” But of course I knew about theories that space and time could be described as existing on a so-called hyperplane. And if there were such a thing as parallel universes, they could be thought of as taking place on different hyperplanes from our own world.

“I don’t know anything about ‘scientists,’ whatever they are, and I do mean astrologers. And I think it’s best if you don’t mix up fifer-, um... hyper-planes in the rest of this narrative.”

“But king...”

“Just keep to the point, lad!”

“Whatever you say, Your Grace. I’ll try to be more careful.”

“Good, good...” and the dream faded.

When I awoke the next morning, however, I wondered about the Mel Gibson part. Did Mel’s directorial vision in *Braveheart* correspond to again some other spatio-temporal “hyperplane” of fourteenth-century reality? In other words, *Braveheart* might represent some other alternate universe, where time and space were all mixed up from our point of view, and history had turned out differently from our history.

For a confused moment, I was suddenly afraid that by my own bungling of historical description, I had actually changed the course of historical events, kind of like inventing my own “Braveheart.” Uh ohh. Suppose I was now Mel Gibson, as John had suggested—instead of me?

I quickly examined myself as to my attitude toward the Holocaust. Okay. Right. I certainly wasn’t Mel Gibson, so I was just going to assume that I was still safely me.

But somehow it felt like a close call.

Oh, why couldn’t history just lie down and behave itself? I didn’t need all these complications!

Royal Idyll: September, 1329

She really was a remarkably beautiful woman, Roger thought, besides being quite bright—and a queen to boot. Her

breasts, while not large, fitted well with her slender body, and the nipples, while small in diameter, puckered up into nicely tallish cones when erect. She lay there, her long red locks tangled together, huddling herself like a cat before a warm fire, her hand cupping his prick and balls.

“Is he really dead?” she said.

Roger spoke roughly. The fate of the deposed king wasn't his favorite subject. “Of course.”

“Poor Edward.”

“Oh, please!”

“Well, he was my husband.”

“Not a very good one. He's better off where he is.”

She looked up. “What do you mean?”

“With the angels in heaven, of course.” He pushed her gently, rolling her over onto her back, and began to work on her with his tongue. She closed her eyes and began to breathe heavily.

When they were finished, she poised her head on her elbow and looked into his face. She toyed with the hair on his chest.

“Roger?”

“Yes?”

“What are you thinking?”

I'm thinking how nice it is to lie here with my sweet girl.”

She kissed the end of his prick. “Roger, I'm worried about Edward. He doesn't like it when you walk in front of him and remain seated in his presence. And you were silly to tell the chamberlain to cancel that tournament the other day after Edward had ordered it.”

“The boy shouldn't have done that without asking me.”

“He's growing up now; he wants to really be the king.”

Roger laughed. He sat up and kissed her on the shoulder. “He still needs guidance. You'd better tell him to mind his manners, Isabella. Or else.”

“Or else what?”

“Isabella, just tell your son to shut up and behave himself, like a good boy. For the foreseeable future, there can be only one ruler in England, no matter who sits on the throne.” He looked at Isabella and saw a frown on her forehead. He patted the tip of her fine straight nose with one finger. “I mean only one pair of rulers.”.

Survival of the Fittest

Roger Mortimer, now styled earl of March, may have been thinking here that he had a secret hold over the young king. And here’s why. The death of Edward II has always been something of a mystery. Officially he was announced as having died of natural causes in late 1327, after having been captured in November 1326 and deposed the following January. Many people think that he was killed in prison, and since Roger was the supreme power in England, he has, logically enough, been accused of Edward’s death. (One notorious story claims that Edward was killed by having a red-hot iron inserted in his rectum, possibly a symbolic payback for his sexual preferences.) But there is another version: it claims that the body buried in Edward’s grave is not his, and that Edward was kept prisoner by Mortimer and lived on until 1341. If this last is so, Mortimer may have meant, in the scene above, that if Edward III gave him too much trouble, Roger could have produced Edward’s royal father alive and ready to be hoisted onto on the throne again.

I find muddles like this very confusing. History may be defined as the record of what was written down about what happened. But if different people write down different stories, which story is history? Talk about hyperplanes; there are too many hyper-planelets in the case of Edward II for me!

At any rate, nothing came of any secret Edward II in hiding that may or may not have existed because Mortimer finally overreached himself in his arrogance and insults to the young king. By late 1330, Roger himself was aware of being in danger: he had tucked himself away in an impregnable castle at

Nottingham. But Edward III and some of his friends found a secret passage and surprised his mother and her lover in their bed chamber the night of October 19. Swords drawn, they told Mortimer he was through.

Christopher Marlowe dramatizes the moment in his 1592 play "Edward II" (Scene 25):

Edward III: ...
Bring him to a hurdle, drag him forth;
Hang him, I say, and set his quarters up.
And bring his head back presently to me.

Isabella: For my sake, sweet son, pity Mortimer!

Mortimer: Base Fortune, now I see that in thy wheel
There is a point to which, when men aspire,
They tumble headlong down; that point I touched,
And seeing there was no place to mount up higher,
Why should I grieve at my declining fall?
Farewell, fair Queen. Weep not for Mortimer,
That scorns the world, and as a traveler
Goes to discover countries yet unknown.

Edward's friends carried Mortimer off to be tried and hanged as a traitor. One of The Spider's brood, Mortimer, died; and another, Edward III, took his place. But Roger Mortimer did leave children: his daughter Katherine married into the Beauchamps, the family of the earls of Warwick, and the Mortimer strand continued on in that family, as we'll see later on.

Meanwhile, the other arachnoid heir, young Edward, from a different strand of silk, as great-grandson of John's legitimate son Henry III, took his place in the sun. With the execution of Mortimer, the blonde, handsome eighteen-year-old King Edward III was off to a dramatic start in his reign. From the first, he kept the country on the edge of its seat as he

vigorously prosecuted the war against the Scots—unfortunately with mixed results. But then he declared war on the French with the avowed goal of setting himself on the throne of France. He won a great victory at Crécy, and his son, called the Black Prince, defeated the French at Poitiers a few years later and even captured the French king, John II. Edward covered English arms with glory—at a high cost in lives and treasure, of course. He also reorganized the government; and under his reign the economy of England prospered.

In a play, “Edward III,” that many think was at least partly written by Shakespeare, even though it was not included in the first folio, the Bard (or whoever) treats one of those great moments, after the battle of Poitiers:

[“Edward III,” Act 5, Scene 1]

Herald: Rejoice, my lord, ascend the imperial throne:

The mighty and redoubted Prince of Wales,
Great servitor to bloody Mars in arms,
The Frenchman’s terror and his country’s fame,
Triumphant rideth like a Roman peer,
And, lowly, at his stirrup, comes afoot
King John of France together with his son
In captive bonds, whose diadem he brings
To crown thee with, and to proclaim thee king.

King Edward: Sound, trumpets, welcome in, Plantagenet!

.....

Prince : My gracious father, here receive the gift,

.....

Install your highness in your proper right,
And herewithal I render to your hands
These prisoners, chief occasion of our strife.

These were some of England’s finest hours.

Courtesy of a royal strand of silk from the web of the Old Spider. The human genome is a funny thing, and it could be that the heroic actions at Crecy and Poitiers were presaged in my King John. After all, he truly amazed the world with his whirlwind capture of the castle of Mirebeau in 1202, and did a pretty fair job of keeping the indomitable Welsh under control.

Or maybe there was no connection. Certainly such other traits of character as the skill with which Edward III courted and bribed the powerful aristocrats of his day were not in evidence in the continual violent confrontations of the court of King John. Indeed, Edward's ability to get himself loved and admired was certainly no inheritance from my friend John.

[Well, I knew that last paragraph would get me into trouble with you-know-who. The night I posted the final draft of this chapter, there he was in my dreams again. This time we were outside, on the banks of the Potomac River for some reason. King John was dressed in a suit of armor, just like the first time. I detected a squeak and then a clank when he moved to sit down on a rock. I was perched uncomfortably in a crotch between the limbs of a sycamore tree. A full moon lit up the river and the royal figure.]

King John: How can you compare me unfavorably to that clumsy politician, that poseur Edward III?

Me: Look, facts are facts. He manipulated people cleverly, I don't see any evidence that you knew your way around the cloakroom.

King John: "Ability to get himself loved"! You don't take into account that mess that I inherited from my brother.

Me: Your other descendant in this chapter didn't leave England in such fine shape either.

King John: (another squeak) If you mean Mortimer, he was an insensitive ruffian.

Me: Good soldier, though. Look at Ireland.

King John: (Squeak) Don't talk to me about the Irish.

Me: Is that all you can say about a man who was ruthless, to be sure, but who had his own code of loyalty, “insensitive ruffian”? You’re missing the point of all this, Your Grace.

King John: And look at how your scribblers, your friend Shakespeare and now this Marlowe fellow, build up these people—first Saint Edward, then Mortimer going to his death so valiantly, while I supposedly acted like a whining wretch!

Me: Come on, let’s not quibble about details. Let’s get back to the point at issue.

King John: What point?

Me: I’ll tell you what point. We’re trying to understand the family—not just give you a quick cleanup job.

King John: (squeak, squeak, grind) I’m not a piece of dirty laundry. I’m a monarch, God’s anointed, after all.

Me: We’re looking for the truth, Your Grace. Karma isn’t about fakery. And the name of this game isn’t to divert attention away from you yourself.

King John: You know, I haven’t heard anything yet.

Me: Anything what?

King John: From Inside.

Me: “Inside”?

King John: (squeak) I’m sure they know what you’re doing. What *we’re* doing.

Me: Oh. Well, we’ve just started. Let’s give it some time.

King John: Time, time, time...

The moonbeams gleaming off his armor gradually began to dissolve him, and within seconds there was even less of him than of the Cheshire Cat. I awoke with a slight headache, and a resolution not to be deterred from my task. I had to admit to myself that I had blown John off about one little thing, and that did bother me: I agreed with him that Mortimer had gotten more of a break in death speeches than had John. But, you know, maybe that was just the difference between Marlowe and Shakespeare. Different authors, different readings of character.

After all, it was Marlowe, and not Shakespeare, who chose to write *Dr. Faustus* and plumb the depths of what a man may dare to do if he's ruthless enough. Mortimer was his kind of guy, I think; too bad for literature, I'll bet, that Marlowe got fatally cut up with a shiv in a Deptford tavern back in 1593. But I couldn't get myself hung up over all that. I was busy elsewhere. King John said that life isn't fair. You were right there, Your Grace—now try living with the consequences!

My big problem, however, was my uneasy feeling about John's continuing attitude of insouciance. Well, maybe "insouciance" is too strong, since he was worrying about the mysterious Insiders—whoever they were—and their attitude toward the project. But still, what was his honest reaction to what I had been reviewing in the family history? I was wondering if I was ever going to get King John to look into a mirror.

I was certainly going to try.

Maybe Roger Mortimer was too complicated a personality for the king. Roger had set out to be loyal; then he felt forced to betray his king. But when he had defeated and killed the king, he had let success go to his head and had been destroyed through his disloyalty to the new king. He was in a way a tragic figure.

But I could see how John could have missed all that. So I knew now whom I was going to pick for the next sketch—I would keep it pretty simple. William Beauchamp, one of the sons of Katherine Mortimer, grew up to have a modest, middling career in politics—nothing like his fierce grandfather. With an ordinary person like William Beauchamp, I shouldn't have to spell out moral lessons for anyone, much less for someone of John's intellectual acuity. He should get the point.

But what would he do with it?

I thought: we'll see.