Kathryn Howard

No Other Will Than His

BORN: 1521; MARRIED: 28 JULY 1540; EXECUTED: 13 FEBRUARY 1542

*There has probably been more interest in the wives of Henry VIII than in the King himself, although it is impossible not to wonder about the man that brought these six women together in history. Their lives were all unique, yet all had fates ultimately decided by the same man. Two were divorced, with one getting a much better deal than the other. Two were beheaded, one falsely accused, the other probably not. One died shortly after giving birth to the male heir Henry so desperately longed for. One survived as his widow.*

Kathryn Howard was the daughter of Lord Edmund Howard, a younger brother of Thomas Howard, Duke of Norfolk. She was also first cousin to Anne Boleyn, Henry's ill-fated second Queen. She was brought up in the household of the Dowager Duchess of Norfolk. As part of the Duchess' household, she would have spent most of her time at Lambeth and Horsham.

Kathryn came to court at about the age of 19 as a lady in waiting to Anne of Cleves and there is no doubt that the spirited young girl caught Henry's attentions. Kathryn's uncle probably encouraged the girl to respond to the King's attentions and saw it as a way to increase his own influence over the monarch. The Duke of Norfolk also took advantage of the debacle of the Anne of Cleves marriage as a chance to discredit his enemy, Thomas Cromwell. In fact, Cromwell was executed shortly after the marriage was nullified.

Sixteen days after he was free of Anne, Henry took his fifth wife, Kathryn Howard, on July 28, 1540. Henry was 49 and he bride was no older than 19.

For all that can be said against this match, Kathryn did manage to lift the King's spirits. Henry had gained a lot of weight and was dealing with the ulcerated leg that was to pain him until his death. The vivacious young girl brought back some of Henry's zest for life. The King lavished gifts on his young wife and called her his 'rose without a thorn' and the 'very jewel of womanhood'.

Less than a year into Kathryn's marriage, the rumors of her infidelity began. In a way, one couldn't blame her for seeking the company of handsome young men closer to her own age. But to do so, even if only in courtly flirtations, was dangerous for a Queen, especially one who came from a powerful family with many enemies. Kathryn didn't help matters much by appointing one of her admirers as her personal secretary.

By November 1541, there was enough evidence against the Queen that Archbishop Cranmer informed the King of Kathryn's misconduct. At first, Henry did not believe the accusations. But, he agreed to allow further investigations into the matter. Enough evidence was gathered that the Queen had been promiscuous before her marriage and may have had liaisons after becoming Henry's wife. She was executed on the Tower Green on February 13, 1542 and laid to rest near her cousin Anne Boleyn in the Chapel of St. Peter ad Vincula at the Tower of London.