

Chapter Thirty-three

The Benedictine Ranulf Higden of Chester, working on his 'Polychronicon' for many years, had earned a reputation as a learned and well-read monk of some intellectual rigour. It is his version of the death of King Edward II that became the most popular of all: roughly paraphrased, that Roger Mortimer sent orders to Berkeley Castle as to how the king should be killed. When his gaolers Thomas Gournay and John Maltravers read the letter, they were friendly towards King Edward at supper time, so that he would know nothing of their treachery. But when he had gone to bed and was asleep, the traitors crept into his chamber and seized him as he lay in bed. With other men's help they pressed him down and suffocated him with great feather-beds and a large table laid on his stomach, heavier than fifteen robust men. The Lord Edward woke up and managed to turn over but there was no escaping his tormentors. They spread his legs and, heating a plumber's iron red hot, *'inserted a horn into his fundament as deep as they might, and took a spit of burning copper, and put it through the horn into his body'*. Repeatedly rolling his bowels with this spit of burning copper, they burned out the respiratory organs past the intestines. The king's screams were so loud that many in the vicinity heard his cry both within and without the castle, and knew it for a man who suffered a violent death. The cries of the dying man wakened many of Berkeley, as they asserted, to compassion and prayers for the holy fleeting soul. *'Thus,'* wrote this Brother Ranulph Higden, *'was our most strenuous king struck down. The murder was so designed,'* states the learned monk, *'as to leave no exterior mark on the royal body, no wound which would be witnessed by any process of justice. Thus his tormentors would never be bound to answer for the offence and pay the penalty for it. And so they killed their lord, and nothing was perceived.'*

In the preface to his life's work Higden writes that as far as is possible, the whole truth shall not be in doubt. Later however, he writes that *'it is not possible to be equally certain about all things.'*

Clearly not. The traffic started to move again, and I changed gear to a higher speed. The one chronicler anywhere near Berkeley Castle at the time, Adam Murimuth, consistently maintained - even after the 1330 trial when the chroniclers got going in earnest - that the worst of the accusations were '*common rumour*'. Yet Higden's chronicle perpetuated the myth of Edward II's murder in Berkeley Castle more than anything else at the time, and provided Christopher Marlowe two hundred years later with the plot for his play that was to colour the popular view of history. But it is a little known fact that in 1352 Edward III summoned the monk to an audience at Westminster '*to have certain things explained to him.*' He was to bring all his histories and parchments with him. Whatever the King told Higden in that audience, it stopped him ever writing another word: his '*Polychronicon*' came to an abrupt end. What was revealed to him? had he been involved in the smokescreen from the start, acting on the royal family's behalf, and told he could now relinquish the task? Or, if he had been writing in good faith (without the natural discernment of the intellect he was purported to possess) told that the murder was an untruth, and that his encyclopaedic work was based on a false premise? That the deposed King had survived and lived out his last years as a penitent monastic? Was he told the truth about events at Berkeley Castle and subsequent events, and about who was involved?

Most especially, the truth about the queen's part in it?

What was becoming clear from reading the archives, backed up by all the research papers, was that there was far more evidence - evidence, not hearsay - that Edward was alive after 1327, than that he wasn't. There were multiple references in the archives that pointed to the king still being alive after 1327. The only 'evidence' of his death was the letter Lord Berkeley wrote to Queen Isabelle - which later he denied doing. Her connection with him had to be the key to finding out what really happened to Edward II.

The more I looked at what happened to Roger Mortimer, the more he looked like their fall-guy. The crucial thing though - Father Lorenzo had been right - was motive. Who had a motive for keeping Edward alive but not in power? What was that motive? It could only be Love. Sibling? Filial? Marital? The Earl of Kent wanted his brother back on the throne, but that would have been the end for Edward III and Isabelle. Edward III was a minor at the time, and had no power to act. It had to be Isabelle, saving the life of her husband, the father of their children, father of the now-king, and protecting the man who had taken the coronation oath but defaulted on his calling, who wished to make reparation for his sins, living out his days in penitence.

I was now convinced that it was Isabelle who had outwitted them all. From the earliest days she had skilfully manoeuvred a way to survive in a foreign country with a husband who preferred the company of Piers Gaveston and his other male favourites, so skilfully that the people came to love and admire this young queen who surpassed all expectations in her role. She possessed a diplomatic acumen unusual in medieval royal wives who were not expected to be involved at the heart of politics. Isabelle was cast in a different mould from most: she did not conform to conventional archetypes. Women generally were meant to be weaker and smaller, *'feeble of nature'*, more mendacious than men and *'slower in working and moving than men'*. Not so Isabelle. The fair sex, by dint of descent from Eve, were scapegoats for the moral weaknesses of society: it was a given that *'the malice of the soul is more in a woman than in a man'*. Crucially, a woman was expected to be demure. She must certainly be less assertive, *'for the heart of a man findeth it hard to be corrected by the domination or lordship of a woman'*.

A woman of Isabelle's intelligence was unlikely to subscribe to this.....