

THE SECRET

Anne Boleyn was bubbling with excitement. Tournaments were her favourite sport. She liked the costumes, the trumpets and the crowds. Above all, she liked the thrills. She loved to see the brave and handsome knights charging each other on horseback.

The finest knights in Europe were here today. It was going to be the best tournament of all.

Anne sat down beside her sister Mary and looked around. The ladies of the court filled the stand. Some were chatting, some were waving. They were a magnificent sight in their long, bright dresses. Queen Katherine was at the front. Her ten-year-old daughter sat beside her.

Anne looked carefully at the queen. She was an elegant woman, but she was not very beautiful. She was plump and serious. Her red-gold hair was tied up in a bun on the back of her head. Anne thought she looked rather boring.

I'm much prettier than her, Anne thought. And much more fun. She smiled to herself.

Mary noticed her sister's look. 'What are you smiling at, Anne?' she asked.

'Nothing', Anne replied. 'Nothing that matters, anyway.'

‘Come off it!’ Mary laughed. She knew her younger sister well. ‘Tell me what you were thinking.’

Anne leaned towards her. ‘I was looking at the queen’, she whispered. ‘She’s such a frump!’

Mary was shocked. ‘Shhh! Don’t say things like that, Anne! You’ll be in serious trouble if anyone hears you.’

‘I don’t care!’ Anne replied. ‘Anyway, it’s true. Everyone knows it. Even the king finds her boring!’

At that moment the trumpets sounded. The tournament had begun.

The first fight was between an English champion and a handsome young knight from France. Most of the ladies thought the Frenchman was very dashing. Some waved their handkerchiefs at him. He bowed and waved back.

Soon the two knights were ready. The trumpets blared. The men lowered their lances and charged.

Horses’ hooves thundered on the ground. Everyone held their breath. The knights met with a great crash. The Frenchman’s lance broke in two. But the Englishman’s lance slammed into his opponent’s shield.

The Frenchman was thrown right out of the saddle. He landed on the ground with a clatter and lay still. A lady on Anne’s right let out a scream of horror.

‘Poor man!’ cried Mary. ‘I do hope he’s all right. He was my champion.’

Most of the ladies had a champion. He was their favourite knight and they wanted him to win. Some of the knights had the names of their wives or lady friends

woven on to their coats.

Tournaments were very romantic.

In a few minutes, the French knight got to his feet. He had a broken arm, but he was not too badly hurt.

‘Thank goodness!’ Mary said when she saw her hero walking away. ‘I thought for a minute he had been killed.’

Anne did not seem very interested.

‘Wasn’t he your champion too, Anne?’ asked Mary. ‘After all, you did live in France once. I thought you liked French knights.’

‘No, he was not my champion’, Anne said proudly. ‘I liked French knights once. But not anymore.’

She turned to see who was fighting next.

Mary was a married woman. She chose a champion just for fun. But the twenty-four-year-old Anne Boleyn was not married. She was one of the prettiest and liveliest of the queen’s ladies-in-waiting. Her family expected her to find a husband soon. Many young men took a fancy to her.

Mary was dying to know who Anne’s favourite was. ‘Come on’, she teased. ‘Tell me the name of your hero.’

‘No’, Anne smiled. ‘It’s a secret.’

But it was not a secret for much longer.

'I DARE NOT TELL'

It was King Henry's turn. This was the moment everyone had been waiting for. All eyes turned towards the good-looking king as he rode into the tournament ground. The crowd clapped and cheered.

'Long live King Hal!' people called as he rode up and down before the stands. He bowed gracefully to the crowd. He was tall and strong – the perfect figure of a king.

But what the crowd most wanted to see was the name of the lady on his coat. Was it Queen Katherine?

Mary leaned forward. Her eyes were rather weak. 'What does it say?' she asked her sister. 'Is he fighting for the queen?'

Anne did not reply. Instead, the lady on Mary's other side read out the words: 'I dare not tell'.

Mary looked puzzled. 'What does that mean?' she asked.

The lady explained. 'It means, my dear, that the king does not want to say who he is fighting for. Certainly, it is not the queen.' She lowered her voice. 'They say he has a new lady friend!'

Mary was not surprised. King Henry was fond of Queen Katherine, but he did not love her. He was always chasing other women. Mary herself had been his friend

for a time. She wondered who his new lady was.

By now the king was right in front of them. He pulled gently on his horse's reins and stopped. Mary could not believe her eyes.

Henry's face broke into a broad smile. He lifted his hand and waved. Mary waved back. Then she realised – he was not waving at her.

He was looking straight at Anne.

A few seconds later, Henry rode on. Mary turned to her sister. Anne was blushing. All of a sudden, Mary realised what was going on.

'Oh Anne!' she muttered, taking her sister's hand. 'Why didn't you tell me?'

'Tell you what?' Anne replied.

'That the king is your champion.'

Anne laughed but said nothing.

'Does he love you?' Mary asked quickly. 'Does he want you to be his lady friend? Do you want to be his friend? Come on, you must tell me what's going on!'

Anne looked into her sister's face. She had stopped smiling. 'Yes, Henry does love me,' she said quietly. 'And, yes, he does want me to be his lady friend. But no, I will not accept.'

'What?' Mary cried. 'Why ever not? It is such an honour, and he is so handsome and –'

'Listen!' Anne interrupted. 'I do not want to be his friend.' Her voice was calm. 'I want to be his wife.'

Mary could not believe her ears. 'What did you say?'

'I said I want to be queen.'

‘But Henry has a queen!’ Mary spluttered.

Anne looked proud and determined. ‘So what? I will be his new queen. Queen Anne.’

Tears came into Mary’s eyes. ‘Oh Anne!’ she said. ‘What are you saying? Be careful, sister! Beware the king! Oh, beware the king!’