

To the reader —an explanation ...

Much has been written and said about the Tudor period of English history. Many people are familiar with something of the story of Henry VIII and his six wives. But the Tudor years were also years of great suffering. Queen Mary I, who reigned from 1553–1558, is known historically as ‘Bloody Queen Mary’, for she was responsible for the cruel martyrdom of at least 283 faithful Christians, fifty-six of them women. There may well have been many more whose sufferings were not recorded.

Caught in the Web is an attempt to recapture and commemorate the circumstances, trials and endurance of those days. The account is based first of all on the life of young Lady Jane Grey, nine-day Queen of England, herself both a victim and a martyr; then on the frightening cruelties which followed her death during the reign of Mary Tudor. To bring the record to life I have chosen to use a narrative form in which a number of the characters are fictitious, even though the setting of their lives and experiences is not. As a reader, you may well ask, ‘How then can I distinguish fact from fiction? How can I know which people in this book are historical figures and which are not?’

Of the major characters, Hal Tylney, Lady Jane Grey's page, is largely fictional; so too are Sarah Bridges and Ebenezer Squires. Lady Jane did in fact have a page boy whose presence on important occasions of her life is mentioned in several early records. But I have chosen to give him a name and character, and through his story to introduce readers to the lives of many authentic men and women of the times. Among the lesser characters, Elizabeth Tylney, Hal's mother, is a historical figure; so too are Adrian Stokes, stable lad at Bradgate Park, and Lady Jane's other attendants, Mistress Ellen and Mistress Jacobs.

All information about the principal historical figures who appear in these pages is factual, and any important words attributed to them can be traced to their actual writings or recorded sayings. Lady Jane Grey, her family and tutors are included in this number; so too are the martyrs, Lady Anne Askew, John Bradford, Nicholas Ridley, Hugh Latimer and Thomas Cranmer. Queen Katherine Parr, Lord Admiral Thomas Seymour and Bishop Edmund Bonner are each represented accurately. All political facts and situations have been carefully researched and presented as they actually occurred, together with the social customs of the period.

One aim of this book is to recapture these stirring events and sufferings of the past, especially for those whose memories of school history lessons may have prejudiced them against reading accounts of former days. But these pages are not written solely as a memorial and reminder of the heroism of a bygone age. In our own generation there has also been widespread persecution and martyrdom of Christians—in China, Africa, Indonesia and many other places. Some have even predicted that such events could again take place in the West. So, as we trace God's dealings in the lives and experiences of these Christian men and women of Tudor times, may we find in their noble example an encouragement and challenge for ourselves today.

Faith Cook

The wild boar

'I must away,' said Matt Tylney tersely, pulling himself as gently as he could out of his wife Elizabeth's arms. 'God will care for you, my dear one, and for our son. Only do not fear for me.' Deaf to Elizabeth's tearful pleadings, Matt disappeared into the gathering darkness of that September evening. It was a night that would change Elizabeth Tylney's life for ever, and one that she and her six-year-old son, Henry, always known as Hal for short, could never forget.

It had been the same each night for many weeks now. As darkness fell, Matt would take down his bow and arrows from the peg on the wall. Setting off from his village home in Newtown Linford, he would vanish into the night with a group of other men. Hal did not know where his father went each night, only to return early in the morning as dawn began to break, and to sleep most of the day. He had not always done this, and the boy was well aware that his mother Elizabeth was troubled about Matt's strange activities.

Now in her mid-twenties, Elizabeth had been only seventeen when she married Matt seven years earlier. Life had seemed peaceful and predictable as the young couple set up home together. Matt was

earning an honest if meagre wage caring for the livestock belonging to the monks at Ulverscroft Priory, which lay several miles from their village home. Every morning he would call for his neighbour Hugh Lambert, who also worked at Ulverscroft, and together they would set off for the priory. Skilled as a shepherd, Matt knew almost instinctively if any of the flock was showing signs of sickness. He had become experienced at dealing with difficult births at lambing time and was expert at shearing the sheep and grading the wool for sale. Matt was also responsible for keeping the boundary fences of the priory lands in good repair in order to protect the livestock from the ever-present menace of prowling and hungry wolves that roamed the Benscliffe Wood, lying immediately to the south of the priory. Although his wages only amounted to £4 a year, low even for those times, with the vegetables he could grow on the smallholding around his cottage home, he and Elizabeth had been contented enough.

Then came a blow as unexpected as it was final. Early in 1539, as winter days gave place to spring, officials arrived in Leicestershire from far-off London. Before long they were calling at the Ulverscroft Priory and the monks knew well enough why they had come. With orders from none other than Henry VIII himself, all-powerful King of England, and his Privy Council, they demanded that Ulverscroft, like every other priory and monastery in the area, should be closed down immediately.

The lands, livestock, furnishings, libraries, silver plate and religious relics—in fact everything that belonged to the priory—were to be compulsorily sold to the Crown. Dismayed and furious, Matt Tylney and his neighbour Hugh Lambert knew at once that they would be without work. Although the monks would also lose their secure way of life, many would be able to find alternative employment in various skills, but it was far different for labourers such as Matt and Hugh. Matt had been well aware of a number of odd, even evil, practices that had been taking place in the priory in the name of religion, but was willing enough to ignore such things for the sake of his job. With little understanding of the politics and burning issues of the day that lay behind the widespread closure of all monasteries in the country, Matt felt bewildered and cheated. Now he must return to his home in Newtown Linford and break the news to Elizabeth that he had no work.

‘What troubles you?’ Elizabeth had asked as she saw Matt’s angry and distressed face when he returned to his home that evening.

‘I have no work,’ Matt responded abruptly, burying his face in his hands. ‘It is a monstrous evil and I cannot tell what to do.’

‘Have they come even to Ulverscroft then?’ cried Elizabeth in dismay, for all in the area had heard of the dramatic closure of nearby monasteries. ‘Then we must starve if you can find no work!’ Just at that moment Hal had entered the cottage. Glancing swiftly from his father to his mother, he knew immediately that something was seriously wrong and ran out again as quickly as he had come.

With hundreds of others in the area also seeking fresh work, Matt Tylney tried ceaselessly to find some other way to support his family. How could he let Elizabeth and Hal suffer the shame of poverty and forfeit the roof over their heads? Perhaps they would become inmates of a poorhouse, for he knew that he could no longer pay the rent due to the Marquess of Dorset, on whose land his small wattle-and-daub cottage stood. Day after day Matt tramped out to distant farms to offer his skills, but without any success. And when Elizabeth told him that she was expecting another child, he became desperate for work.

Hugh Lambert too was struggling to find some way of earning a living and one morning Hal was surprised to see their neighbour arrive at the cottage door.

‘Be your pa in, my boy?’ asked Hugh kindly, bending his head as he entered the low doorway. Hal had always liked his neighbour and had often played with his son, Will. Good-natured and friendly, Hugh had a family of three to provide for, including two-year-old twins, Lucy and Betsy. Like Matt, he too was almost in despair of ever finding work again.

Elizabeth happened to be outside tending the vegetable plot when Hugh called and in a few moments the two men were deep in earnest, whispered conversation. Hal meanwhile sat quietly in the corner of the room, and the men seemed scarcely to notice him. He could not hear much of what was passing between them, but noticed that his father looked troubled even though he was nodding in agreement. Hal could only pick up the odd snatch of words—phrases such as ‘meet at

nightfall', 'None will see' and 'What if we're caught ...?' What was his father planning to do? The boy did not know.

In fact, Matt and Hugh were deciding to join a gang of poachers. It was a dangerous and desperate enterprise: both men were well aware of the risks they were taking. The dense woodland that surrounded their village home—Blakeshay Wood, Benscliffe Wood and Swithland Wood, all part of the great Charnwood Forest—belonged to the Marquess of Dorset, Sir Henry Grey of Bradgate Manor. If the steward of the manor, who had charge of the property, or any of the gamekeepers should catch the poachers, no mercy would be shown and, as likely as not, they would be hung on the local gibbet for their crime.

'Matt, I beg you, I urge you, do not so!' sobbed Elizabeth. 'It cannot be long before the steward's men must catch you; then what must befall us?' But despite Elizabeth's pleas, Matt felt it was a risk he must take.

'Better that than starve,' he told her firmly. Each night as darkness fell, Matt, Hugh and other members of the gang ventured stealthily into the woods, making their way as quietly as they could through the undergrowth. Armed with his bow and arrows, Matt would look for wild boar, deer, badgers, or even hares and rabbits, which he could shoot and sell for meat. Always one man would be on guard to keep watch for any who might spy on them or report their activities to the steward of Bradgate. At an agreed signal the men would disappear into the thick undergrowth if the look-out man spotted any danger.

On occasions the poachers would dig a sizeable pit in some clearing among the trees. Overlaying it with thin twigs and a final layer of fallen leaves and undergrowth, they hoped that some animal might stumble into their trap. So well disguised was the pit that even the poachers would not find it again unless they drove a large stake into the ground to mark its whereabouts. One pit completed, the men dug another, and another, only finishing their night's work as dawn began to lighten the eastern sky.

The following night Matt and his fellow poachers would return to inspect the pits, and to share out their catch. Some pits remained intact, but before long they would discover one into which some

wild boar or deer had fallen. An arrow or the swift thrust of a spear would put the creature out of its misery. Then, slinging his share of the booty across his shoulders, Matt would make his way home. The proceeds from the sale of meat or fur would be sufficient to keep Elizabeth, Hal and himself for some weeks.

And on this dark moonless night late in September 1539, Matt set out yet again, despite Elizabeth's frightened protests. Before long the poachers discovered to their satisfaction that a large sow had fallen into one of their pits. But no sooner had they killed the animal than, without any warning, its mate, a ferocious boar, bristling with rage at the pitiful squeals of the trapped sow, burst out of the undergrowth and charged at the gang. The men scattered in panic. The boar turned and charged again. This time its sharp tusks caught Matt on the thigh, tossed him high in the air like a plaything, and as suddenly dropped him again. Then it crashed back into the undergrowth. Severely wounded, Matt fell to the ground with a groan, bleeding profusely. Hugh rushed forward, stripped off his own shirt and tried to staunch the flow of blood. But nothing that anyone could do seemed to help. All that remained was to carry the injured man home as gently as possible and tell Elizabeth what had happened.

That night Hal had been unable to sleep, tossing and turning on his rush mat in the corner of the room. It seemed harder than usual. But mostly he sensed that his mother was anxious and he was not sure why. The small lamp in the corner of the room with its tallow wick spluttered and glowed, casting weird shadows round the room, which seemed to mingle with his troubled thoughts. Then he caught the sound of distant footsteps. Elizabeth had heard them too and had already jumped up from her mat and was standing at the door. But when Hugh Lambert stooped to enter the cottage carrying Hal's father in his arms, the boy burst into frightened tears. Laying his burden down carefully near the dying embers of the charcoal fire, Hugh told Elizabeth what had happened. Hal could see well enough that his father was badly hurt. Perhaps his papa would die; then what would they do?

'Hal, my son,' said Matt feebly to his child, 'look after your mother for me and don't grow up to be a bad man like I've been.' These were the last words he spoke. Hours later Matt died in Elizabeth's arms.

Now the family was indeed destitute. The cost of burying Matt in the burial ground of the nearby parish church of All Saints ate up all of Elizabeth's small savings. Worse than this, the sorrow and shock of Matt's death brought on the premature birth of her child and not many days later she buried her infant next to its father. Hugh Lambert and his wife Joan grieved with her; so did the other neighbours, but such circumstances were commonplace among them, and there was little enough anyone could do to help Elizabeth. Perhaps the widow and her child would now have to go to the poorhouse in Leicester.

