

# ANNE ASKEW

A true tale of Tudor crime and punishment

by Miss Bellwood



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Written By :  
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“Anne, how can you say such a dreadful thing!” Francis stood over his younger sister, bossily wagging his finger in what he hoped was a good imitation of his father.

Blazing with passion, Anne jumped to her feet and pointed back at him. “I’ll say what I like, and I’ll say it again,” she cried. “Girls deserve to read the Bible just as much as boys. Even the poorest servant girl is as precious in God’s eyes as the richest, most spoilt boy in his silly furs and fancy robes.”

Her eyes flashed as she looked pointedly at Francis’ fine clothes, making him blush. Lounging in his armchair by the fire, her other brother, Edward, hid a smirk and bent his head over his book. He much admired his sister’s razor-sharp tongue, but he didn’t want it turned on him.

Francis battled on. “But you can’t say such things,” he protested, his voice becoming a whine.

“Brother, dearest,” laughed Anne. “You know full well you can’t stop me. I shall say such things, and I will go on saying them until the day I die.” And she stuck out her tongue at him in such a comical way that Francis couldn’t stop himself from smiling.



*Anne Askew*

Within minutes the two of them were chasing each other around the room while Edward laughed and clapped. Anne was a firebrand, no doubt about it, but her joy at life was just as strong as her anger.

Suddenly, the heavy door was flung open and a deep voice growled, “What in God’s name are you doing?”

Anne and Francis froze before the terrible sight of their father looming in the doorway. There was an awful pause. “Well?” he growled. “Francis? I shall have you flogged for such unmanly behaviour!”

“It was me, Father,” Anne spoke up, pushing strands of fiery red hair out of her eyes. Her voice trembled, but she went on boldly. “If anyone is to be punished, it should be me.”

“Indeed?” frowned her father. “Well, it may be the last childish game you ever play. I have come to speak with you. Follow me.” And with that, he swept away down the dark, draughty corridor.

The children stood in surprised silence. It was extremely unusual for their father to visit them during the day, and unheard of that he should need to speak to his daughter, not one of his sons. Instinctively, Francis put a protective arm around Anne.

“What do you think he means, Annie?” he whispered fearfully.

“Don’t worry,” she murmured, and hurried from the room, her face pale but brave.

Anne stood in front of her father’s bulky wooden desk, heart pounding but head held high. Her father, busy writing on parchment with a long quill, did not look up. Anne took a deep breath and waited. She knew she must not speak first, and that this was a test of her obedience.

Well, she could wait. After some time, her father laid down the quill, looked sternly at her over his reading spectacles, and said abruptly, “You are fifteen years old now, Anne – old enough to be useful as a wife and a mother. You shall be married next month.”

Anne bowed her head in silent submission but, inside, her blood was beginning to boil. She had dreamed of studying, of becoming a philosopher or lecturer perhaps, though she knew full well such careers were almost unheard of for women. Still, she had always hoped there would be a chance. But now...

She raised her head again and saw that her father had gone back to writing. Scritch, scratch, went his quill. Anne clenched her fists and bit her lip to control her anger.

“May I ask... to whom I shall be married?” she managed to say in an almost-steady voice.

Her father didn’t even look up. “Sir Thomas Kyme,” he replied shortly. This was too much for Anne. The volcano seething and bubbling inside her erupted violently, words spilling from her like red-hot lava.

“Thomas Kyme? The man my poor dead sister was to marry?” she raged. “That old man, that miserable, humourless old fool? He couldn’t have Martha, so he thinks he’ll have me instead?”

Her father continued writing.

“I won’t do it,” Anne cried, rushing towards the desk and grabbing it with both hands. “Do you hear me? I’d rather be dead like Martha. I won’t do it.”

Suddenly her father pressed down on his quill so hard it snapped, then in a flash leaned forward and slapped Anne across the face.

She gasped with pain and tried not to cry, but the hot, bitter tears streamed down her face. Her father folded his arms in satisfaction. “You are my daughter,” he said, and his voice was sharp as flint. “You will do what I say.”



“What are you doing in there, woman?” Sir Thomas Kyme impatiently rattled the doorknob of his wife’s room. “Can you not hear your son crying?”

There was no answer, though the fact that the door was locked told him full well that Anne was there. Resolving to have a servant remove the lock immediately, he hammered on the door. “Let me in!” he roared. “I am your husband, and I own this house!”



*Sir Thomas Kyme*

Suddenly the bolt slid back and Anne wrenched open the door so quickly that Sir Thomas nearly tumbled into the room.

“Forgive me, dear husband,” she said, and her voice was sweet as honey but laced with acid. “I did not hear you approach me so softly.”

Sir Thomas shot her a black look. Not for the first time, he strongly suspected that his wife was mocking him.

They had been married five years now, five long, difficult years, and although he had two healthy children to show for it, he felt that Anne disliked him more each day. Not that he had ever expected her to love him, of course, but her continuing hostility was tiresome. After all, he was an important man.

He could not be seen to have a disobedient wife. Already she had infuriated him by refusing to take his surname, which was unheard of among married women. Really, he felt, she was impossible!

Anne stood defensively in the doorway, so he peered suspiciously beyond her and saw a pile of manuscripts on the table. With a grunt of disapproval, he pushed her aside and strode to the papers. What he saw infuriated him – essays written by those heretics who refused to believe the literal truth of the Bible, who dared to suggest a person could still be Christian without being Catholic. Screwing up sheets of parchment in his fists, he turned to his wife with a roar.

“Why are you studying this filth? This ungodly nonsense?” he growled, shaking the papers in her face. Anne did not flinch.

“These are academic discussions on the Bible, my lord,” she replied coolly. “I wish to educate myself, as do many others. Of course, we weak women do not have the towering intellect of great men like yourself, but we may try our humble best.” She smiled innocently.

Sir Thomas snorted like a bull poked with a stick. “Women are NOT to read the Bible,” he snarled, taking a threatening step towards her. “Women are NOT to consider themselves equal to men.” He flung the crumpled pages in Anne’s face. “Women are NOT to study works which criticise the teachings of the Church.” And with that he slapped Anne’s face, hard, cutting her cheek with one of his heavy rings. “You are my wife,” he bellowed. “You will do what I say!”

Anne stood perfectly still for a moment, a pearl of blood glistening on her cheek, and in her memory she heard identical echoes of those words. But this time she would not cry.

She smiled at Sir Thomas, almost pityingly, and said simply,  
“You may hurt me, but you can never break my spirit.”

She left the room and never saw him again.



“You want to stay here?”

Francis stirred the embers of his study fire and rubbed his eyes, his head still fuddled with sleep. His sister had taken him completely by surprise by arriving on his doorstep in the darkness, shivering with the cold and a kind of excited terror at what she had just done: run away from her husband, without even saying goodbye to her children, then ridden frantically through the night to London.

He put down the poker and turned to study Anne’s flushed face and tangled hair. “You want to stay here?” he asked again, half feeling he was dreaming.

“Yes, Francis. Please, dear brother,” said Anne passionately, throwing off her muddy riding cloak. “I have such plans, Francis. Now I am here in London I shall ask for a divorce from Sir Thomas – the King himself has done it, so why shouldn’t I? Then I can be free to study and learn... to pray and teach others... oh, Francis!”

And she rushed to him and hugged him, just as she had done when they were children. “You and Edward both work in the King’s court, you can introduce me to scholars and priests,” she gushed excitedly. “It’s perfect!”

“But wait, wait...” Francis gently held her shoulders. “Annie, you cannot just do these things. There is too much against you.”

“Like what?” challenged Anne, and Francis could hear the old stubbornness in her voice.

“Well, for one thing, you will not receive a divorce. It is unheard of for a woman to request one.” Anne opened her mouth but Francis quickly went on. “You speak of studying and preaching! Anne, you know those activities are banned to women. And your ideas are radical, perhaps even...” he lowered his voice and glanced around, even though the room was empty, “.... perhaps even dangerous.”

Anne smiled and took her brother’s face in her hands. “You worry too much,” she said fondly. “Why, Queen Catherine herself is known to discuss matters of religion, and I hardly see it possible that King Henry would have his own wife convicted of heresy!”

Francis said nothing, but frowned heavily. He was not important in Court, but he knew that it was a murky pit of corruption and intrigue. He also knew that there were dark mutterings amongst Henry VIII’s advisers about the outspoken

Queen who, they feared, had far too much power over the old, sick King. Intelligent as she was, Anne did not realize what troubles might lie ahead if she continued to speak her mind. However, once she had an idea in her head, Francis knew she would do it – and trying to stop her would just make her more determined. He sighed.

“I shall have a bedchamber made up for you,” he said wearily.



*Catherine Parr, sixth (and last) wife of King Henry VIII*



And so began the happiest months of Anne's life. After reluctant introductions from Francis and Edward, she soon made strong



*Anne speaking about religion  
(as shown in a TV drama)*

friendships among several ladies of the court who regularly met to discuss matters of religion and politics, scornfully defying the rule that women should only read the Bible alone. Soon she was taking a leading role in these study groups (which sometimes Queen Catherine herself attended) and had embarked on a program of preaching. She cared nothing for wealth or power, and spent many days visiting the poor and sick, trying to ease their suffering.

As Francis had predicted, her divorce was flatly denied, but she found she didn't really care. After sending several rambling, furious letters demanding her return, Sir Thomas had eventually come to a grumbling acceptance that she would never come back. In fact, Anne rather suspected he was relieved to live without her. And although she missed her children terribly, she knew that they would grow up in comfort and luxury. All in all, life was good.

But dark shadows were gathering. Along gloomy corridors and behind heavy curtains at Court, whispers flew like the uneasy rustle of wind before a great storm.

"That woman – that Anne Askew – is trouble..."

"She talks too much... has too many radical ideas..."

"And she associates with the Queen... that heretic... that witch..."

“Shhh! We cannot risk attacking the Queen... Henry dotes on her too much, the old fool...”



*Entrance to the dungeon of the  
Tower of London*

“Ah, but what if... what if we were to use Anne to get to the Queen?”

“Yes, yes ... make her admit the Queen’s heresy!”

“Then we shall be rid of both...”

And one night the storm broke with a thunderous knocking on Francis’s door. Guards burst in, arrested Anne and dragged her, unresisting,

to the Tower of London.

“On what grounds is this arrest?” cried Francis, valiantly trying to block the way. A guard brutally shoved him aside, then replied grimly, “Heresy.”



“Anne Askew, do you consider yourself a good Christian woman?”

The Lord Chancellor, top advisor to the King, spoke mildly, his hand resting gently on Anne’s shoulder. His eyes, however, glittered dangerously and he watched her like a snake eyeing its prey.

Anne, seated on a low stool, wrapped in a dirty shawl, answered simply, “I do.”



*The Lord Chancellor*

The Lord Chancellor raised his thin eyebrows in mock surprise. "Interesting, interesting," he murmured. "Then you agree that the Church is right and correct in all its teachings?"

"I do not," replied Anne, in the same steady voice as before.

"You do not?" The Lord Chancellor's reptilian eyes narrowed. He hissed, "So you dare to call yourself Christian, yet you doubt your faith?"

"I do not doubt my faith for an instant," corrected Anne calmly. "I simply doubt the teachings of men who claim to speak for God, but who only speak for themselves."

The Lord Chancellor drew himself up tall, a viper preparing to strike. "And you dare to prattle and gossip about such weighty matters with other clucking hens of the court?"

Anne spoke curtly. "If you mean, do I discuss ideas with other women, then yes. I do."

A flicker of a smile darted across the Chancellor's face. I almost have her, he thought. Now carefully, carefully... He forced himself to speak casually. "And these women... do they include the Queen?"

Anne looked him full in the face, her gaze unflinching. "No," she said. And smiled.

The Lord Chancellor paced the room, the only sound his rich robes swishing and rustling.

"She admits everything and nothing," he muttered thoughtfully, tapping his chin with a thin finger. The Constable of the Tower stood awkwardly by the door, anxiously awaiting orders but not daring to interrupt.

"She openly speaks the truth about her own heresy," mused the Lord Chancellor as he walked.

“Yet she refuses to say the same about the Queen.”

The Constable cleared his throat nervously. “She is a brave soul indeed, my lord,” he said cautiously. “It is perhaps time to...er... free her.”

“Free her?” The Lord Chancellor stopped short. His face twitched with fury. “Free her? She cannot be freed. She is our best, our only chance, of being rid of the Queen forever. She must confess.”

“But – but how?” asked the Constable weakly. They had been there for hours now, questioning Anne until his head spun. It was late and he was tired. He had other prisoners to visit, dozens of documents to read. “We cannot torture a woman, so we must let her go. Perhaps in the future – ” But he stopped when he saw a needle-thin smile spreading over the Chancellor’s lips.

“That’s it!” the Chancellor rasped. “If she wants to behave like a man, then we shall treat her like one.” Triumph shone in his eyes. “Prepare the rack.”

Hours later, as a faint glimmer of gold lit the early morning sky, a guard carried a huddled figure trailing a dirty shawl to the dark doors of Newgate Prison. Inside, he laid her as gently as he could on the filthy floor. She lay motionless, a rag doll, her wrists and ankles raw from being chained to the rack, her body twisted and broken.



*The rack*

The Lord Chancellor had been merciless, cranking the handle round, stopping at each turn to ask the same question – “Is the Queen a heretic?” – then, receiving no answer, forcing it round again.

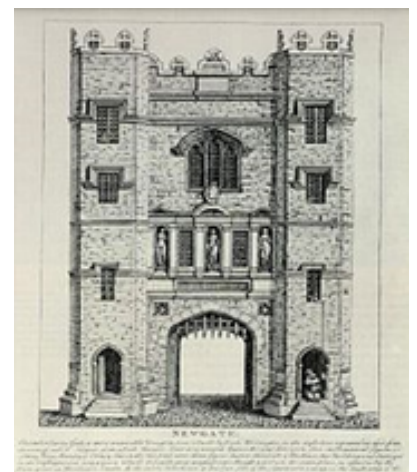
Slowly, slowly, the rack stretched, wrenching Anne’s body with it. But she would not give in. Only once did she moisten her dry lips to speak. The Lord Chancellor leaned over eagerly, straining to hear. But his expression turned sour as Anne looked him in the eye and whispered words she had used once before.

“You may hurt me, but you can never break my spirit.”



On the morning of July 16th, 1546, a gang of ragged servant boys could be seen dragging logs into the market square at Smithfield. There they piled up the wood around a tall central stake. It was a strangely still, sultry day, with dampness in the air that suggested a coming storm. The crowd of buzzing spectators who were already gathering for the day’s big event hoped it would not rain enough to spoil the flames. For this was to be no ordinary bonfire – it was the burning of Anne Askew, the heretic.

By afternoon the sky was a glowering grey and ominous rumbles of distant thunder mingled with the low murmurs of the mob. The mutterings swelled as a sombre procession snaked its way from Newgate Prison.



*Newgate Prison*



Above the heads of guards Anne could be seen, slumped awkwardly in a chair, carried because she could not walk unaided. She had been in Newgate for several weeks, cared for by kind warders and prisoners who pitied her terrible injuries, able to write a little and rest as best as she could.

Now, as fat raindrops began to fall and a flash of lightning turned the sky a putrid yellow, Anne's chair was set at the foot of the stake. A priest, his cloak whipped by the growing wind, began to chant monotonous prayers as guards bound Anne with chains from her neck to her ankles. As he looped the final chain, one guard surreptitiously drew out a small but heavy cloth bag from his tunic and swiftly placed it around Anne's neck. She could not speak, but her grateful eyes rested on him for a moment. Then the executioner lit a firebrand and, with a harsh cry of "Death to the heretic!" flung it on to the pyre.

The crowd gasped in delighted horror as flames began to lick hungrily around the logs, hissing in the spattering rain but growing fiercer by the second. Then the air was filled with an ear-splitting crack of thunder. But it was not thunder. One weaving, seeking flame had reached Anne, and the bag around her neck – which contained gunpowder – had exploded instantly, creating a roaring inferno and sending Anne to her instant, painless death in a spectacular blaze of glory.



*Anne being carried  
out for execution  
(as shown in a TV  
drama)*

After Anne's death, a long poem she had managed to write in Newgate Prison was discovered. In it she urged others to endure persecution and fight bravely for their beliefs. It included the inspiring lines:

**“ Like as the armed knight  
Appointed to the field  
With this world I will fight  
And faith will be my shield. ”**

