

Jane Boleyn

The Infamous Lady Rochford

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Extract

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PROLOGUE

The Hand of Fate



Their way lit by the flickering light from great wax torches, and to the soothing sound of chanted prayers, the mourners walked solemnly towards the three black-draped barges ready at the river's edge. Amongst them were the leading men of the land, entrusted with the sombre task of accompanying the tiny coffin containing the body of the infant prince to its resting place with his ancestors in the Abbey Church of St Peter's at Westminster just a few miles away. It was February and bitterly cold. The icy waters of the Thames lapped against the sides of the vessels, the leafless trees stood stark and sentinel as if to guard the baby on whom so many hopes had rested, the breath of the oarsmen was clearly visible as they watched the casket being gently brought aboard. The final journey had begun.

A tolling of the bells could be heard as the cortège made its way slowly from the royal palace of Richmond where the child had died so suddenly, to the Abbey where the monks waited patiently. All would be done according to strict protocol and tradition, every minute detail of the prescribed ceremonial observed. Eight royal officers – yeomen and grooms of the household – were stationed at the door of St Peter's to receive the tall funeral torches: thick wax and resin candles fixed into wooden holders, carried by the twenty appointed torch bearers. The choir, which faced the sanctuary, and the catafalque on which the coffin would be placed, were draped with over three hundred yards of black cloth, arranged under the meticulous supervision of Ralph Jenet, the yeoman of the Wardrobe of Beds. He could never have performed a more poignant task for the king his master. The air inside the church was heavy with the smell of the burning wax and the soft fragrance of the incense.

Light and colour abounded, for all was decorated for the glory of God. The walls were covered with paintings in vibrant reds and blues and greens and yellows, or with richly embroidered hangings, which glittered with gold and silver thread. Sculptures of stone angels smiled benignly down on the intricately carved friezes of birds, flowers and foliage adorning the tracery around the monuments or the niches encircling the painted and gilded statues of saints. Diffused light of every shade and hue flowed through the panes of the towering stained-glass windows. The dancing flames of hundreds of candles were everywhere. The shrine, shimmering with gold and precious stones, containing the remains of St Edward the Confessor, a founder of the Abbey, was housed in its own chapel together with sacred relics such as a thorn from the crown of thorns, the girdle of the Virgin Mary and a phial protecting a few drops of the blood of Christ. The chapel stood proudly in the heart of the church, just behind the high altar, itself a stunning testament to medieval skill, craftsmanship and faith. It was the perfect setting for the burial of a prince.

More than four hundred people were present at the interment. One hundred and eighty paupers held yet more torches as they walked in the procession. They took their role in the ceremony very seriously because the prayers of the poor would help those facing divine judgment. Five of the king's knights carried specially made funeral banners. Then came the elaborate hearse swathed in more than seven yards of black cloth of gold and decorated by painters who had worked day and night to complete it. Four knights reverently bore the coffin, covered with black cloth of gold and with a white cloth of gold cross upon it, over which there was a canopy held by four more knights. Four earls, a marquess, barons and yet more knights followed. Next came chaplains, preachers, those who were 'daily waiters upon the prince', even two knights whose job it was to ensure that the correct order of precedence was maintained amongst the congregation. Nothing was left to chance. The mourning robes themselves were graded in fabric and richness according to the rank of the wearers, the chief of whom wore hoods covering their heads.

The king had chosen the child's final resting place carefully. He

was placed as near as possible to those previous kings whose ranks he could join only in death. Although he would never sit upon St Edward's Chair with the crown upon his head, he would lie on the left-hand side of the altar, close to the canopied tomb of Edmund Crouchback, the youngest son of Henry III, a few steps from the Chapel of St Edward.

The customary, consoling words of the Latin burial service began; the coffin was ritually sprinkled with holy water and censed at each of the four sides and, as the echo of the final prayers and the antiphons led by the king's composer and musician, Robert Fayrfax, faded away, everyone left the confines of the church. The monks could once again carry out their daily routines uninterrupted by the formalities of state. And the baby could sleep.

It was all so different from just seven weeks earlier when his birth was announced on New Year's Day, 1511. His parents were King Henry VIII of England and his queen, Katherine of Aragon. He was their first living child. They were still young – the king was not yet twenty, although Katherine was almost six years older – and both were delighted that the succession was now assured. The boy seemed healthy; there was every reason to believe that he would be joined by brothers and sisters in due course. Henry was so grateful that he rode to the shrine of Our Lady at Walsingham, in Norfolk, to give thanks, a journey of about two hundred miles. Bonfires were lit in the streets of London to celebrate the birth; free wine provided for some lucky revellers; the happy news proclaimed throughout the kingdom and to the royal courts of Europe. The child was christened Henry after his father and grandfather, the first Tudor monarch.

In the second week of February, Henry VIII and Katherine attended two days of magnificent jousts in the child's honour at the palace of Westminster. The queen presided over the tournament serenely, secure in the knowledge that she had fulfilled her primary function as consort by producing a son. On the second day, she presented the prizes to the victors, including one to her husband, for Henry joined the lists as the gallant 'Loyal Heart'. The chief nobles of the land were all there. No one imagined that the little prince would die just ten days later and would lie in a grave not far from the tiltyards.

Nor could anyone have known then that Henry and Katherine would become only too familiar with grief. The king at first tried to hide his sorrow and comfort the queen with thoughts of the family they would one day have but, despite her numerous pregnancies and many long hours spent in prayer, Katherine managed to give birth to only one child who lived to grow up. And that was a girl, Princess Mary. What use was she in a masculine age when prowess on the battlefield could decide the success or ruin of a dynasty?

Henry understood this only too well. There was little he would not do to gain the son he needed. In the process, his country was changed for ever and few of his subjects were untouched, although some were more affected than others. One of the knights who had jousting with the king on that carefree day, and who later helped carry the body of the tiny child, was Sir Thomas Boleyn, a courtier very much in favour with his sovereign. Thomas and his wife, Elizabeth Howard, had two daughters and a son. The girls' names were Anne and Mary and their brother was George. When the mourners entered Westminster Abbey on that raw February day, these children were playing with their attendants. So was a little girl, one Jane Parker, who would one day marry George Boleyn. They grew up blissfully unaware that the direction of their lives and even their ultimate fate would be so determined by the death of a prince they had never seen. Those four children were not to know that one would become a queen, one would eventually lead a life of relative obscurity, three would face the headsman's axe and Jane's reputation would become tarnished with tales of adultery, incest and betrayal.

THE EARLY YEARS



Childhood



It was time to go. The horses shifted and stamped restlessly. They always seemed to know when a long journey was imminent. The carts were laden with fashionable clothes, domestic items, everything needed to make life comfortable. Servants and escorts stood ready too. For Lord Morley's daughter, Jane Parker, a new life was about to begin. She rode out towards London, leaving behind her family home at Great Hallingbury.

Until now, the Tudor mansion, built by Lord Morley, had been her world. The solid, red-bricked house replaced an earlier Morley dwelling that had nestled in the same Essex village for over three hundred years. It was huge, a magical place for giggling children to hide and play. Scattered amongst the richly carved oak furniture and plate inside the building were many reminders of Lord Morley's mother, Alice Lovel. When she died in 1518, Alice made generous bequests to her son. Lord Morley could sleep in the bed of cloth of gold and tawny velvet that she left him. He could sit in her 'best chair', which probably stood in the long gallery, now equipped by Lord Morley with expensive linenfold panelling and tall, graceful windows. Alice's gilt bowl, emblazoned with her own coat of arms as well as that of her first husband, was on display for all to see. Also on view was an even older and more precious heirloom, the special cup with its gilt cover that Alice said was 'gotten' by her ancestors. One of the exquisitely embroidered wall hangings also came from her. Lord Morley had been allowed to choose whichever one he wanted from her estate. Everything fitted perfectly into his newly constructed home, which was one of the finest in the county. Its grounds were impressive too. If the weather was fine, Jane roamed

happily outside in the carefully tended gardens, which stretched for over two acres. There was an orchard, to provide apples, pears and quinces for the quince marmalade that everyone loved. There was a pond, surrounded by trees and stocked with fish. There was a long brick stable block and hay loft, so necessary for the Morley horses, surmounted by tall red Tudor chimneys. Whether Great Hallingbury, or Hallingbury Morley as her father preferred to call it, was snuggling under thick snow or basking in the warm sunshine of a summer's afternoon, the setting was idyllic, especially during those few precious years of childhood when the years pass slowly and growing up seems so far away.

Just a short walk across the fields from the house was the parish church of St Giles. It is still standing. Built largely of flint and limestone, with a square bell tower, it is small and intimate. The nave, forty-five feet long, with circular windows set deeply into the walls, led into the chancel through a round arch constructed of Roman bricks, for there had once been a Roman site here. It was probably in this pretty church, so much the heart of the village, that Jane was baptised. About the year 1505, the tiny girl was carried to the porch of St Giles by her mother's midwife. Lady Morley was not present as it was customary for mothers not to re-enter society until they had been churched, or purified, about forty days after giving birth. With Jane's godparents at her side, the midwife gently took her inside for the baptism itself. There, at the stone font, before the richly carved rood screen and amidst the painted walls and brightly coloured statues of saints, the baby was welcomed into the great Catholic fold. Lord and Lady Morley knew how important it was that babies be received into the protection of the Church as quickly as possible after their birth. Life was unpredictable and diseases often struck without warning; they did not want their little daughter to fall into limbo, the dreadful nothingness that awaited the souls of unbaptised children. Everything, therefore, was correctly done. The priest blessed Jane with holy oil on her shoulders and chest, on her right hand and on her forehead. Salt was placed into her mouth so that she would be 'freed from all uncleanness, and from all assault of spiritual wickedness'. She was dipped three times into the sacred water in the font. She was anointed with holy chrism.

The godparents, whose names are lost to us, vowed to ensure that Jane's mother and father kept her 'from fire and water and other perils' and to make certain that she knew 'the Pater noster, Ave and Creed, after the law of all holy church'. They told the priest the name chosen for her: she was christened Jane, possibly after her father's sister, another Jane Parker. Family ties were always important.

As she rode away from these familiar surroundings, Jane knew how important those ties were. She had every reason to feel pride in her lineage. Her father, Sir Henry Parker, Lord Morley, was a peer of the realm, owning lands in Norfolk, Buckinghamshire and Herefordshire as well as in Essex. He came from ancient stock. His ancestors had played their part in tumultuous events over the centuries, helping to quell the Peasants' Revolt and fighting for king and country in the Hundred Years War against England's traditional enemy, France. Yes, Jane could feel proud.

She knew, of course, that it could all have been otherwise. The family lands and title came through Jane's grandmother, Alice Lovel. Alice's brother, a previous Lord Morley, died in Flanders fighting for Edward IV. However, although he had died a hero, he also died without children so his entire estate went to Alice. Girls sometimes had their uses. But Alice's first marriage, to Sir William Parker, Jane's grandfather, had brought the family close to disaster: Sir William Parker had fought on the wrong side at the Battle of Bosworth. He supported the doomed Richard III against Henry Tudor, the victorious Henry VII. Sir William survived the battle but the new king never really trusted him. His son, the young Henry Parker, the future Lord Morley and Jane's father, was fortunate to have been brought up in the household of Lady Margaret Beaufort, Henry VII's mother.

Stern and formidable she might be, but Lady Margaret was loyal to those she took under her wing. She was particularly concerned that the little boy should receive what she felt was his due, especially when his mother remarried after Sir William's death. Lady Margaret paid 500 marks to Alice's new husband, Sir Edward Howard, to make sure that young Henry Parker kept some family land, presumably at Great Hallingbury. Sir Edward adhered to the bargain

and also remembered his stepson in his will of 1512. He bequeathed the manor of Morley Hall in Norfolk to his wife, Alice, for her lifetime after which it would pass to Jane's father. The legacy did not come without conditions, however. In exchange, Morley was required to give land worth 10 marks a year to the prior and convent of Ingham in Norfolk or forfeit Morley Hall to them. Morley was lucky that Alice and Sir Edward had no children to complicate the situation further. Sir Edward had sired two bastards for whom he did his best to provide: he asked the king to choose one, the other being allocated to Charles Brandon, Duke of Suffolk. Howard hoped their new guardians would be 'good' lords to his sons but, as an extra safeguard, he left the boys money to help them set 'forth in the world'.

This did not, of course, affect Lord Morley or his inheritance. In fact, as far as Jane's father was concerned, the Howard marriage, which might have proved so awkward, brought him both land and valuable connections at court. The Howards were a very influential family. Sir Edward's father was the Duke of Norfolk, one of the leading men in the land, and Sir Edward's sister, Elizabeth, had married Sir Thomas Boleyn. Sir Thomas was a rising star, an ideal companion to the gregarious Henry VIII, certainly a man it was advantageous to know. And he was a neighbour, for, like the Morleys, the Boleyns owned lands in Essex and Norfolk. Being linked to the Boleyns created more associations since Thomas had sisters who married into other Norfolk or Essex families. His sister Anne, for example, married Sir John Shelton, Alice married Sir Robert Clere and Margaret married Sir John Sackville. Although the inter-relationships were complicated, Lord Morley had every reason to believe that he and his family would gain from them. And Sir Thomas Boleyn had a son, George, who was more or less Jane's age. Who knew what time might bring?

Certainly, as she rode to London, Jane understood that her destiny lay outside the confines of Great Hallingbury. Even while she enjoyed those brief years of childhood, Jane realised that they were but a preparation for the future – hers. Lord and Lady Morley took the upbringing of their children very seriously. It was their duty. Both boys and girls must be taught all that society demanded

if they were to take their rightful place when the time came. Lord Morley had a love of learning that lasted his whole life. Educated at Oxford himself, he wanted a stimulating and rigorous education for his son and heir, Henry. Expertise in the classics, however, was not something to encourage in his daughters. No husband would want a wife who was more knowledgeable than himself. Jane's schooling was therefore designed to fit her for the role of a wife and mother. She stayed at home in those early years, learning how to read and write, how to supervise servants and run a large household, and how to harness the healing properties of common herbs so that she could treat everyday ailments. Then, of course, there was needlework. Jane spent hours quietly sewing and perfecting convoluted yet delicate stitches. In this she was not alone, as most wealthy women excelled in this pastime. Even Queen Katherine made shirts for her husband and thought nothing of mending them herself as a sign of her love. And, perhaps Jane's greatest pleasure, she learnt the rudiments of dancing and music. A talented musician himself, the king delighted in everything musical. He revelled in the highly choreographed and glittering masques performed after supper at court. In these spectacular entertainments, favourite gentlemen strutted about in elaborate costumes, playing the roles of holy pilgrims, mysterious strangers or brave knights ready to rescue damsels in distress. The prettiest and most accomplished of the ladies always got the best parts. For Jane, it was as well to be ready. Opportunities to be on show before the entire court did not come easily, even for the daughter of a peer. Chances had to be seized.

That is, naturally, if God willed it so. Religion underpinned everything. While still a child, Jane was instructed with the underlying beliefs of Catholicism. She learnt about the sacrifice of Christ and the sacrament of the mass. She took comfort in the gentle goodness of the Virgin Mary who, along with the saints, could intercede for her with God. She prayed for the pope in Rome and she prayed for the king and queen. With her rosary beads in her hands, Jane recited the prayers she was taught, attending the services that were conducted in the Morleys' private chapel within the house itself. The Latin words of the mass became familiar to her as she knelt with her relatives and servants before the altar and watched

the priest use the chalice and other religious ornaments given by the late Alice Lovel. Before her were the terrifyingly vivid doom pictures painted on the church walls, which showed the souls of the righteous led into heaven by saints, martyrs and winged angels while the damned were dragged away to eternal torment by laughing devils and monsters. She was thankful that the Catholic Church stood between herself and the horrors of hell, for the Church was invincible.

It also preserved the fabric of society and the established hierarchy. For Jane, this meant that, next to the king, her father was the most revered person in her life. He was head of the family and took all the major decisions. One day he would arrange her betrothal and she would be expected to conform to his wishes. Every family chose their children's spouses with infinite care. Marriage was, after all, a contract. It brought material and social advantages to both sides. It was not something to be entered into lightly. It was what she was being trained for and one day it would happen.

Of course, it would also bring responsibilities. Jane had only to watch her own mother to appreciate the complexities of the life that awaited her. Alice St John was the daughter of Sir John St John, a prosperous and respected Bedfordshire landowner. Her wedding to Lord Morley was brokered by Lady Margaret Beaufort, Morley's patroness and a relative of the St Johns. Jane saw how well the match worked. Alice gave birth to at least five children: Jane herself, her sister Margaret, presumably named after Lady Margaret, who helped pay the christening expenses for the Morley progeny, another sister Elizabeth, and two sons, Henry, the heir, and his brother Francis. Childbirth was both painful and hazardous but it did not interfere very much with a noblewoman's other duties. Although the bond between mother and baby could be as strong then as it is now, Lady Morley was not required to care for any of her offspring herself; wet-nurses and servants did that. She supervised their upbringing only in the most general of terms. In fact, Jane rarely saw her mother when she was very young for, like so many women of her station, Lady Morley accompanied her husband on his visits to court, sometimes staying away from the family houses for long periods. As a peer, Lord Morley had to play his part in the affairs of

state. For most nobles, this meant engaging in the dangerous jousting that the king so enjoyed and fighting in the wars against France. Morley, however, was no soldier. Eventually, he served Henry with his pen, as a writer and translator of classical texts but, in the meantime, attendance at court was a painless way of proving his loyalty and doing his duty. Naturally, Lady Morley went with him, as, once she was old enough, did Jane.

Unsurprisingly, since her true importance still lay in the future, much of Jane's early life is undocumented. There was nothing unusual or noteworthy in the way in which she was brought up. As a way of widening experience, it was customary for young girls of her class, while in their early teens, to be sent away from home to serve in the households of other rich noblewomen. Sir Thomas Boleyn sent his two daughters abroad; little Catherine Howard, another relation of Jane's through marriage, spent her formative years with the Duchess of Norfolk. For the Morleys, the crucial decision was not whether or not to let Jane go, it was her destination. The most envied situation of all for a girl was admittance to the royal court in the train of a great lady. The greatest lady of all was the queen. Mothers schemed and plotted furiously to place their daughters with her. And very possibly, this is what happened to Jane. In his series of poems, 'Metrical Visions', George Cavendish, who knew her personally, wrote that Jane was 'brought up at court' all of her 'young age'. Certainly, when Jane departed from Great Hallingbury and left childhood behind, she travelled to a new life, a life that was centred on the court of Henry VIII with all its intrigue, jealousies and sheer exuberant luxury. It was an environment that she would never really leave.