

MARTYRS of the REFORMATION

- Anne Askew -

A. D. 1545.

There were at the English court in the reign of Henry VIII. a certain number of ladies of the highest rank who loved the gospel - the duchess of Suffolk, the countess of Sussex, the countess of Hertford, Lady Denny, Lady Fitzwilliam, and, above all, the queen. Associated with these was a pious, lively and beautiful young lady, of great intelligence and amiable disposition, and whose fine qualities had been improved by education. Her name was Anne Askew. She was the second daughter of Sir William Askew, member of a very ancient Lincolnshire family. She had two brothers and two sisters. Her brother Edward was one of the king's body-guards. The queen frequently received Anne and other Christian women in her private apartments, and there prayer was made and the word of God expounded by an evangelical minister. The king, indeed, was aware of these secret meetings, but he feigned ignorance. Anne was at this time in great need of the consolations of the gospel. Her father, Sir William, had a rich neighbour named Kyme with whom he was intimate, and, being anxious that his eldest daughter should marry a rich man, he arranged with Kyme that she should wed his eldest son. The young lady died before the nuptials took place, and Sir William, reluctant to let slip so good a chance, compelled his second daughter, Anne, to marry the betrothed of her sister, and by him she became the mother of two children.

The Holy Scriptures in the English version attracted Anne's attention, and ere long she became so attached to them that she meditated on them day and night. Led by them to a living faith in Jesus Christ, she renounced Romish superstitions. The priests, who were greatly annoyed, stirred up against her her young husband, a rough man and a staunch papist, who "violently drove her out of his house." Anne said, " Since, according to the Scripture, ' if the unbelieving depart, let him depart ; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases, ' I claim my divorce."

She went to London to take the necessary proceedings, and either through her brother, one of the guards, or otherwise, made the acquaintance of the pious ladies of the court and of the queen herself. It was a great vexation to

the enemies of the Reformation to see persons of the highest rank almost openly professing the evangelical faith. As they did not dare to attack them, they determined to make a beginning with Anne Askew, and thereby to terrify the rest. She had said one day, "I would sooner read five lies in the Bible than hear five masses in the church."

On another occasion she had denied the corporal presence of the Saviour in the sacrament. She was sent to prison. When she was taken to Sadlers' Hall, the judge, Dare, asked her, "Do you not believe that the sacrament hanging over the altar is the very body of Christ really?" Anne replied, "Wherefore was St. Stephen stoned to death?" Dare doubtless remembered that Stephen had said, "I see the Son of man sitting at the right hand of God!" From this it followed that he was not in the sacrament. He preferred to answer, "I cannot tell." It is possible, however, that his ignorance was not feigned. "No more," said Anne, "will I assoil your vain question." Anne was afterward taken before the lord mayor, Sir Martin Bowes, a passionate bigot. He was under-treasurer of the mint, and in 1550 obtained the king's pardon for all the false money which he had coined. The magistrate gravely asked her whether a mouse, eating the Host, received God or no. "I made no answer, but smiled," says Anne. The bishop's chancellor, who was present, sharply said to her, "St. Paul forbade women to speak or to talk of the word of God."—"How many women," said she in reply, "have you seen go into the pulpit and preach?"—"Never any," he said.—"You ought not to find fault in poor women, except they have offended the law." She was unlawfully committed to prison, and for eleven days no one was allowed to see her. At this time shewas about twenty-five years of age.

One of her cousins, named Brittain, was admitted to see her. He immediately did everything he could to get Anne released on bail. The lord mayor bade him apply to the chancellor of the bishop of London. The chancellor replied to him, "Apply to the bishop." The bishop said, "I will give order for her to appear before me to-morrow at three o'clock in the afternoon." He then subjected her to a long examination. He asked her, amongst other things, "Do you not think that private masses help the souls departed?"—"It is great idolatry," she replied, "to believe more in them than in the death which Christ died for us." "What kind of answer is this?" said the bishop of London.—"It is a weak one," replied Anne, "but good enough for such a question."

After the examination, at which Anne made clear and brief replies, Bonner wrote down a certain number of articles of faith, and required that Anne should set her hand to them. She wrote, " I believe so much thereof as the Holy Scriptures doth agree unto." This was not what Bonner wanted. The bishop pressed the point, and said, " Sign this document." Anne then wrote, " I, Anne Askew, do belive all manner of things contained in the faith of the Catholic Church." The bishop, well knowing what Anne meant by this word, hurried away into an adjoining room in a great rage. Her cousin Brittainne followed him and implored him to treat his kinswoman kindly. " She is a woman," exclaimed the bishop, " and I am nothing of deceived in her."—"Take her as a woman," said Brittainne, "and do not set her weak woman's wit to your lordship's great wisdom."

At length, Anne's two sureties—to wit, Brittainne and Master Spilman of Gray's Inn were on the following day accepted, and she was set at liberty. These events took place in the year 1545.

Anne having continued to profess the gospel and to have meetings with her friends, she was again arrested three months later, and was brought before the privy council at Greenwich. On the opening of the examination she refused to go into the matter before the council, and said, " If It be the king's pleasure to hear me, I will show him the truth."—" It is not meet," they replied, " for the king to be troubled with you." She answered, " Solomon was reckoned the wisest king that ever lived, yet misliked he not to hear two poor common women ; much more His Grace a single woman and his faithful subject."—"Tell me your opinion on the sacrament," said the lord chancellor.—" I believe," she said, " that so oft as I, in a Christian congregation, do receive the bread in remembrance of Christ's death and with thanksgiving, ... I receive therewith the fruits also of his most glorious passion."—" Make a direct answer to the question," said Gardiner.—" I will not sing a new song of the Lord," she said, " in a strange land."—" You speak in parables," said Gardiner.—" It is best for you," she answered, " for if I show the open truth ye will not accept it."—"You are a parrot," said the incensed bishop. She replied, " I am ready to suffer all things at your hands—not only your rebuke, but all that shall follow besides ; yea, and all that gladly."

The next day Anne once more appeared before the council. They began the examination on the subject of transubstantiation. Seeing Lord Parr (uncle to the queen) and Lord Lisle, she said to them, " It is a great shame for you

to counsel contrary to your knowledge."—"We would gladly," they answered, "all things were well." Gardiner wished to speak privately with her, but this she refused. The lord chancellor then began to examine her again. "How long," said Anne, "will you halt on both sides?"—"You shall be burnt," said the bishop of London. She replied, "I have searched all the Scriptures, yet could I never find that either Christ or his apostles put any creature to death." Anne was sent back to prison. She was very ill, and believed herself to be near death. Never had she had to endure such attacks. She requested leave to see Archbishop Latimer, who was still confined in the Tower, but this consolation was not allowed her. Resting firmly, as she did, on scriptural grounds, she did not suffer herself to swerve. To her constitutional resolution she added that which was the fruit of communion with God, and she was thus placed by faith above the attacks which she experienced. Having a good foundation, she resolutely defended the freedom of her conscience and her full trust in Christ, and not only did she encounter her enemies without wavering, but she spoke to them with a power sufficient to awe them, and gave home-thrusts which threw them into confusion. Nevertheless, she was only a weak woman, and her bodily strength began to fail. In Newgate she said, "The Lord strengthen us in the truth! Pray, pray, pray!" She composed while in prison some stanzas which have been pronounced extraordinary, not only for simple beauty and sublime sentiment, but also for the noble structure and music of the verse.

By law, Anne had a right to be tried by jury, but on June 28, 1546, she was condemned by the lord chancellor and the council, without further process, to be burnt for having denied the corporal presence of Christ. They asked her whether she wished for a priest; she smiled and said she would confess her faults unto God, for she was sure that he would hear her with favour. She added, "I think His Grace shall well perceive me to be weighed in an uneven pair of balances. . . . Here I take heaven and earth to record that I shall die in mine innocency."

It was proved that Anne had derived her faith from the Holy Scriptures. Gardiner and his partisans therefore prevailed upon the government, eight days before the death of this young Christian, to issue a proclamation purporting "that from henceforth no man, woman or person, of what estate, condition or degree soever he or they be [consequently, including the ladies and gentlemen of the court as well as others], shall, after the last day of August next ensuing, receive, have, take or keep in their possession the text

of the New Testament, of Tyndale's or Coverdale's translation, in English, nor any other than is permitted by the act of Parliament ; . . . nor after the said day shall receive, have, take or keep in his or their possession any manner of books printed or written in the English tongue which be or shall be set forth in the names of Fryth, Tyndale, Wycliffe, . . . Barnes, Coverdale, ... or by any of them ;" and it was required that all such books should be delivered to the mayor, bailiff or chief constable of the town, to be openly burned.

This was a remarkable proceeding on the part of Henry VIII. But events were stronger than the proclamation, and it remained a dead letter,

Anne's sentence was pronounced before the issue of the proclamation. The trial was over, and there was to be no further inquiry. But her death was not enough to satisfy Rich, Wriothesley and their friends. They had other designs, and were about to perpetrate the most shameful and cruel acts. The object which these men now proposed to themselves was to obtain such evidence as would warrant them in taking proceedings against those ladies of the court who were friends of the gospel. They went (July 13) to the Tower, where Anne was still confined, and questioned her about her accomplices, naming the duchess dowager of Suffolk, the countess of Sussex and several others. Anne answered, " If I should pronounce anything against them, I should not be able to prove it." They next asked her whether there were no members of the royal council who gave her their support. She said, " None."—" The king is informed," they replied, " that if you choose you can name a great many persons who are members of your sect." She answered that " the king was as well deceived in that behalf as dissembled with in other matters." The only effect of these denials was to irritate Wriothesley and his colleagues, and, determined at any cost to obtain information against influential persons at the court, they ordered the rack to be applied to the young woman. This torture lasted a long time, but Anne gave no hint, nor even uttered a cry. The lord chancellor, more and more provoked, said to Sir Antony Knevet, lieutenant of the Tower, "Strain her on the rack again." The latter refused to do this. It was to no purpose that Wriothesley threatened him if he would not obey.

Rich, a member of the privy council, had frequently given proof of his baseness. Wriothesley was ambitious, inflated with self-conceit, haughty, and easily angered if his advice was not taken. These two men now forgot themselves, and the spectacle was presented of the lord chancellor of England and a privy councillor of the king turned into executioners. They set their

own hands to the horrible instrument, and so severely applied the torture to the innocent young woman that she was almost broken upon it and quite dislocated. She fainted away and was wellnigh dead. "Then the lieutenant caused me to be loosed; incontinently I swooned, and then they recovered me again. After that I sat two long hours, reasoning with my lord chancellor on the bare floor, where he, with many flattering words, persuaded me to leave my opinion."

Henry VIII. himself censured Wriothesley for his cruelty, and excused the lieutenant of the Tower. " Then was I brought to a house," says Anne, "laid in a bed, with as weary and painful bones as ever Job had." The chancellor sent word to her that if she renounced her faith she should be pardoned and should want for nothing, but that otherwise she should be burnt. She answered, " I will sooner die." At the same time she fell on her knees in the dungeon and said, " O Lord, I have more enemies now than there be hairs on my head ; yet. Lord, let them never overcome me with vain words, but fight thou. Lord, in my stead, for on thee I cast my care. With all the spite they can imagine they fall upon me, who am thy poor creature. Yet, sweet Lord, let me not set by them that are against me, for in thee is my whole delight. And, Lord, I heartily desire of thee that thou wilt of thy most merciful goodness forgive them that violence which they do, and have done, unto me. Open also thou their blind hearts, that they may hereafter do that thing in thy sight which is only acceptable before thee, and to set forth thy verity aright, without all vain fantasies of sinful men. So be it, O Lord, so be it !"

The 16th of July, the day fixed for the last scene of this tragedy, had arrived; everything was ready for the burning of Anne at Smithfield. The execution was to take place, not in the morning, the usual time, but at nightfall, to make it the more terrible. It was thus, in every sense, a deed of darkness. They were obliged to carry Anne to the place of execution, for in her state at that time she was unable to walk. When she reached the pile she was bound to the post by her waist with a chain which prevented her from sinking down.

The wretched Shaxton, nominated for the purpose, then completed his apostasy by delivering a sermon on the sacrament of the altar, a sermon abounding in errors. Anne, who was in full possession of her faculties, contented herself with saying, " He misseth and speaketh without the book." Three other evangelical Christians were to die at the same time with her—Belenian, a priest ; J. Lacels (Lascelles) of the king's household, probably the man who had revealed the incontinence of Catharine Howard,

a deed for which the Roman party hated him ; and one Adams, a Colchester man. " Now, with quietness," said Lacels, " I commit the whole world to their pastor and herdsman Jesus Christ, the only Saviour and true Messias." The letter from which we quote is subscribed, "John Lacels, late servant to the king, and now I trust to serve the everlasting King with the testimony of my blood in Smithfield."

There was an immense gathering of the people. On a platform erected in front of St. Bartholomew's church were seated, as presidents at the execution, Wriothsley, lord chancellor of England, the old duke of Norfolk, the old earl of Bedford, the lord mayor Bowes, and various other notabilities. When the fire was going to be lighted the chancellor sent a messenger to Anne Askew, instructed to offer her the king's pardon if she would recant. She answered, " I am not come hither to deny my Lord and Master." The same pardon was offered to the other martyrs, but they refused to accept it and turned away their heads. Then stood up the ignorant and fanatical Bowes, and exclaimed with a loud voice, " Fiat justitia" Anne was soon wrapt in the flames, and this noble victim, who freely offered herself a sacrifice to God, gave up her soul in peace. Her companions did likewise.
