

# MY THREE LADIES

by John Boyne

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She had been dead for no more than a week when she first came to visit me in the night. I was sleeping restlessly, my dreams filled with affairs of state and the endless drama of the court, when I slowly awakened to the scent of juniper in the air, her particular perfume. Lost in a place 'twixt wake and sleep, I opened my eyes and stretched out an arm to where she had laid beside me for three years before and whispered her name: *Anne*.

My utterance was met with silence and now the cold of my chamber brought me fully back to consciousness. Damned servants, I thought. Allowing the fire to die out again. I determined to cause merry mayhem about it but before I could find the words to roar for attendance, the perfume came stronger to my senses and caused me to feel a sudden rush of terror. Had her essence lingered so over these last seven days and I had failed to notice it? It seemed impossible. I whispered her name again but this time as an answer to the perfume and the moment the word escaped my lips, the curtains on either side of my bed rustled as if the wind had entered the chamber and upon it, I heard a voice sigh my own name in reply: *Henry*.

The populous is aware of their king's fortitude but I confess that at the sound of my name I felt a panic unlike any that I had known before. The voice was hers, I was sure of it, but surely such a thing was beyond possibility, for had I not ordered her death myself, and had I not selected the fellow who would lift her head from her shoulders on that uncommon dark May morning? And afterwards, had I not attended her tomb at St Peter ad Vincula before announcing my betrothal to another, she who held my heart and all our destinies in her hands?

But what use a crown without a brave heart to support it and I was damned if I was going to lie there while a prankster made a sport of me and so I reached out and with a mighty pull, wrenched back the curtains to discover who it was had determined to meet a grizzly fate and despite the darkness I had no doubt that the figure standing in the centre of the room – composed and smiling sweetly – was that of my late wife, the mistress Boleyn, our dead queen.

'Anne,' said I for the third time, for the awfulness of seeing her return from the place beyond to my own bed-chamber was as nothing compared to my disbelief at the possibility of it. Was I still asleep, I wondered, but a pinch to the arm advised me otherwise. Perhaps my evening repast had invented this image in my mind, a piece of stale cheese, a chicken that had gone to the wrong. But my stomach lay settled within me and I did not suffer the perspirations that tortured me whenever I had eaten more than my fill.

'You do not dream,' she said then, her voice light and cheerful, as it had been when she had whispered in my ear of how I could solve the problem of Catherine. 'I daresay you thought you would not see me again, my Lord?'

'You are not of this world,' I said defiantly. 'Spirit, you have no business here.'

'Except unfinished business,' she replied in a gentle tone. 'How quickly you move from lady to lady, my Lord, your affections never lasting longer than the seasons.'

An unfair accusation, I believed, for had I not suffered years of torture as I tried to rid myself of one harridan in favour of another? Had I not broken with my beliefs and the faith as well as the memory of my own dear brother in order to bring her to my bed and to my throne?

'You had my heart,' I told her. 'And you betrayed me.'

'You will know worse betrayal than my own,' she stated calmly before fading from my sight. 'You robbed me of my life, my Lord. But I do not intend to leave yours quite so easily.'

And in what felt like only a moment I was opening my eyes again from sleep, convinced that this had been naught but a mischievous dream.

As the day continued, I cursed my own foolishness at giving in to the lunacy of a mere delusion and went about my business as usual. I put the matter of Anne from my thoughts and soon I had another sitting on my left hand side, a warm throne beside my own, and all who knew me saw how entranced I was by my new queen, the lady Jane. Happily, it was not long before she was with child and I fell to my knees every night and every morn to plead with my creator for a son, not for my own sake, but to end the mutterings of the court by providing a future stability to the land, something that neither Mary nor Elizabeth could provide owing to their sex. My prayers were answered when a true heir was born but the lad was weak and sickly and though the apothecary dared not tell me that he might not live for long, I knew it well, for his eyes held none of my lustre, his limbs were fragile and the roar of his illnesses kept all awake at night until I could stand it no more and had him moved from my hearing. His weakness was his mother's, I swear it, not my own, for she survived his birth by no more than a few days. It was then that mistress Anne returned to me, but not alone.

This time, the scent of juniper was mixed with rose-petals and I dared not pull back the curtain for fear of what I might encounter and lay there, timid, demanding that these horrors be brought to an end.

'Henry,' she laughed. 'Look, my Lord, I have a companion now.'

I could take it no longer and when I peered out there was Anne, the rough scar that encircled her neck pulsating in the moonlight, weeping a trail of scarlet, while that honest lady, Jane, stood by her side, crying in a most pathetic fashion.

'What is this?' I cried. 'What have you done?'

'She will not let me go, sir,' cried Jane. 'She keeps me for a servant girl.'

'And what were you while I reigned as queen?' roared Anne then, her eyes glowing red, her voice so loud that I threw myself back against my pillows, sure that help would arrive now for it was like a great hurricane sweeping through the room, upsetting objects as it travelled its course. 'Were you not my own servant, Jane?' she continued to scream in an infamous fashion. 'Did you not conspire in my downfall and then assume my rightful place as soon as my head and my body were separated?'

'I did not, oh I swear it I did not,' came the pitiful reply, and an honest one too for Jane was a sweet girl who meddled not in politics, unlike her naughty predecessor.

'Two to haunt you now, my Lord,' laughed Anne. 'Do you care for that?'

'I do not,' I shouted. 'I demand that you leave me this instance and return to your fiery home.'

'Your orders hold no sway here,' she said, coming towards me quickly, instilling fear in my heart as her hands reached out to my throat. 'Shall I throttle you now and take you with me?' she asked. 'Will you join us, my Lord? Will you make a triumvirate of us in the afterlife?' Her cold fingers encircled my neck with a grip unlike any I had known before and she squeezed slowly. My breath began to leave my body as my eyes grew wide and my tongue felt heavy on my palate. I swore I would die. But at that very moment, just as life appeared to be leaving me forever, my eyes opened suddenly and it was morning time and I lay alone, trembling, fearful, afraid of sleep.

The night terrors began in earnest then. I knew not which nights my ladies would appear before me and which nights I would be left in peace. Every visit grew more horrible. Anne would become more and more angry, screaming her curses at me before threatening a dagger to my frame or an axe to my head; Jane would stand by her side and weep at her own fate, throwing curses down on me for leaving her as a ward to this dreadful woman when what chance did I have of removing her from the next world, when I thought I had already despatched her from this one? As the days grew into weeks and these in turn became months and years, my counsellors and ministers grew fearful for me. It was true that I was becoming more exhausted on a daily basis for I feared the visions that my closed eyes would bring me and my only comfort came in food and cruelty, my twin delights. I grew heavy and unhappy, and the court was filled with a tension over which my unhappy moods presided. I took another wife, a second Anne, but she was not to my taste and I quickly despatched her to Hever Castle where I would not have to endure her countenance; I dared not let her join her namesake in the afterlife and insisted that she be protected and cared for, actions which confused the court. And then a young girl entranced me, a second Catherine, and I took her to my bed and offered her a throne, which she gladly accepted. But foolish me, for she was little more than a child and her virtue was limited. As her infidelities came to light I had no choice but to send her to the axe too, lest my ministers considered me too easily abused, but as she was led screaming to her doom, I feared that it would not be long before she visited my bed-chamber again and I dreaded the moment that I would next lay eyes on her pretty features.

Soon I would look back on the visits of Anne and Jane with pleasure for the moment that Catherine joined them my torments increased ten-fold. Sleep no longer mattered for my three witches would visit me during the day now, while I attended to papers in my study, or while I was giving chase with the hunt. Catherine took her place at their head and her anger and viciousness was a study in cruelty for she would appear as if from nowhere, displaying the wounds that encircled her pretty neck and screaming as she advanced on me, her hands outstretched, ready to throttle me. I tried to flee but Anne was behind me, with tools in her hands ready to murder me, while Jane watched proceedings and let such a roar of misery from her mouth that I thought it might deafen me.

Every day became a terror and in my desperation I despatched my priest to Rome, seeking help to exorcise these spirits back whence they had come, but my reputation was low there and answer came there none. It was then that I thought to banish these ladies myself. Who were they after all but souls lost 'twixt an earthly domain and a spiritual resting place and had the Lord himself not appointed me to my position? With great secrecy I summonsed several men and a crone to Greenwich, each of whom was known to have curious connections with the afterlife and together we lay in wait night after night for any of my ghastly tormentors to return. We laid potions, invoked prayers which were spoken in languages of the East, and burnt candles fused with an elixir of pomegranate and hayseed, which I was assured had qualities that repelled spirits. A new-born fawn was sacrificed and I confess that I felt like an emperor of ancient Rome as his blood was bottled and left in the four corners of my chamber. These rituals continued for a month and a day and the visitations finally ceased. Convinced that I had triumphed over my ghosts I rewarded each of my exorcists with gold. However, within three nights of their departure I was awoken once again to a ghastly screaming and a vision of Catherine approaching me with Saracen swords and I knew that we had failed. In my anger, I enacted the Witchcraft Act and had the men and the crone brought back to Greenwich for a private burning.

I was left with no choice but to suffer the daily torments and in response I repaid them in kind upon my people and upon my court, directing such cruelties and punishments as might satisfy my own depressed spirits. As time passed I took another wife, a third Catherine, a homely creature with a tender heart who has nursed me through these final days as I have grown old and fat and riddled with the gout. I cannot recognise my own form when the glass is placed before me; was I not once young and handsome and vigorous? Did the ladies not swoon as I strode before them and call me a fine fellow? But this is what my three dead queens have brought me to. They have laid me low.

I lie in my bed now, knowing that I will never set foot on solid ground again. My breathing grows laboured and the great corpulence of my body feels heavy and settled, as it prepares for its final hour. The queen is here and my ministers and advisors surround the bed; I can see the fingers of my chancellor twitching as he waits for me to breathe my last so that he might remove the ring of kingship from my finger and pass it to my son Edward, who I fear will not outlive me by many years. My hands are so engorged that I dread to think how the ring will be removed. The pliers, I daresay.

And standing between these men, their eyes alight with vengeance and fury, are my three ladies, Anne, Jane and Catherine, screaming with delight, cursing me even as my own light begins to fade from within, sparing me no charity in my final moments, promising me eternal misery and pain when I leave this world to join them in their unhappy limbo. *O make them cease*, I cry, summoning all my energies for a final entreaty – I, whose words were once obeyed without question, without hesitation, by all; I, who commanded armies and levied taxes and broke with Rome – but the ministers ignore me now for they can hear nothing except the

advancement of their own ambitions, see nothing bar the frivolity of the youthful court that beckons them. The queen takes my hand and holds it as my eyes start to close and it is warm and tender, like her, and I am grateful for it, but a moment later her fingers are prised away as Anne takes my left hand in hers, which is icy and hard, and Catherine grips my right, her sharp nails digging into my palm so that I might scream in pain, and although I try to stay here, to remain in this world where I have been master for thirty-two years, their strength is too great and my spirits are too low and my eyes slowly close while my heart gives another beat... and another... and a final one now... until my body feels light again, as if I am a lad once more, and I am lifted from the majesty of my room to a curious darkness by my three ladies who fall on me with the fury of the damned and I hear my own voice screaming from within as their eternal vengeance begins.