

QUEEN ELIZABETH



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By Jacob Abbott

ELIZABETH'S MOTHER

1533-1536

Greenwich.—The hospital.—Its inmates.—Greenwich Observatory.—Manner of taking time.—Henry the Eighth.—His character.—His six wives.—Anne Boleyn.—Catharine of Aragon.—Henry discards her.—Origin of the English Church.—Henry marries Anne Boleyn.—Birth of Elizabeth.—Ceremony of christening.—Baptism of Elizabeth.—Grand procession.—Train-bearers.—The church.—The silver font.—The presents.—Name of the infant princess.—Elizabeth made Princess of Wales.—Matrimonial schemes.—Jane Seymour.—The tournament.—The king's suspicions.—Queen Anne arrested.—She is sent to the Tower.—Sufferings of the queen.—Her mental distress.—Examination of Anne.—Her letter to the king.—Anne's fellow-prisoners.—They are executed.—Anne tried and condemned.—She protests her innocence.—Anne's execution.—Disposition of the body.—The king's brutality.—Elizabeth's forlorn condition.

TRAVELERS, in ascending the Thames by the steamboat from Rotterdam, on their return from an excursion to the Rhine, have often their attention strongly attracted by what appears to be a splendid palace on the banks of the river at Greenwich. The edifice is not a palace, however, but a hospital, or, rather, a retreat where the worn out, maimed, and crippled veterans of the English navy spend the remnant of their days in comfort and peace, on pensions allowed them by the government in whose service they have spent their strength or lost their limbs. The magnificent buildings of the hospital stand on level land near the river. Behind them there is a beautiful park, which extends over the undulating and rising ground in the rear; and on the summit of one of the eminences there is the famous Greenwich Observatory, on the precision of whose quadrants and micrometers depend those calculations by

which the navigation of the world is guided. The most unconcerned and careless spectator is interested in the manner in which the ships which throng the river all the way from Greenwich to London, "take their time" from this observatory before setting sail for distant seas. From the top of a cupola surmounting the edifice, a slender pole ascends, with a black ball upon it, so constructed as to slide up and down for a few feet upon the pole. When the hour of 12 M. approaches, the ball slowly rises to within a few inches of the top, warning the ship-masters in the river to be ready with their chronometers, to observe and note the precise instant of its fall. When a few seconds only remain of the time, the ball ascends the remainder of the distance by a very deliberate motion, and then drops suddenly when the instant arrives. The ships depart on their several destinations, and for months afterward when thousands of miles away they depend for their safety in dark and stormy nights, and among dangerous reefs and rocky shores, on the nice approximation to correctness in the note of time which this descending ball had given them.

This is Greenwich, as it exists at the present day. At the time when the events occurred which are to be related in this narrative, it was most known on account of a royal palace which was situated there. This palace was the residence of the then queen consort of England. The king reigning at that time was Henry the Eighth. He was an unprincipled and cruel tyrant, and the chief business of his life seemed to be selecting and marrying new queens, making room for each succeeding one by discarding, divorcing, or beheading her predecessor. There were six of them in all, and, with one exception, the history of each one is a distinct and separate, but dreadful tragedy. As there were so many of them, and they figured as queens each for so short a period, they are commonly designated in history by their personal family names, and even in these names there is a great similarity. There were three Catharines, two

Annes, and a Jane. The only one who lived and died in peace, respected and beloved to the end, was the Jane.

Queen Elizabeth, the subject of this narrative, was the daughter of the second wife in this strange succession, and her mother was one of the Annes. Her name in full was Anne Boleyn. She was young and very beautiful, and Henry, to prepare the way for making her his wife, divorced his first queen, or rather declared his marriage with her null and void, because she had been, before he married her, the wife of his brother. Her name was Catharine of Aragon. She was, while connected with him, a faithful, true, and affectionate wife. She was a Catholic. The Catholic rules are very strict in respect to the marriage of relatives, and a special dispensation from the pope was necessary to authorize marriage in such a case as that of Henry and Catharine. This dispensation had, however, been obtained, and Catharine had, in reliance upon it, consented to become Henry's wife. When, however, she was no longer young and beautiful, and Henry had become enamored of Anne Boleyn, who was so, he discarded Catharine, and espoused the beautiful girl in her stead. He wished the pope to annul his dispensation, which would, of course, annul the marriage; and because the pontiff refused, and all the efforts of Henry's government were unavailing to move him, he abandoned the Catholic faith, and established an independent Protestant church in England, whose supreme authority would annul the marriage. Thus, in a great measure, came the Reformation in England. The Catholics reproach us, and, it must be confessed, with some justice, with the ignominiousness of its origin.

The course which things thus took created a great deal of delay in the formal annulling of the marriage with Catharine, which Henry was too impatient and imperious to bear. He would not wait for the decree of divorce, but took Anne Boleyn for his wife before his previous connection was made void. He said he was privately married to her. This he had,

as he maintained, a right to do, for he considered his first marriage as void, absolutely and of itself, without any decree. When, at length, the decree was finally passed, he brought Anne Boleyn forward as his queen, and introduced her as such to England and to the world by a genuine marriage and a most magnificent coronation. The people of England pitied poor Catharine, but they joined very cordially, notwithstanding, in welcoming the youthful and beautiful lady who was to take her place. All London gave itself up to festivities and rejoicings on the occasion of these nuptials. Immediately after this the young queen retired to her palace in Greenwich, and in two or three months afterward little Elizabeth was born. Her birth-day was the 7th of September, 1533.

The mother may have loved the babe, but Henry himself was sadly disappointed that his child was not a son. Notwithstanding her sex, however, she was a personage of great distinction from her very birth, as all the realm looked upon her as heir to the crown. Henry was himself, at this time, very fond of Anne Boleyn, though his feelings afterward were entirely changed. He determined on giving to the infant a very splendid christening. The usage in the Church of England is to make the christening of a child not merely a solemn religious ceremony, but a great festive occasion of congratulations and rejoicing. The unconscious subject of the ceremony is taken to the church. Certain near and distinguished friends, gentlemen and ladies, appear as godfathers and godmothers, as they are termed, to the child. They, in the ceremony, are considered as presenting the infant for consecration to Christ, and as becoming responsible for its future initiation into the Christian faith. They are hence sometimes called sponsors. These sponsors are supposed to take, from the time of the baptism forward, a strong interest in all that pertains to the welfare of their little charge, and they usually manifest this interest by presents on the day of the christening. These things are all

conducted with considerable ceremony and parade in ordinary cases, occurring in private life; and when a princess is to be baptized, all, even the most minute details of the ceremony, assume a great importance, and the whole scene becomes one of great pomp and splendor.

The babe, in this case, was conveyed to the church in a grand procession. The mayor and other civic authorities in London came down to Greenwich in barges, tastefully ornamented, to join in the ceremony. The lords and ladies of King Henry's court were also there, in attendance at the palace. When all were assembled, and every thing was ready, the procession moved from the palace to the church with great pomp. The road, all the way, was carpeted with green rushes, spread upon the ground. Over this road the little infant was borne by one of her godmothers. She was wrapped in a mantle of purple velvet, with a long train appended to it, which was trimmed with ermine, a very costly kind of fur, used in England as a badge of authority. This train was borne by lords and ladies of high rank, who were appointed for the purpose by the king, and who deemed their office a very distinguished honor. Besides these train-bearers, there were four lords, who walked two on each side of the child, and who held over her a magnificent canopy. Other personages of high rank and station followed, bearing various insignia and emblems, such as by the ancient customs of England are employed on these occasions, and all dressed sumptuously in gorgeous robes, and wearing the badges and decorations pertaining to their rank or the offices they held. Vast crowds of spectators lined the way, and gazed upon the scene.

On arriving at the church, they found the interior splendidly decorated for the occasion. Its walls were lined throughout with tapestry, and in the center was a crimson canopy, under which was placed a large silver font, containing the water with which the child was to be baptized. The ceremony was performed by Cranmer, the

archbishop of Canterbury, which is the office of the highest dignitary of the English Church. After it was performed, the procession returned as it came, only now there was an addition of four persons of high rank, who followed the child with the presents intended for her by the godfathers and godmothers. These presents consisted of cups and bowls, of beautiful workmanship, some of silver gilt, and some of solid gold. They were very costly, though not prized much yet by the unconscious infant for whom they were intended. She went and came, in the midst of this gay and joyous procession, little imagining into what a restless and unsatisfying life all this pageantry and splendor were ushering her.

They named the child Elizabeth, from her grandmother. There have been many queens of that name, but Queen Elizabeth of England became so much more distinguished than any other, that that name alone has become her usual designation. Her family name was Tudor. As she was never married—for, though her life was one perpetual scene of matrimonial schemes and negotiations, she lived and died a maiden lady—she has been sometimes called the Virgin Queen, and one of the states of this Union, Virginia, receives its name from this designation of Elizabeth. She is also often familiarly called Queen Bess.

Making little Elizabeth presents of gold and silver plate, and arranging splendid pageants for her, were not the only plans for her aggrandizement which were formed during the period of her infantile unconsciousness. The king, her father, first had an act of Parliament passed, solemnly recognizing and confirming her claim as heir to the crown, and the title of Princess of Wales was formally conferred upon her. When these things were done, Henry began to consider how he could best promote his own political schemes by forming an engagement of marriage for her, and, when she was only about two years of age, he offered her to the King of France as the future wife of one of his sons, on certain conditions of

political service which he wished him to perform. But the King of France would not accede to the terms, and so this plan was abandoned. Elizabeth was, however, notwithstanding this failure, an object of universal interest and attention, as the daughter of a very powerful monarch, and the heir to his crown. Her life opened with very bright and serene prospects of future greatness; but all these prospects were soon apparently cut off by a very heavy cloud which arose to darken her sky. This cloud was the sudden and dreadful fall and ruin of her mother.

Queen Anne Boleyn was originally a maid of honor to Queen Catharine, and became acquainted with King Henry and gained his affections while she was acting in that capacity. When she became queen herself, she had, of course, her own maids of honor, and among them was one named Jane Seymour. Jane was a beautiful and accomplished lady, and in the end she supplanted her mistress and queen in Henry's affections, just as Anne herself had supplanted Catharine. The king had removed Catharine to make way for Anne, by annulling his marriage with her on account of their relationship: what way could he contrive now to remove Anne, so as to make way for Jane?

He began to entertain, or to pretend to entertain, feelings of jealousy and suspicion that Anne was unfaithful to him. One day, at a sort of tournament in the park of the royal palace at Greenwich, when a great crowd of gayly-dressed ladies and gentlemen were assembled to witness the spectacle, the queen dropped her handkerchief. A gentleman whom the king had suspected of being one of her favorites picked it up. He did not immediately restore it to her. There was, besides, something in the air and manner of the gentleman, and in the attendant circumstances of the case, which the king's mind seized upon as evidence of criminal gallantry between the parties. He was, or at least pretended to be, in a great rage. He left the field immediately and went to London. The tournament was

broken up in confusion, the queen was seized by the king's orders, conveyed to her palace in Greenwich, and shut up in her chamber, with a lady who had always been her rival and enemy to guard her. She was in great consternation and sorrow, but she declared most solemnly that she was innocent of any crime, and had always been true and faithful to the king.

The next day she was taken from her palace at Greenwich up the river, probably in a barge well guarded by armed men, to the Tower of London. The Tower is an ancient and very extensive castle, consisting of a great number of buildings inclosed within a high wall. It is in the lower part of London, on the bank of the Thames, with a flight of stairs leading down to the river from a great postern gate. The unhappy queen was landed at these stairs and conveyed into the castle, and shut up in a gloomy apartment, with walls of stone and windows barricaded with strong bars of iron. There were four or five gentlemen, attendants upon the queen in her palace at Greenwich, whom the king suspected, or pretended to suspect, of being her accomplices in crime, that were arrested at the same time with her and closely confined.

When the poor queen was introduced into her dungeon, she fell on her knees, and, in an agony of terror and despair, she implored God to help her in this hour of her extremity, and most solemnly called him to witness that she was innocent of the crime imputed to her charge. Seeking thus a refuge in God calmed and composed her in some small degree; but when, again, thoughts of the imperious and implacable temper of her husband came over her, of the impetuosity of his passions, of the certainty that he wished her removed out of the way in order that room might be made for her rival, and then, when her distracted mind turned to the forlorn and helpless condition of her little daughter Elizabeth, now scarcely three years old, her fortitude and self-possession forsook her entirely; she sank

half insane upon her bed, in long and uncontrollable paroxysms of sobs and tears, alternating with still more uncontrollable and frightful bursts of hysterical laughter.

The king sent a commission to take her examination. At the same time, he urged her, by the persons whom he sent, to confess her guilt, promising her that, if she did so, her life should be spared. She, however, protested her innocence with the utmost firmness and constancy. She begged earnestly to be allowed to see the king, and, when this was refused, she wrote a letter to him, which still remains, and which expresses very strongly the acuteness of her mental sufferings.

In this letter, she said that she was so distressed and bewildered by the king's displeasure and her imprisonment, that she hardly knew what to think or to say. She assured him that she had always been faithful and true to him, and begged that he would not cast an indelible stain upon her own fair fame and that of her innocent and helpless child by such unjust and groundless imputations. She begged him to let her have a fair trial by impartial persons, who would weigh the evidence against her in a just and equitable manner. She was sure that by this course her innocence would be established, and he himself, and all mankind would see that she had been most unjustly accused.

But if, on the other hand, she added, the king had determined on her destruction, in order to remove an obstacle in the way of his possession of a new object of love, she prayed that God would forgive him and all her enemies for so great a sin, and not call him to account for it at the last day. She urged him, at all events, to spare the lives of the four gentlemen who had been accused, as she assured him they were wholly innocent of the crime laid to their charge, begging him, if he had ever loved the name of Anne Boleyn, to grant this her last request. She signed her letter his "most loyal and ever faithful wife," and dated it from her "doleful prison in the Tower."

The four gentlemen were promised that their lives should be spared if they would confess their guilt. One of them did, accordingly, admit his guilt, and the others persisted to the end in firmly denying it. They who think Anne Boleyn was innocent, suppose that the one who confessed did it as the most likely mode of averting destruction, as men have often been known, under the influence of fear, to confess crimes of which it was afterward proved they could not have been guilty. If this was his motive, it was of no avail. The four persons accused, after a very informal trial, in which nothing was really proved against them, were condemned, apparently to please the king, and were executed together.

Three days after this the queen herself was brought to trial before the peers. The number of peers of the realm in England at this time was fifty-three. Only twenty-six were present at the trial. The king is charged with making such arrangements as to prevent the attendance of those who would be unwilling to pass sentence of condemnation. At any rate, those who did attend professed to be satisfied of the guilt of the accused, and they sentenced her to be burned, or to be beheaded, at the pleasure of the king. He decided that she should be beheaded.

The execution was to take place in a little green area within the Tower. The platform was erected here, and the block placed upon it, the whole being covered with a black cloth, as usual on such occasions. On the morning of the fatal day, Anne sent for the constable of the Tower to come in and receive her dying protestations that she was innocent of the crimes alleged against her. She told him that she understood that she was not to die until 12 o'clock, and that she was sorry for it, for she wished to have it over. The constable told her the pain would be very slight and momentary. "Yes," she rejoined, "I am told that a very skillful executioner is provided, and my neck is very slender."

At the appointed hour she was led out into the court-yard where the execution was to take place. There were about

twenty persons present, all officers of state or of the city of London. The bodily suffering attendant upon the execution was very soon over, for the slender neck was severed at a single blow, and probably all sensibility to pain immediately ceased. Still, the lips and the eyes were observed to move and quiver for a few seconds after the separation of the head from the body. It was a relief, however, to the spectators when this strange and unnatural prolongation of the mysterious functions of life came to an end.

No coffin had been provided. They found, however, an old wooden chest, made to contain arrows, lying in one of the apartments of the tower, which they used instead. They first laid the decapitated trunk within it, and then adjusted the dissevered head to its place, as if vainly attempting to repair the irretrievable injury they had done. They hurried the body, thus enshrined, to its burial in a chapel, which was also within the tower, doing all with such dispatch that the whole was finished before the clock struck twelve; and the next day the unfeeling monster who was the author of this dreadful deed was publicly married to his new favorite, Jane Seymour.

The king had not merely procured Anne's personal condemnation; he had also obtained a decree annulling his marriage with her, on the ground of her having been, as he attempted to prove, previously affianced to another man. This was, obviously, a mere pretense. The object was to cut off Elizabeth's rights to inherit the crown, by making his marriage with her mother void. Thus was the little princess left motherless and friendless when only three years old.