

Prologue

February 12, 1554

Tower of London

John Feckenham, chaplain to Queen Mary, donned his heavy black cloak before clasping his sweaty palms together. He dropped to his knees and offered up one last prayer for the poor soul whose death this day would ease many minds. All this could have been avoided had Lady Jane Grey returned to the true faith. Perhaps then Queen Mary would have held off the executioner's blade. Yet, she had not.

He would miss their lively doctrinal conversations, for Jane did have a quick mind. A pity they could not continue in this fashion for another month or so. But he had failed to make Jane see the errors of her Protestant faith, and she would not give up the Church of her great-uncle Henry VIII for the true Catholic religion. Jane even made Feckenham promise to give her prayer book to the queen when all was over and done, the hope being that Queen Mary might see the light and turn away from the Pope and Rome, thus saving her body from the flames of hell.

John placed his cap upon his head and slowly made his way to Gentleman Gaoler's quarters where Jane had been staying since she had been deposed. Though a satisfactory place within the Tower, it still held an unfortunate view of the Tower Green where Jane's scaffold had been constructed.

Sir John Brydges, Lieutenant of the Tower, was waiting by Lady Jane's door. A grim line creased his lips. Within the house, the weeping and wailing of Mrs. Ellen and Mrs. Tilney, Jane's attendants, twisted Feckenham's heart. All knew their parts to play. The question was, did the fair Lady Jane?

John followed Sir Brydges into the room. "It is time, madam," Brydges said kindly.

The woman flinched as if Brydges's words were a hard lash. Dressed in the black gown and dark French hood Lady Jane wore at her trial, the dry-eyed woman finally nodded. In her hands she held a new prayer book and a crumpled piece of parchment, lest she forget the memorized words. As she departed the home and walked to the scaffold, her lips moved slowly, though no words could be discerned—almost as if she were rehearsing the lines to a tragedy.

Few were present to watch this spectacle unfold; after all, Lady Jane did have royal blood coursing through her veins and her death was not subject for public display. All walked on in silence until they stood at the scaffold steps. She turned; her gaze locked with his. "God grant you all your desires and accept my own hearty thanks for all your attention to me. Although indeed, those attentions have tried me more than death can now terrify me."

Her words swirled through Feckenham's head and tied his tongue. Before his voice returned, she had ascended the scaffold stairs. With haste, he followed.

She stood, her back ramrod straight as she fumbled with the parchment in her shaking hands. Slowly the woman began to address the small assembly. "Good people, I am come hither to die, and by a law I am condemned to the same. The fact against the queen's Highness was unlawful, and the consenting thereunto by me: but, touching the procurement and desire thereof by me, or on my behalf, I do wash my hands thereof in innocency before God, and the face of

you, good Christian people, this day.

“I pray you all, good Christian people, to bear me witness that I die a true Christian woman, and that I do look to be saved by no other mean, but only by the mercy of God, in the blood of his only Son Jesus Christ: and I confess, that when I did know the Word of God, I neglected the same, loved myself and the world; and therefore this plague and punishment is happily and worthily happened unto me for my sins; and yet I thank God, that of his goodness he hath thus given me a time and respite to repent.

“And now, good people, while I am alive, I pray you assist me with your prayers.”

Here then she knelt and turned once again, gazing into Feckenham’s eyes. “Shall I say this Psalm?”

“Yea,” Feckenham said and hoped the woman could read the words as practiced. She turned back to the prayer book and began to recite the fifty-first Psalm. He followed her English words with his Latin. When done, she rose and gave a timid smile. “God, I beseech Him abundantly reward you for your kindness to me.”

Feckenham could feel a heat creep up the back of his neck even though the day was brisk. How had he been kind? Oh, if only there could be another way.

As instructed, the woman handed her gloves and handkerchief to her attendants and her prayer book to Thomas Brydges, the lieutenant’s brother. She removed her hood and began to untie her gown when the executioner stepped forward.

Startled, she stepped back. “I desire you to leave me alone.”

Had she forgotten that her clothing would become the executioner's property?

Quickly her attendants came to her aid and helped with the unlacing. At least this small disaster had been avoided.

Feckenham looked around the green, but none seemed to think the behavior odd. Perhaps they had written it off to nerves instead of a queen forgetting her duty before her executioner. He breathed a sigh of relief. All would continue as planned.

A cloth was given to the woman to fasten about her eyes. The executioner came forward and knelt down. "My lady, I beg your forgiveness."

"You are forgiven," she said in a soft voice.

There was nothing else to be done. "My lady," the executioner said, "please stand upon the straw."

She hesitated, and her eyes grew wide as she stared at the block. Feckenham thought for sure she would bolt. But she did not.

"I pray you dispatch me quickly," she whispered before kneeling. Again, she paused. "Will you take it off before I lay me down?"

"No, madam," he answered just as quiet.

With shaking fingers, she tied the kerchief across her eyes and began to fumble about with her hands, looking for the block. "What shall I do? Where is it?" she cried.

All about looked on in horror, if this did not conclude swiftly who knew what mischief would be had. Without further thought, Feckenham guided her to the block.

She lowered her head and uttered her last words, “Lord into thy hands I commend my spirit.”

With a swift swing of the ax, by all accounts, Lady Jane Grey was dead.

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