

Deathbed Confessions of Henry VIII

By Jerome Gagnon

“He’s dying, your grace!” the Franciscan monk said to an unresponsive Catherine Parr. The thought of seeing her husband now—especially in his weakened state—left her feeling...well, she wasn’t quite sure how it made her feel. Catherine hadn’t spoken to Henry in over six months. He had been lucid for half that time and the other three months he had spent babbling incoherently about how the Flemish were out to steal his bodily fluids. Until now the monks had not given Catherine much news of the King’s condition, perhaps because they themselves did not fully understand what they saw. But she’d been hearing whispers, echoing through the monastery’s hallowed halls, that he had only days to live and that his ravings had gotten even more frantic over the past week, if such a thing were possible. What little time he had left he seemed determined to spend living in constant fear of what he referred to only as the “Belgian Conspiracy”. So fearful was he of a Flemish offensive that he now refused to sleep altogether.

But now Henry’s time on Earth was drawing to a close. Catherine wondered if she had the strength to go in there and see Henry in his nearly-vegetative state. She would have preferred to remember him as the strong lion she had married. Granted, he was tempestuous at times and was no stranger to throwing half-eaten turkey legs at people every now and then, but she preferred that Henry far more to the one she expected to find in that bedchamber. She doubted whether he had the strength to even *eat* a turkey leg nowadays.

As her hand lingered on the cast-iron door leading to the King’s bedchamber, she recalled their last real conversation which had been a fight. Their anniversary had just passed and Henry

had once again forgotten to buy Catherine a gift and at the last minute scrounged up a diamond necklace that seemed awfully familiar to her. She remembered. It was the necklace that Henry's third wife Jane Seymour had worn to her execution. When he vehemently denied this and began to attack her and call her an ingrate, she calmly pointed out that there was still a little bit of her blood left on it.

The best defense was always a good offense with Henry. Just like when he proposed. It was supposed to be this whole production with bards, poets and a chanting chorus, but it had been raining heavily the night before and the travelling circus' carriage got caught in a mudslide. Upon receiving this piece of unfortunate news, Henry got himself into such a rage that he had Tom Cromwell, his right-hand man, find him the nearest clown to execute. So humiliated was he by the spectacular failure of his endeavour that he vowed to never again enjoy a trapeze act. He waited another three years until he proposed again, this time making absolutely sure that everything would be just right.

Henry always needed to control everything, especially outcomes. He hated endings, particularly those that ended with a whimper rather than a bang, that just fizzled out and withered away. She suspected that was why he was always having people executed; to avoid having to slowly drift apart from them and then awkwardly bump into them ten years later and have nothing to say except some tepid remark about the weather. He wanted to be left wanting more of them. Many times he had even threatened to have Catherine herself executed. But she never paid any mind to what she knew to be empty threats. She couldn't speak for the other wives, but behind closed doors the Henry she knew was a sweet dear of a man. Contrary to what everyone thought, he was in reality a very passionate and highly sensitive man.

For the most part, her marriage to Henry had been a calm and happy one and she was generally able to temper his foul moods. Only once did he seriously try to have her executed for high treason when he felt that the royal portrait of him she had commissioned was unflattering in its portrayal of what he privately referred to as his “royal bulge”. She still remembered the ‘aw-shucks’ look on old Tom Cromwell’s face when she caught him trying to plant Protestant propaganda in her bedchamber. But other than that, they got along swimmingly. For the majority of the marriage, they had even been good friends, having bonded over their shared love of good food, orchestral music and chucking apples at Calvinists.

She wondered what life would be like once Henry was gone. She hated to admit it, but she was relieved that his pain would soon be coming to an end, but also that the burden she had been carrying for so long would soon be lifted. Ever since Henry fell ill, she had not only become her husband’s nurse, but the kingdom’s de facto ruler as well. She knew nothing of matters of state. Such decisions had traditionally been left to Cromwell, but with him now gone, Catherine had to try her best to make do without him. Just last month she narrowly avoided war with Russia after tensions had rapidly escalated over a bounced check.

These days she thought a lot about Henry as he was when she first knew him. She remembered their honeymoon. They had spent a fortnight in the resort town of Gstaad. Henry kept putting the trip off claiming he had urgent king business to attend to, but Catherine knew it was because he was insecure about his body. Even after finally relenting, he still refused to take his shirt off in the hot springs. His restless nature was not suited for leisure. Even on vacation he was unable to set his work aside. Many times, Catherine found herself intercepting letters Henry had drunkenly sent out to Cromwell ordering him to send over the British Navy to convert the Lutherans there by force. Thinking back on it, Henry, at the height of his power and vigor, had

never been more attractive to Catherine than during that trip, and it was in fact soon after that his health began to decline. But those days were over. They felt like memories of another lifetime. Now she had to be strong and attend to her duties as wife and queen one last time.

She finally gathered up the courage to go in and see her husband. The room was dimly lit and reeked of impending death. She called his name out weakly, not daring to get any closer to the dying king. Henry was unresponsive. His unblinking bloodshot eyes were fixed on his wife, but didn't seem to recognize her. Or maybe he mistook her for another, for his face suddenly contorted into some haggard mask of shock and terror. Catherine, fearing for her husband, started towards his bedside.

"S—stay back, you!" he said hiding behind his covers. He then popped his head out and asked shakily "Is that you, Tom?"

Which stopped Catherine dead in her tracks. 'Tom?' she thought. As in old Tom Cromwell? Why, he'd been executed years ago! She hadn't realized how far-gone Henry was until this very moment. Heartbroken, she ran out of the bedchamber lamenting the man she once knew.

As she ran out Henry chuckled to himself. He had always loved pulling practical jokes on people and was glad to see that while he had lost use of his body, he had at least not lost any of his wit. The look on Catherine's face reminded him of the time he'd convinced his ex-wife Anne of Cleves to shave her head for some new Anglican holiday he made up in honour of a bald radish farmer with no legs he had met and promptly canonized one night when drunk.

He was glad to see Catherine and to see that she still cared, but was relieved that she had left. He needed to be left alone with his thoughts right now. While he hadn't actually seen the

ghost of old Tom Cromwell in some time (unless you counted that one erotic fever dream last Tuesday), he had in fact been plagued by the same recurring, non-erotic dream of him for the past few nights. In it, he and old Tom were assembling a commode with the King of Spain, but the commode became sentient and tried to eat them. He and Tom would run for shelter as King Felipe tried to draw the commode's attention away from them as would a matador. The two Englishmen would each time find shelter in Tom's childhood home of Kent that overlooked the great southern English countryside. They would stay up all night gossiping and reminiscing about past escapades until Henry would finally gather up the courage to beg Tom for forgiveness for having him executed, but the dream always ended right before he could hear old Tom's answer.

He did not fear death, only dying. The moment between dead and not-dead, the kill switch. Would it hurt? Or would it come as a relief? When that moment came, would he be brave? He knew only that facing that moment was the only way to be absolved from his guilt and seek forgiveness from all those he'd wronged, tyrannized and oppressed—to see his dream through to the end, if you will. But there were a lot of people waiting for him up there and he wasn't sure if any of them would be in a forgiving mood. There was only one way to find out. But the longer the actual process of dying took, the more his courage began to abandon him. And what a long process it was! Nobody had ever told Henry how long it could take to die, how the body had a way of desperately clinging to life, even if it meant throwing all dignity out the window. In a way, he envied all those that had perished under his guillotine. A quick and relatively painless death was a kindness. But no act is ever purely kind, and now, in his sickened state, he was being punished for the cruelty that overshadowed these kindnesses. Henry's courage had all but left him now. It wasn't the dying part that scared him so much as the waiting

to die. He just wanted it over with. The prospect of spending even another day trapped in his failing, aching body terrified him.

He'd been cooped up in this monastery for the past six months with nothing to do but take sponge baths and speculate about what they would do with his body once he'd finally kicked the bucket. Would there be a big funeral? Would anybody even show up? Everyone he'd ever really cared for was waiting for him on the other side anyhow. Hell, his sickly weasel of a son whom he had sacrificed so much for was too weak to even make the trip to see his ailing father. Perhaps they would donate his body to pseudo-science. He could already picture all the alchemists, astrologists and witch doctors lining up like vultures waiting for him to die so that they could turn his spleen into purple quartz or use it to predict crop yields.

He initially came to this monastery in the middle of nowhere because Catherine had wanted to see its famous petunias in bloom for the first two weeks of spring (he didn't see why they needed two whole weeks to look at a few flowers, but hey, it still beat taking her and her mother out to brunch). Next thing he knew he was bedridden, infirm and needed to have his diaper changed and his mutton pureed. Oh, he'd seen the petunias bloom, alright. He'd seen the damn things bloom, die and bloom all over again.

He was eager to please his latest wife and make at least one of his marriages stick the landing before he died. But it wasn't easy. Maybe it was his fault or maybe it was because she was a teetotalling religious nut who hogged the sheets—either way, he always felt like he was on the verge of a nervous breakdown around her.

Henry wondered if it was not too late to convert to Islam. Any religion that allowed harems had to be at least somewhat open-minded about accepting divorcés, right? Besides that,

he'd much rather have the 72 virgins waiting to greet him in Heaven than five angry ex-wives. Why was it that all of Henry's relationships failed? Why did the people he love always wind up leaving him? Even with all this time to think he still couldn't figure it out. Maybe he just loved too freely, or was too trusting. Or maybe he used people. Maybe he was unable to enjoy a person's company because he was too busy thinking of all the other great things he was missing out on.

In his incapacitated state, Henry had taken refuge in memories, mulling over all the good times in his life as well as the bad and everything he would've done differently. If he had to go back and do it all over again, he probably wouldn't have founded his own religion. *Not* as fun as it seemed. So many dull rituals, useless holidays and silly hats. And he certainly wouldn't have put himself at the head of it. Should've made it some floating ghost who spoke only Aramaic instead so everybody would stop pestering him all the time. He couldn't take all those people looking up to him with all that wonder in their eyes as if he were perpetually about to light a bush on fire or heal a leper. It was hard work always pretending to have all the answers. And for what? Just so that he could have a male heir? Look where that got him. His boy Edward could barely tie his own shoes, much less run a kingdom... But there was no point ruminating over such things now. England would be fine without him. He had to learn to let it go.

The mental exercise of trying to minimize the damages that his feckless son might inflict upon the Kingdom (his suggestion of making the cavalry ride ponies into war because real horses were too tall to mount, for example, had already come up in various military discussions) made him re-evaluate his own contribution to it. He realized that, given enough time, a king was never remembered for having steered the kingdom into bold, new directions, but rather for just having gotten it a little closer to its final destination. It was a reassuring and humbling thought that a

younger Henry would have been too egotistical to find comfort in. And with his time running out, he now realized that he should've enjoyed what he had while he had it and *as* he had it instead of always trying to change things and nitpicking them to death trying to make them just right.

He always thought he would be afraid of Judgment and seeing those he had wronged again and whether they would forgive him or not. And maybe it was because he was starting to see the bright light they all talked about, but he was no longer afraid. He was completely at peace with himself, regretting only the things he never had the guts to do, like folk dancing. He would've been good at that. As for the people he had wronged, he wasn't worried anymore. He realized that despite his best efforts, they had never really left him. All these memories he'd been peering over for the past six months had been made memorable by people that had touched his life.

The light grew brighter. He saw Anne Boleyn, his second wife. And he realized that it was the first time he had ever seen her smile (they had spent most of their eight-year marriage screaming and throwing precious vases at each other). He smiled back and became excited at the thought of seeing her and all his other friends again, at the prospect of second chances and new beginnings, of finally being able to make amends, to no longer have to be a ruler, but instead just trying to be a good man. Death didn't seem so bad to Henry anymore. It was only the next chapter which everyone got to begin on equal footing. That sounded nice. And the light grew brighter.

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