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THE ADVENTURES OF A KENTISH SPY

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BY F. C. ELLISTON ERWOOD, F.S.A.

THERE is, in Cranbrook parish church, an unusual monument, well known to students of genealogy, which commemorates, by means of a glyptic pedigree, the family of Roberts of Glassenbury.¹ It is of importance mainly on account of one of the last names engraved thereon "the most noble Jane, Duchess of S. Albans" the ill-starred heiress and neglected wife of that profligate blackguard, George Duke of S. Albans. She it was that as the last of her race, caused the monument to be erected. It is not, however, with the end of the line that we are at present concerned, but rather with the beginning of it (at least as far as Cranbrook is concerned) the member who is thus described on the marble: "The first who appears by clear evidence to have been interred here is Walter Roberts, Esq. (son of John and Agnes) who built the Moated House in the valley of Glassenbury." This Walter Roberts was of importance in his day and played no insignificant part in the long family feuds that did not entirely cease after the fatal field of Market Bosworth.

The family of Roberts (Robards or Robarts) is of Scottish origin, but early came south and was domiciled in Goudhurst, county Kent, from the time of Henry I to Richard II. Then, by marriage with a daughter of Tillie of Glassenbury, in the same county, the Roberts' succeeded

¹ This is given in full in *Annals of Cranbrook Church* by William Tarbutt, Cranbrook, 1873.

to the Cranbrook estates and built "a fair sumptuous house on the hill of Glassenbury". The mansion survived till 1472 when it was pulled down, to be replaced, the following year, by that referred to on the monument in the church. Walter Roberts shortly afterward was deprived of his estates and was "forced to fly for endeavouring to conceal his friend and neighbour Sir John Guildeforde¹ from the resentment of that cruel Prince, King Richard ye 3rd., but was restored on the accession of King Henry ye 7th., became Sheriff of Kent in the 5th year of that reign and died in or about the year 1522 (being above 80 years of age)."

From this it is evident that Walter Roberts was definitely of Lancastrian and Tudor sympathies and that he had not only opposed the Yorkist faction, but had suffered from them. His name was included in a supplementary Act of Attainder of 1484 against those concerned in the late rebellion (October 1483, the Duke of Buckingham's rising) where he had been associated with Sir George Browne of Betchworth (whom he had accompanied to Maidstone), Sir John Fogge and some 100 other Kentish gentry. The particular complaint against "Roberd of Cranbrook" was that, as late as February 10th, 1484, he had harboured some of the traitors in his house, evidently the Sir John Guildeforde of the inscription being one.

The closing years of the fifteenth century in England were marked by scenes of strife and anarchy that were particularly mediaeval. Besides the well-known leaders of the rival Yorkist and Lancastrian factions, there were other more or less vague personalities involved, concerning whom we should like to know more. With the final victory of the Lancastrians in 1485, the majority of the opposite party accepted the facts of the situation, and trusting in the efficacy of the proposed alliance, of the new King with the heiress of York, sank their political and family differences. Some there were, however, that declined the olive branch thus extended. They refused to accept defeat and went

¹ Sir John Guildeforde (Guldeford), ob. 1493 and buried in Canterbury Cathedral.

abroad, where from the temporary and hazardous shelter of a foreign court, they were the impelling force that drove their "men of straw" across the Tudor stage, like leaves before the wind. In the last efforts to recover their lost powers they adopted the whole range of the political practice of the middle ages, and Simnel, the mechanic's son, in 1487, and Warbeck (whose father was a boatman) in 1499, were two of the stalking horses. Of strangely different mental calibre, each was destined, had the schemes succeeded, to have been ultimately cast aside to reveal the real instigators of the plot. Thus from their headquarters at the Burgundian Court the Yorkist leaders carefully manipulated the strings, and watched with some concern the failures of their puppets to achieve royal position, knowing that when the last of these tools had failed, they must either abandon their hopes or risk their own heads.

Both of the pretenders had been unsuccessful in their enterprises and the latter of them had involved in his own collapse the life of the Earl of Warwick, the head of the Yorkist party. The leadership then devolved on the Earl of Suffolk, Edmund de la Pole. He was the second son of his father John, and his mother had been Elizabeth, sister of Edward IV. His elder brother had been involved in Simnel's rebellion and had been killed at the battle of Stoke in 1487. Though his father had been both Duke and Earl, the son was content with the Earldom only, surrendering the Dukedom in exchange for his brother's attainted estates. In 1499, being suspicious of the royal attitude towards him, he fled to Aix la Chapelle, but a mission from the English Court, headed by Sir Richard Guildeforde,¹ and possibly including Roberts, was able to persuade him to return. For a time he lived on his estates, peacefully enough to the outward view, but with his past record, the King could not be other than suspicious. In 1501, the political atmosphere being none too clear, he once more went abroad, again to Aix. Here he commenced negotiations with the Emperor Maximilian for some measure of support in a projected

¹ Son of Sir John Guildeforde, Knight Banneret and K.G., Comptroller of the House to Hy. VII. Died at Jerusalem 1508. *Arch. Cant.*, XIV.

invasion and here he was to be found when this story opens in the spring of 1503.

One fine morning, shortly after Easter of that year, Walter Roberts was walking round his estates, but recently restored to him, and "in a strake of a medowe lyeng yn the bak syde of Cramebroke" he encountered, by chance or design, one of his employees, Alexander Simpson by name, and a sawyer by trade, who had been with him for near a score of years. After a few ordinary remarks about the state of the crops, the weather and so forth, the master called the man on one side and asked him a strange question. "Alexander maye I trust the?" said Roberts, to which Simpson replied in non-committal, curt country fashion "Ye have knowne me a great while; ye knowe whether ye maye trust me or not; ye maye trust me well ynough yff ye lyst." Nothing more appears to have been said and master and man went their several ways.

A month or so later, in the Rogation days, Roberts and his man Simpson happened to be working together, with others, on the "upper pond" at Cranbrook, "newing" and cleaning it. They withdrew from the rest, and Roberts, reminding Alexander of their previous conversation continued thus: "Alexander thou art remembered that y asked the of late whether y myght trust the or not, and thi self aunswerdist me that y knewe and myght trust the well ynough. This it is, I wold send the over the See to Therle (or the Duke) of Suffolk." Simpson, in his subsequent account of this conversation, was not clear, for reasons already mentioned, whether the personage was described as the Earl or the Duke, but he quite clearly understood that it was de la Pole he was to seek out, and he replied that "he derst rygh well goo to hym." Whereupon Roberts said that he wished Alexander to prepare himself with all speed to go on a journey to Aix la Chapelle, to the Yorkist headquarters and to find out, both there and on the way, as much as he could of de la Pole's intentions, who were there with him, what aid and assistance he was counting on from Maximilian, the probable date of his sailing for England, the port of departure and of arrival and any matters of like

import, and to return to this country and make report as soon as he had found out all there was to know. Finally he was asked to be ready to set out by the coming Whitsun.

On Whitsunday, therefore, after Matins and before High Mass, behold William Roberts and Alexander Simpson in Cranbrook churchyard, beyond the east end of the church, and thus removed from passers by, meeting for final instructions and farewells. Simpson reported that he was quite ready, and once more his master impressed upon him the need for the strictest secrecy and discretion, and to talk about his business to no one at all. He gave him for expenses two gold nobles and a score of silver groats, bade him farewell and wished him success. The following Wednesday Alexander Simpson departed on his mission.

He journeyed via Calais to Ghent and thence to Aix, lodging in small villages en route, avoiding as far as possible large towns. He evidently gathered some information and transmitted it, but it was described subsequently as of little importance and of no value.

About Midsummer he arrived at Aix (Acon in the document) where he took lodgings in a cobbler's shop, to which also, various members of Suffolk's retinue likewise consorted. This proved a bad move for Alexander, for in spite of all his precautions, or possibly because he took few, it was soon reported at the Yorkist headquarters that a stranger had arrived from England. It was not long therefore before he was kidnapped and brought before the leaders in Council. Simpson in his narrative particularly mentions "a man with a white hed whome theye called Nevyll" and a White Friar, and these two examined Simpson pretty thoroughly. Nevill was little inclined to waste time on their captive and merely threatened, without any questioning, to cut off his ears. This threat must have had some effect, for under question Alexander told the complete story from beginning to end, giving the name of his employer and the purpose of his visit. Nevill said that he knew nobody of the name of Roberts, nor had ever heard of him, but the Friar knew him fairly well and described him as "right a sad wyseman." In the end Alexander Simpson was ordered to be clear of the town

by 8 o'clock next morning. He says that after his examination he was in no way molested, either by word or deed.

Now all this information is derived from Simpson's own account of his movements, given subsequently when arrested soon after his return to England, but on the face of it his version seems lacking in verisimilitude. Is it probable that the Yorkists would allow, let alone order, a confessed spy, one who had been in the country a couple of months, to return to England? He must have gathered information, and though his efforts had been described as valueless, that is a common experience of spies, to be told that the information they bring is either already known or incorrect or of no account. It appears therefore that Simpson was released for one or more of three possible reasons. The information he possessed was really inaccurate and if reported, would do no harm to the Yorkist movement, or he was purposely supplied with false information designed to lead the English authorities astray, or lastly, he deliberately sold himself to the Yorkists and offered himself as an agent against his employers. The sequel may indicate which of these was the most probable.

Simpson's own account goes on to say that having heard and seen as much as he was likely to, he went to Antwerp, thence by sea to a little port in Brittany, from which place he took passage to England in a hoy laden with salt fish, and after a short and uneventful voyage, landed at Erith on the Kentish Thames side. He immediately returned to Cranbrook, but stayed in his house for one night only. He did not go to see his master nor did he in any way report to him, but rising early next morning, left home quietly, taking with him his saw (it will be remembered he was a sawyer). He travelled to Sutton-at-Hone, near Dartford (and Erith) where he sought and found employment, and he worked at his trade till he had earned a couple of shillings. Then he came again to Erith, and on the night of July 25th, he was arrested and conveyed to the Tower of London, but not, as the record clearly states, for this foreign adventure, "but for certen woordes supposed to be spokyn of his mouth at Erith, to a man of Crayford, called Thomas Broke."

Thomas Brook was one of those who arrested Simpson and assisted to convey him to the Tower. He was a witness, and his depositions give a sequel to Alexander's mission abroad.

Brook says that on the night of July 25th, being St. James's Day he was sitting and drinking in the inn kept by one John Wilson at Erith. Shortly after came in one Alexander Symson, who came up to him where he was sitting and enquired whether he were the innkeeper. Thomas said he was. (N.B.—Thomas is clearly a liar.) Alexander now repeated his master's query : Could he trust him or not, for if he could there was a little matter that was to be arranged and it could be a source of profit. Thomas began to take an interest in the conversation and enquired as to the nature of the proposition, to which Alexander replied " My hoste y spake with a thyng ryght nowe at the water syde and it come to me." Says Thomas " And who was the thing." " A Chyeld," replied Alexander, " whiche chield shuld be with my lord off Cristes Cherche and that his name was Jamys Ormond whiche shuldbe a great Inheretor and nexte unto the Crowne." He continued further " My hoste, ye have a good boote off yeure owne and if y maye trust yewe y wyll avauntage yewe xl marcs by yere yf ye can conveye me and the chield ynto eny Cuntre off Fraunce or Seyland, y recke never wher."

Brook now came down to business and enquired what ready money Simpson had. That was an awkward question for he had left but twenty pence out of his two shillings. But he had, so he said, " a thyng withyn the house worth xx s. " (what was it ?) and he added " y am sure ye have summe moneye yewre self, and as for my geyre, y recke never to leve it with yewe." He continued, " Y prae yewe my host, that ye wyll purveye yn your boote a bowe and a byll, that if case bee wee bee pursewed, that yf we cannot ascape, that ye maye set me on land yn Tenet and let me shifte for us all." This was too much for honest Thomas Brook. He smelt treason and as it did not promise to be a paying proposition, he made his necessity a virtue and called in the constable. The record ends with a list of Erith worthies,

headed by the Constable and the "Mayre" who haled Alexander Simpson to the Tower, and Thomas Brook, worthy soul, brought up the rear.

Only one other ray of light is shed on this episode and that is the substance of the words spoken by Alexander to the child James Ormond on the Erith foreshore: "the foreseyd chield sayth he herde the sayde Alexander saye and moyvd the Chield that if he cowde fyend the meane to get a bote to conveye hym, that he shuld fyend the meane to make hym a great lord yf he wooldbe counsellyd by hym."

Here, unfortunately, all the available records appear to end and the solution of the mystery and the fate of Alexander are both unknown. It is possible that the explanation may be somewhat on these lines.

Simpson appears to have very readily disclosed his mission to Nevill at Aachen, so readily that one mistrusts him at once. The glib manner in which he repeats his story, at his examination in the Tower convinces one that he is lying—that he prefers to be regarded as a weak fool rather than a knave. Now both Nevill and the Friar were shrewd judges of character and they probably summed up Simpson on a brief acquaintance, better than did his old master at Cranbrook after twenty years, and it is more likely that Nevill offered Simpson the choice of having his ears (and throat) cut or transferring his services to the Yorkist side. Then a plan was proposed that the new recruit should prove his worth by coming over to England and kidnapping a youth or child, and afterwards conveying him overseas to the Yorkist court where he might be trained as another pretender. Unfortunately nothing is known of James Ormond—whether he were a boy of good family or no, and the matter is further complicated by a difficulty as to what person in the Yorkist line of succession he might have been intended to personate.

It is most apparent that Simpson returned with treachery in his mind; he did not attempt to report to Roberts. He cleared from Cranbrook as quickly as he could and explained his going to Sutton-at-Hone as "he thought ever yn his

myend first to have shewed the premysses with the circumstances off the sam to Sir Richard Guldford."

As far as we know he had never been in communication with Sir Richard, and in any case, even if the latter had been primarily responsible, through his friend Roberts for the despatch of the spy, he would certainly desire that the channel of information should be his father's old friend. It is contrary to expediency for agents to know and deal direct with their principals.

Thus the story ends. Was Jimmy Ormond of Erith destined to be a King of England and an overthrower of a great dynasty? Was Simpson but a common sawyer or had he been on missions like this before? He was certainly conversant with the language and customs of the Low Countries and Germany to be able to travel to and fro without exciting overmuch suspicion. And which of the traitorous brood was the white-haired Nevill? We may never know. In those days of secret diplomacy and underhand intrigue, too much was never written down. The axe and the block or the assassin's dagger were far too near the politician or the secret agent for records of success or failure to be left for other eyes, and what the methods of jurisprudence could not extract from the unlucky captive, is like to remain unknown.

Thus James Ormond, who might have been king, is after all but a very unsubstantial ghost, less even than the phantoms of his predecessors.

The Yorkist faction was to all intents destroyed in the following year. While de la Pole was in negotiation with the Emperor for support, Henry of England was likewise in communication with that opportunist diplomat. Henry was a King in being and more able and more likely to fulfil his part of a bargain, and so it comes about that Aix la Chapelle must be cleared of Yorkists. Suffolk and his followers were driven out, and after a few weary years of wandering, unwanted guests at every court they visited, their leader fell into Henry's hands. His fate was certain and after being kept in prison from 1506, he was taken out and beheaded in 1513.

Postscript.—Now that Erith has recently become a Borough the reference to the “Mayre” is not without interest. There is, in a book called *Lawyer’s Logic* published in 1588 a facetious remark that “the Mayor of Erith is the next best Mayor to him of London,” which was true then in the sense that there were no other Mayors between London and Erith. It seems then that Erith did at one time boast a Mayor. The above episode gives the name of one earlier than the reign of Elizabeth, and there is another in the Erith Subsidy Roll for 1625, Robert Cooper—Maïor.

Can anyone say how or when this title became extinct ?