... No where lives a woman true and fair ...

January 1649

She shivered when she got out of bed. The fire had gone out during the night, and the small window sported frost roses – on the inside. Her feet shrank from the contact with the cold floor, and she regretted ever having taken off her stockings the preceding evening. She splashed some water from the pitcher into the basin and did a hasty wash of face and hands before dressing.

Her worn linen shift was due for a change, the constant wear of some weeks telling on it, but what with the cold she had no inclination to disrobe herself entirely and so decided that it would do another day. To compensate she dug into the mule chest until she found a pair of clean stockings, thick, grey woollen stockings that always itched for the first hour or two. She sat down on a stool and pulled them on, one foot at the time. They ended well above the knee and to hold them in place she tied her everyday garters – serviceable things in a faded green – into place.

The stays were tightened into place and she spent quite some time ensuring they lifted her breasts just so. Her petticoats came next, and it took her a while to locate the petticoat pocket until she recalled she'd hung it with her skirts. The pocket was a gift from her sister-in-law, the double folded linen embroidered with cornflowers and poppies. In it she carried what little things she might need about her person – an extra hairpin, a needle, the odd coin and the heart shaped stone Henry had given her some weeks ago. She caressed the little stone, holding it for some instants in her palm before dropping it back into its keeping place.

Skirts – heavy things in a dark brown homespun – her red bodice and she was done, looking about for her shoes. New shoes that she tied into place with embroidered ribbons, thinking her feet looked deliciously dainty in this new footwear with its timbered heel.

She spent a few moments fiddling with her hair before placing a linen cap atop her hair. A vibrant redhead, she was proud of her hair and would contrive to adjust the cap so that it hovered in the borderlands of immodesty, far too much of her heavy, gleaming hair revealed to the world. Fortunately, her husband did not object – as long as she wore her hair adequately covered in church.

From the warmth of the bed, he had watched her morning ministrations, reluctant to leave the comforting nest of quilts, pillows and bed hangings. But a rising winter sun was throwing a weak ray of light through the frosted window and with a little sigh he threw the bedclothes back and rose.

His shirt covered his legs to just above the knees, but given her little smile she could discern the slight stiffness of his morning erection, a state of affairs that was dissipating as fast as mist does on a summer morning. He scratched his privates, adjusted the stockings – one had come loose during the night and was draped around his ankle – and once he'd gartered them into place he looked about for his breeches.

"Here." She handed them to him. For an instant her hand grazed his. She wet her lips, there was a flush creeping up her throat and he was tempted to bed her then and there. After a quick look at the daylight patterning the floor he muttered a thank you no more.

Some minutes later he was clattering down the stairs, his doublet neatly buttoned, his hair smoothed down to lie as flat as it could.

"Henry?"

The voice brought him up short. The master - here? His eyes flew up the stairs, met hers as she reached the staircase.

"Sir," he said, bowing to the man who was standing in the dark hall.

Master Prentiss was a man of middling height and impressive girth, and at present he was looking tired.

"What are you doing here?" the master said, undoing the clasps of his cloak. He nodded at his wife, now halfway down the stairs.

"Henry has been keeping vigil with me," Frances Prentiss said. "For the king." She took her husband's cloak and shook it out before handing it to one of the maids.

"Too late for that," Master Prentiss said. He undid his lace collar, unbuttoned the discreet pewter buttons on his black broadcloth coat and handed his wife hat, gloves and collar before shrugging out of the coat and handing it to Henry. "Fetch me my doublet," he said, and Henry bounded up the stairs like a fleeing doe.

"Too late?" Frances said, smoothing at her apron. "How too late?"

"He's dead," Master Prentiss said. He mimed a sword chop to his neck.

"They murdered him?" Frances gasped.

"Who? Murdered who?" Henry said, reappearing with a padded woollen doublet in faded yellow and grey.

"Not murdered; executed. Not that it makes much of a difference – the king is dead whatever way you think about it." Master Prentiss said. He fiddled with one of his cuffs, and at his irritated sound Frances hurried forward to help him.

"But …" Henry licked his lips. "He was the king!" He held out the doublet to the master and helped him pull it into place. He had to tug somewhat to get the tapered sleeves up – Master Prentiss was no longer as trim as he'd been when the doublet was made.

"And as mortal as any of us," Master Prentiss said. "As fallible as well, I'd reckon." He gave Henry a long look. "Vigil?" he said, "at this time of the day?"

"All night, dear husband," Frances said. "We have not slept a wink, Henry and I."

Which was almost the truth, Henry reflected while swallowing down on a gust of nervous laughter.