

Prologue

Gather round, ye gentles – I'll unfold
The scene of England, in those days of old
When Good Queen Bess unto the throne did come,
And Albion's state so nearly was undone.

Background

England in the sixteenth century is a land divided by religion. For two generations Catholics and Protestants have struggled for the upper hand. First King Henry VIII denied the authority of the Pope in Rome, establishing his own Church of England. Next his only son, the young Edward VI, and his advisers directed the Church towards the Protestant teachings of the heretics Calvin and Luther, and persecuted those who clung to the Catholic faith. But Edward died in his teens without an heir. He was succeeded by his older sister Mary, a Catholic, her mother a Spaniard and herself married to King Philip of Spain. She declared England Catholic once more, and in her turn persecuted those who clung to the Church of England. Finally Mary died without an heir, and the Crown passed to Elizabeth, surely the most unlikely candidate for monarch: her mother Anne Boleyn had been beheaded by Henry and declared a witch, and Elizabeth herself was ruled illegitimate during her sister Mary's reign and charged with treason. Thus it was that she came to the throne in a most insecure case, and she at once made further enemies by returning the nation to the Church of England which her father had established.

Foreign Relations

England is surrounded by powerful enemies – France and Spain in particular, both Catholic nations, both deadly rivals, both keen to either topple Elizabeth or else bring her under their sway by marriage. She has been pursued by Philippe of France, younger brother of the King, and also by Philip II of Spain, her late sister's husband. But to agree to either would surely bring the enmity of the other. Thus the delicate balancing act. Scotland is another threat, a Catholic nation historically allied to France, but Elizabeth's troops have defeated the Scots on the battlefield. After the Scottish Lords threw Queen Mary off the throne – in disgust at her dissolute lifestyle – and replaced her with her infant son James, Elizabeth was able to keep Mary close at hand, as a prisoner in all but name here at the Court of St James. The Protestant nations of Europe, such as Denmark, are small and weak, and diplomatic ties with England barely existent. For political judgement, the Queen as a mere woman is of course beholden to her counsellors – Sir Francis Walsingham, Lord Canning and General FitzBacon can certainly be relied upon for a wide diversity of advice, so radically distinct are their natures and policies one from the other.

Courtiers

Such political tension means that the Court is a murky place, full of intrigues and spies, with each party seeking to gain the upper hand. But it is also a place of brightness, of jollity and gaiety. The Queen is a young, energetic woman, and a great patron of the arts. Her virgin state leaves her free to flirt with any handsome noble, and gallants crowd about her like wasps around a honey-pot. And each year explorers return from the colonies abroad, particularly the new lands of Virginia, bearing strange and exciting finds to accompany their tales of derring-do. Sir Walter Raleigh is but recently returned from a trip to the new colony of Roanoke, and Sir Francis Drake is no doubt planning another of those privateering excursions so dreaded by Spanish merchantmen, while the Earl of Essex is prime example of the stay-at-home school of gallantry.

Diversions

*The new fad of play-writing is the latest craze to sweep London, with two rival companies, the Globe and the Swan, enjoying full houses every night. The curtain rises tonight on a Court fresh from watching *Two Ladies of Venice*, the latest hilarious comedy by Master Shakespeare, playwright and actor of the Globe company, which the Queen has been patronizing lately. Master Shakespeare's career has enjoyed a meteoric rise of recent, displaying an extraordinary talent, and many now say that he is the superior of the Swan's Master Marlowe – himself a playwright of no mean genius. The other great movement of the age is that of arcane learning. Europe is enjoying its Renaissance, and London has its share of astrologists, hermeticists, alchemists and (some say) traffickers with unclean spirits. Foremost by repute is Dr Dee, a most learned man, reader of the stars to the Queen herself, his wisdom only deepened since his association with the Irishman Master Kelley. But the Continent has another league entirely of learning, and Signor della Mirandola, envoy of the Venetian Doge, is whispered to be as advanced in the occult arts as he is in more conventional fields of scholarship.*

Conclusion

Events in England are surely moving towards some sort of crisis – everyone can sense it, like a current in the air. Very soon, maybe this very night, for good or ill, the fate of the realm will be decided...