

The Life of Lady Elizabeth Randolph: A Tragedy in Three Acts

Act One:

Poor decisions and the ever-present danger of plague

Lady Elisabeth Randolph was nearly thirty years old and facing spinsterhood when she married Richard Kidder in 1659. She was soon aware of her husband's stubborn insistence on following his conscience 'to the letter', care-less of the impact his decisions might have on his family and accepting no blame for his misfortune. He sought a quiet life as a caring priest and refused advancement. Within three years Elisabeth was the impoverished mother of three babies with a husband out of work relying on friends' favours to survive.

Rescued in 1664 by the gift of a living in Essex the family recovered but only a year later plague came to the village infecting their house and everyone in it. They all survived isolation, but the weakened children succumbed to other illnesses and **all three died soon after.**

Act Two:

School children and the scourge of smallpox

Another friend eased their poverty by providing work for Richard, and during the next ten years the family grew, with at least three children surviving infancy. In January 1680 when Elisabeth was 50 years old another was added when a daughter Susanna, was born.

But only four months later in May 1680 **smallpox killed three of the older children**, two of whom were sons at school and Kidder's hoped-for heirs, but sparing the baby Susanna. After twenty-one years of marriage and having buried at least six children Elisabeth now had one baby and a distraught husband with agonising gout.

At the age of 50 Elisabeth might have expected Susanna's birth to be her last, but in September 1686 at 56 years old she produced another daughter, Anne.

1689 brought good news of Kidder's promotion. But when Kidder was offered the post of bishop, first of Peterborough and then of Bath and Wells, he stubbornly refused both on the grounds of solidarity with the deprived bishops of those sees. Elisabeth must have wondered if she could continue to face the continuing insecurity. But eventually the King said enough was enough and in September 1691 Richard Kidder was reluctantly enthroned as Bishop in Wells Cathedral and the Kidder family moved to Somerset.

Act Three:

Enter the Great Storm

The much-loved bishop Ken had been deprived of his see and evicted from the Palace so Kidder wasn't warmly welcomed in Wells. And Somerset's damp winter climate so severely worsened his gout he had to be carried to and from the Chapel.

Richard spent much of his time as bishop in self-inflicted conflict with his clergy but it is to be hoped that Elisabeth and particularly her daughters (Susanna age 11 and Anne age 5 in 1691) enjoyed the twelve years they spent playing, learning and growing-up in the Palace, its gardens and the City of Wells.

But on the evening of 26th November 1703 came the third and final tragedy of Elisabeth's life. '*The Great Storm*' raged across the country destroying the Eddystone lighthouse, sinking countless boats and ships at sea, wrecking buildings and killing and drowning thousands of people.

That night a chimney stack collapsed through the roof of the Palace where Elisabeth and Richard, lying side by side in bed, were **crushed to death by falling debris**. The noise of the storm was so intense no one can have heard their screams nor been aware of the tragedy until they were found buried in the ruins. Their bodies were dug out towards morning - the same day as the Cloth Fair in Wells when many visitors were in town and gathered to watch the rescue effort.

In another part of the Palace Susanna and Anne escaped unharmed but having lost a mother, father, home and financial security in one violent night the sisters became orphans with an uncertain future.

Meanwhile the broken bodies of Elisabeth and Richard Kidder were buried with quiet ceremony in the Cathedral churchyard on 14th December 1703 and here we draw the curtain on Elisabeth Kidder's life.

The End

But it isn't quite the last word of the Kidder story:

At 23 years old and already 'out' in society Susanna sought marriage to escape. Two years later she was heading for America as the wife of the next Governor of North Carolina, Sir Richard Everard.

There she had two sons, Richard Kidder- Everard and Hugh Kidder- Everard, and two daughters, Susannah Kidder- Everard (II) and Anne Kidder- Everard.

The Kidder-Everard families multiplied and spread so that, despite Richard's grief at the loss of sons and heirs, the Kidder name is now widely known across several States of America,

And it is thanks to his daughter, Susanna, who was once a '*Woman of the Palace*'.

For 17 year-old Anne Kidder, however, there was no such solution. She remained in England, single, mourning the loss of parents and absent sister, and died age 42 in 1728. She bequeathed effects to Susanna and £300 to erect a rarely admired, large marble tomb for her parents in Wells Cathedral.