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The Cardinal's Court

A Hugh Mac Egan Mystery

Written by Cora Harrison

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The Cardinal's Court: A Hugh Mac Egan Mystery

Cora Harrison



This book is dedicated to my daughter, Ruth Mason, who, since the age of five, has been a huge fan of the Tudors. She has been of great assistance to me while writing this book and we've had many interesting discussions during its progress.

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At the time when the murder of Cardinal Wolsey's instructor of the wards occurred in the hall of Hampton Court, I had been in the adjoining chamber penning the first draft of the marriage contract between James Butler the son of my employer, and Anne Boleyn, the younger daughter of Thomas Boleyn. It would, of course, be a preliminary, tentative outline. I knew that. The girl's father would have something to say about it, Cardinal Wolsey would have something to say about it, even the king himself might be involved.

'What happened?' I tried to keep the note of angry impatience out of my voice and lengthened my stride to keep pace with the serjeant-at-arms who had come to fetch me. He eyed me sidelong, keeping, as was his wont, a few feet away from me. He never liked to be reminded that I was taller than he. Impatiently I moved a little closer.

'You weren't there, were you, last night, during the pageant?'

'No,' I said shortly. The serjeant, a cautious, secretive man, reputed to be hoping for the next vacancy in the judiciary, was famous for always answering one question by putting another. An annoying habit, especially in a time of stress. I liked him – he was an honest man who

served Cardinal Wolsey faithfully and did his best with a difficult job – but I had no great esteem for him and considered that his sister Alice was very much the more intelligent of the two.

‘But why is James involved?’ There was something ominous in the fact that he had come straightaway to fetch me from my lodgings. Why did young James need a lawyer present?

He shrugged, but there was an uneasy look on his face and so I substituted: ‘When did it happen?’

That was an easier question.

‘Last night. It must have been early last night. The body is as stiff as a board, now.’

I glanced up at the clock tower. Eleven o’clock of the morning.

‘Last night,’ I repeated. ‘Before the pageant? I heard nothing of this.’

He shrugged again. ‘We don’t know exactly when it happened,’ he said. And then, rather evasively, ‘No, not before the pageant. We don’t think so. No, we think that it was during the pageant, during the storming of the *château vert* ...’

I turned back to stare incredulously at him. If a man had been killed in the presence of the king himself, during the time when King Henry and his courtiers were busy throwing comfits, oranges and dates at the ladies-in-waiting, supposedly imprisoned within the mock castle, well, this was a terribly grave matter. Why was the serjeant leaving the great hall and coming to fetch me. My first instinct was correct. James was in serious trouble, was in some way involved in this death. I kept close on his heels as we both went through the Base Court.

‘The king’s serjeant, Master Gibson, is very worried about it all,’ he said, answering my unspoken question. And then I understood. John’s face, always an easy one to read, wore a sullen, slightly angry expression. The king had departed at dawn with a riding party but he had left most of his household behind. Serjeant Gibson was the man in charge: the cardinal’s serjeant, John Rushe, would be well below the king’s serjeant in status.

‘And James is supposed to have something to do with it, is that right?’ I asked. My own face, I knew from experience, would show little other than that firmly closed mouth and pair of enigmatic grey eyes beneath level dark eyebrows that I saw every morning in my steel shaving mirror. As always I kept my voice low, though it was bitterly cold and there was no one except ourselves in the courtyard.

‘It was Harry Percy,’ he said. He stopped in the middle of the Base Court, though I wished that he would not. I wanted to see James, to find out what he had to say, and, perhaps more importantly, to find out what people were saying about him.

‘Why? What’s it to do with young Percy?’ I asked. In the cardinal’s court I had the reputation of an imperturbable man and I tried to live up to it.

‘The man, the dead man, was shot with an arrow, a real arrow, bodkin-tipped. Harry Percy says that he saw your James take a real arrow from his arrow bag, not one of those mock ones, not those lightweight arrows made for the pageant from leather mâché, from finely chopped leather, the ones that the pages were supposed to be using.’

I drew in a breath. I could see where this was leading. Bodkin-tipped. My pace through the clock tower

courtyard did not slacken but I felt my eyes narrow as I took in the implications.

Cardinal Wolsey had eight pages, all of them wards of court. Seven of them used the traditional broad arrows whereas James, my James, a fanatical Bowman, favoured the bodkin arrow. And, of course, the arrows they were supposed to be using in the pageant were wafer thick, designed to break into crumbs on impact – wouldn't hurt a kitten. No real arrow, bodkin-tipped or not, should have been used within the great hall.

'What happened exactly? Come on, man, tell me what happened.' All of this had a very odd sound to me. Why shoot someone in the midst of a crowd of merrymakers? I tried to keep a hold on my temper. It was pointless to get exasperated with John Rushe.

'It seems as though the instructor of the wards was standing by the tapestry, just to the side of it, probably half-concealed, keeping an eye on his pupils, perhaps, making sure that their behaviour and bearing was such as would please the cardinal.' John looked at me meaningfully. It was, of course, typical of Edmund Pace to be spying on the boys – and on everyone else. The man was feared and hated throughout the entire staff at Hampton Court, and at York Place, as well. A gatherer of information, a born intriguer and troublemaker. 'He was shot through the edge of the tapestry cloth,' he continued, 'then he fell behind it. You can see for yourself. There's a hole in the tapestry cloth just by the hub of the cart. You know the picture of the cart at the edge of one of the tapestries, the one that is nearest to the door.'

'And the body has only just been discovered?'

‘It was noticed by the cook, Master Beasley. The cardinal sent for him to congratulate him on the magnificence of last night’s supper and when Master Beasley had bowed and was moving away he saw the man’s shoe. He bent down and found the body.’

‘You were sent for me?’ It would have been the cardinal who dispatched him. The question gave me time to weigh up some possibilities, though.

‘I was there. I got up from my seat immediately. I was the first to view the body. And then the king’s sergeant-at-arms, Master Gibson, came. His Grace stayed where he was, but after a minute he sent one of the gentlemen ushers, young George Cavendish, across to me to find what was wrong. He, the cardinal, came over then when he heard about the body. But there was nothing to be done. We saw immediately that he had been murdered.’ That didn’t really answer the question, but I supposed that I would have to allow him to tell it in his own way. Alice often raised a delicate eyebrow and sighed when her brother John began on a long-winded explanation. I waited for more, but he said nothing, just tightened his lips.

‘What happened? What killed him? How did you know that he had been murdered?’ I was beginning to lose patience though my voice stayed low and calm.

‘One of the gentlemen ushers pulled back the curtain. He might have done it roughly in his alarm. There was an arrow. It fell from the wound, fell onto the floor. He picked it up.’

‘Bloodstained?’

I wanted to ask when and why Harry Percy made his disastrous accusation, but John Rushe was not a man to be rushed, as he often said himself.

'Dark on the tip of it,' he confirmed.

'And everyone gathered around.' I could picture the scene. The tables abandoned, benches, chairs and stools pushed aside.

'Thank God that King Henry had gone back to Westminster,' said the serjeant reverently.

'Indeed,' I said politely and waited. We had traversed the length of the Base Court, gone through under the clock tower, crossed the clock court and were now standing in front of the doorway that led to the great hall. It was time for Master Rushe to live up to his name and to come to the point.

'And Harry Percy ...' I prompted.

'Says that he saw James Butler, your James, take an arrow from his bag and that it was a real arrow, not one of those painted leather ones. And that's not all; that young lady, Mistress Anne Boleyn, the lady James Butler is supposed to marry, she backs up Harry Percy, says that she wondered what James was doing, wondered why he was not using one of those pretend arrows that the boys were firing. She was peeping over the battlements, waiting to be rescued.'

I drew in a breath. This was getting serious. One accusation – well, it's one man's word against another's, but two accusations, and one of them from the young lady whose betrothal contract I had been drawing up with such care. If I could not unravel this matter fast, young James could be thrown into the Fleet prison, or even Newgate.

'The cardinal ordered me to fetch you immediately.'

That made sense. Cardinal Wolsey was very fond of James, more so than of Harry Percy. However, it showed

that he was taking the accusation seriously if he immediately sent for the boy's legal advisor. And then I thought of something else.

'You said Mistress Boleyn, Mistress Anne Boleyn, joined in the accusation. Is Queen Katherine still here, then?'

'Yes, she has stayed on. She wanted to discuss with my lord the betrothal between young Arundel and one of her ladies-in-waiting.'

It was all marriage contracts these days for the cardinal's four older pages. Each had been paired with an appropriate lady. Thomas Arundel was only the latest; there had been Harry Percy with the daughter of the Earl of Shrewsbury, Gilbert Tailboys with Bessie Blount.

And, of course, Mistress Anne Boleyn had been taken back from the French court to marry James Butler. It had been a brilliant solution to the disputed Ormond inheritance, dreamed up by the cardinal. James's father, the male heir and the choice of the Ormond family in Ireland, had the right to it according to Irish law. Sir Thomas Boleyn, father of this Anne, the king's ambassador, and grandson of the former earl, had under English law, through his mother, a rather shaky claim, in my view. In fact, I considered that his cousin, Sir George St Leger, whose mother was the older daughter, had a better claim, but King Henry favoured his ambassador.

So, the younger of Boleyn's two daughters had been summoned home to marry James Butler, the son of the man in possession of the Irish part of the Ormond estates.

It only occurred to me now that she might not have liked the idea, that Anne might have preferred another match.

Hers was the first face that I saw when I came into the great hall. Beneath the oriel window that was the

pride and joy of Cardinal Wolsey, she faced the great man himself, black eyes snapping, long dark hair swinging with each toss of a head. Her face, lit by a stray shaft of sunshine coming through the stained glass, was a pale rose-coloured oval, delicately framing those dark eyes.

I saw James instantly. Standing by himself, gripping the rail of a heavy chair, upholstered with padded leather, fastened with round copper nails. His fair-skinned face was so white that his red hair, beneath the black velvet cap, blazed in vivid contrast. No one was with him, but I didn't join him. Murder was a serious accusation. Here in England, it meant a hanging or the axe and a block. I made immediately for the man of power.

'Give you good time of day, my Lord Cardinal!' I said the words formally and saw a gleam in his eyes in response as I replaced my cap. He had often accused my English of sounding like Latin and now he appreciated that I was trying to please.

'Go now, Mistress. I'll speak with you later,' he said to the girl and Anne Boleyn dropped a very pretty courtesy and went off as gracefully as though she were taking part in an elaborate dance, tripping lightly down the three steps that led to the main hall.

'Teach them well in the French courts, don't they?' I made the remark in a light-hearted way and he responded in the same fashion.

'All of the graces, *n'est-ce pas*, Hugh?'

'And all of the virtues, we hope, Your Grace. Especially that of Truth.'

'You Irish are so ignorant of religious matters,' he complained. 'Truth, you know, is not amongst the seven virtues. I should know. I've long coveted a set of arras

hangings that show the seven virtues: Faith, Hope, Charity, Justice, Prudence, Fortitude and Temperance. So much more suitable for a man of the church than these *Triumphs of Petrarch* hangings, don't you think, Hugh?' Gently and almost casually he moved one of the two-tiered, six-branched candelabra so that the light would illuminate my face. A waterfall of solidified wax spilled down one side of each of the candles. Not the first time that it had been moved, or lifted, this morning. I took heart from that. The cardinal had probably eyed Mistress Anne Boleyn as closely as he was now scrutinising me. I nodded at the tapestries below us.

'I hear that the *Triumphs of Petrarch* have borne an unusual fruit this morning.'

He was a hard man to assess, Cardinal Wolsey. He had a gentle smile on his face and his brown eyes were twinkling. A sign of the seriousness of the matter, I guessed immediately.

'You are correctly informed. I hope that the damage to the arras is not irreparable. The loss of such a man, of course ...' and the cardinal raised his eyes to heaven and sighed.

'Irreplaceable!' I made the word sound as neutral as I could. And Edmund Pace for sheer malice and ability to make trouble would indeed be irreplaceable.

'And he was shot last night.' My voice inserted a question mark into my second remark.

'So they tell me.' His eyes slid past me and went not to Master Rushe, but to the king's serjeant, standing on the edge of the dais at a respectful distance from the cardinal. There was another man with him, a squat, thick-set man with bushy mop of iron-grey hair, standing above

an oddly young, smooth and clean-shaven face. They were whispering together. For a moment I thought that I glimpsed a strange expression on Master Gibson's face, an eager, almost a greedy look. And then the winter sun was suddenly extinguished by a heavy cloud. The coloured glass in the great oriel window and in the side windows became dark and almost opaque. The rich garments of the courtiers, the servers and maids of honour were lost in the shadows; only the faces lit by the numerous candelabra, showed palely white in the gloom and every one of them turned up towards us. The face of the king's serjeant now seemed as impassive as the faces on the tapestries. Perhaps I had imagined that eager look.

'The arrow?' My voice must have been louder than I intended, as John Rushe came forward instantly, taking a box from the hands of his assistant and hurrying across to us. There was a movement in the hall and then a stillness. I took the arrow from the box, though I hardly needed to do this. A glance would have been enough. It was unmistakable. Made from well-seasoned ash, bodkin-tipped, and the initials JB scratched into its haft. And there was an ominous dark stain on its tip. I looked down at the hall. All pairs of eyes seemed to be on me. All but one. James Butler gazed steadily and fixedly at the leather seat of the chair whose back he still gripped.

'How long is Queen Katherine staying?' I kept my voice neutral, but ignored the outstretched hand of John Rushe. I would keep this arrow for the moment.

'She hasn't said.' Cardinal Wolsey's voice, also, was quite neutral. 'She received the holy ashes at dawn this morning. She is now praying in her closet with some of her ladies.'

'I see.' Queen Katherine, of course, was very pious and reputed to love the Chapel at Hampton Court. It was not surprising that she did not wish to travel with the ash still smeared on her forehead. Nevertheless, she was unlikely to want to spend the whole forty days of Lent at Hampton Court. But a couple of days perhaps; at least I hoped so. A lady with a calm, penetrating look. I had a feeling that I would like to get her opinion about the worth of the evidence given by Anne Boleyn. Harry Percy I could deal with myself. Even now he avoided my eye.

'Perhaps we should talk about this matter in private,' said the cardinal. 'My rooms, do you think, Hugh? Master Serjeant? And you, Master Rushe, please.' A man with a fine appreciation of rank, the cardinal had spoken first to the king's serjeant. Gibson would be the man in charge of this investigation.

'In a moment,' I said. 'I'll join you there. I must speak with James first.'

I didn't wait for an answer, but descended the three steps down from the dais into the hall and walked across to where James still stood, his head bent, his eyes averted from the curious gazes.

'Let's walk outside for a few minutes,' I said and I took his arm.

He shrugged it off instantly. I should have remembered how self-conscious he was about his lameness.

'It's snowing,' he said.

'You won't melt. Come on.' I waited, made sure that he was in front of me, but said nothing more. He walked stiffly, trying in vain to disguise his limp. A servant carrying a tray of wooden platters was ahead of us. We stood

for a moment in the doorway watching him go. There were indeed blobs of snow on the man's shoulders. The clock tower courtyard was bitterly chilly, the grass bleached a desolate shade of yellow; even the crimson bricks lacked warmth under the leaden sky. The gravel beneath our feet was frozen into clumps and I saw James stumble. I took his arm and held it firmly, making him stop and turn towards me.

'Did you do it?' I had waited until we were alone in the square space before I asked the question. It wasn't a day for people to linger and here in the centre of the clock court, there was no danger of being overheard.

'Of course I didn't.'

I eyed him. Like other boys he would tell a lie sometimes if it served his purpose. He wasn't stupid, though. I was his father's lawyer, or Brehon, as we said in Ireland. He knew that I would look after his interests in this English court.

'I know that there was some fuss, some affair that Master Pace uncovered,' I warned him. 'There were rumours about it.' I eyed him keenly. 'Did you pay his blackmail?'

He was taken aback for a moment and then he shrugged. 'Well, you know what it's like. Gave him a crown to shut him up. He threatened to go to the cardinal. It wasn't anything serious. He had something on Gilbert, too. And Thomas. Probably Harry, too. We all had good matches, rich brides in the offing. He threatened that he could put a stop to the marriages if he told what he knew. He had us all paying him to keep his mouth shut, otherwise we'd have to behave like young priests.'

He's lying, I thought. There was something more than that. Even Cardinal Wolsey with the affairs of Europe on his shoulders had spotted something, knew that there was something amiss, had dropped a hint to me that was impossible to ignore. I wouldn't pursue it at the moment. The man was dead and I had to make sure that my employer's son was speedily freed of all suspicion. If we had been back in Ireland, I could have afforded to take my time. Under the Brehon law, in which I had been trained, the punishment would have been a fine. Here it would be death. And death was very final, held no room for mistakes, no possibility of redressing a wrong. I needed to work fast, needed to absorb all the available information.

'And this arrow, your arrow in the man's chest. I saw it. It was definitely yours. Bodkin-tipped, your initials ...'

'I lost that arrow a few days ago; I told the serjeant that. I was aiming at a duck flying over the moat, just near to the west entrance, just by the stables. It was getting dark. I thought that I would search for it next morning but I forgot about it.'

I suppressed a groan. It was a possible story, but taken with the evidence put forward by the lady, Mistress Anne Boleyn, and by Harry Percy, it was not good enough. Admittedly it was likely, if the man was a blackmailer, that one of the other boys, all eight of the cardinal's pages, all of them armed with these toy arrows, might have had reason to shoot the instructor of the wards, but two people were prepared to swear that they saw James with a real arrow, bodkin-tipped, and that was the arrow which had killed Master Pace.

And the arrow itself was undoubtedly his.

'Anyone with you when you lost the arrow?' I asked the question without much hope and wasn't surprised when he shook his head. Not too many people would have gone out duck shooting on a freezing day in the month of February. The others were probably cosily tucked up by a fire, playing cards and discussing their marriage prospects. James was always driven, always setting himself goals. Perhaps it was the lame leg, or perhaps he had just been born like that.

'Did you notice anything, anything last night during that ...?' I stopped myself using the word 'ridiculous affair' and substituted the word 'pageant'. No matter how puerile the amusements of the king, a man past his thirtieth birthday, it was unwise to voice such opinions.

James shook his head. 'No, but it was very noisy. Everyone was shouting and flinging things and the girls were all shrieking. Mistress Anne was crying *'au secours'* at the top of her voice and her sister Mistress Carey, she was *'Kindness'* and she was screaming – pretending to be frightened, and holding her arms out to the king – everyone knew it was the king, of course. He's the biggest of the lot of them. So we were all laughing at that and cheering her on. And then, of course, there were the sweetmeats thrown in my face and Her Grace the king's sister, the French queen, she emptied a pitcher of rosewater over young Tom Seymour's head and ...'

'Were you near to Harry Percy?' I interrupted him. The cardinal was not patient man. In another moment a servant would appear with a polite message requesting our presence.

'I'm not sure. I can't remember.'

A question for one of the ladies-in-waiting. They were up high. The pretend castle had been erected by the carpenters on the dais. The girls would have been looking down at the melee. Not Anne Boleyn, nor her married sister, Mary, but perhaps I would question Bessie Blount, Gilbert Tailboys' designated wife.

'Let's see what the cardinal has managed to uncover,' I said. I went ahead of him, hearing him limp behind me. If things looked too bad I would smuggle him out of the country, and let the marriage to Anne Boleyn hang in abeyance. I did not think that I could face Margaret, Countess of Ormond, if anything happened to her beloved eldest son.