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HISTORICAL MYSTERIES

BY

ANDREW LANG

WITH A FRONTISPIECE

\_SECOND EDITION\_

LONDON  
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1905

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[Illustration: William Smith 1754 Pinx. Mac Ardell. Mezzo.

Elizabeth Canning.

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## PREFACE

These Essays, which appeared, with two exceptions, in *The Cornhill Magazine*, 1904, have been revised, and some alterations, corrections, and additions have been made in them. 'Queen Oglethorpe,' in which Miss Alice Shield collaborated, doing most of the research, is reprinted by the courteous permission of the editor, from *Blackwood's Magazine*. A note on 'The End of Jeanne de la Motte,' has been added as a sequel to 'The Cardinal's Necklace:' it appeared in *The Morning Post*, the Editor kindly granting leave to republish.

The author wishes to acknowledge the able assistance of Miss E.M. Thompson, who made researches for him in the British Museum and at the Record Office.

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PORTRAIT OF ELIZABETH CANNING. _Frontispiece._	

## HISTORICAL MYSTERIES

### I

#### \_THE CASE OF ELIZABETH CANNING\_

Don't let your poor little  
Lizzie be blamed!

THACKERAY.

'Everyone has heard of the case of Elizabeth Canning,' writes Mr. John Paget; and till recently I agreed with him. But five or six years ago the case of Elizabeth Canning repeated itself in a marvellous way, and then but few persons of my acquaintance had ever heard of that mysterious girl.

The recent case, so strange a parallel to that of 1753, was this: In Cheshire lived a young woman whose business in life was that of a daily governess. One Sunday her family went to church in the morning, but she set off to skate, by herself, on a lonely pond. She was never seen of or heard of again till, in the dusk of the following Thursday, her hat was found outside of the door of her father's farmyard. Her friend discovered her further off in a most miserable condition, weak, emaciated, and with her skull fractured. Her explanation was

that a man had seized her on the ice, or as she left it, had dragged her across the fields, and had shut her up in a house, from which she escaped, crawled to her father's home, and, when she found herself unable to go further, tossed her hat towards the farm door. Neither such a man as she described, nor the house in which she had been imprisoned, was ever found. The girl's character was excellent, nothing pointed to her condition being the result *\_d'une orgie echevelee\_*; but the neighbours, of course, made insinuations, and a lady of my acquaintance, who visited the girl's mother, found herself almost alone in placing a charitable construction on the adventure.

My theory was that the girl had fractured her skull by a fall on the ice, had crawled to and lain in an unvisited outhouse of the farm, and on that Thursday night was wandering out, in a distraught state, not wandering in. Her story would be the result of her cerebral condition--concussion of the brain.

It was while people were discussing this affair, a second edition of Elizabeth Canning's, that one found out how forgotten was Elizabeth.

On January 1, 1753, Elizabeth was in her eighteenth year. She was the daughter of a carpenter in Aldermanbury; her mother, who had four younger children, was a widow, very poor, and of the best character. Elizabeth was short of stature, ruddy of complexion, and, owing to an accident in childhood--the falling of a garret ceiling on her head--was subject to fits of unconsciousness on any alarm. On learning this, the mind flies to hysteria, with its accompaniment of diabolical falseness, for an explanation of her adventure. But hysteria does not serve the turn. The girl had been for years in service with a Mr. Wintlebury, a publican. He gave her the highest character for honesty and reserve; she did not attend to the customers at the bar, she kept to herself, she had no young man, and she only left Wintlebury's for a better place--at a Mr. Lyon's, a near neighbour of her mother. Lyon, a carpenter, corroborated, as did all the neighbours, on the points of modesty and honesty.

On New Year's Day, 1753, Elizabeth wore her holiday best--'a purple masquerade stuff gown, a white handkerchief and apron, a black quilted petticoat, a green undercoat, black shoes, blue stockings, a white shaving hat with green ribbons,' and 'a very ruddy colour.' She had her wages, or Christmas-box, in her pocket--a golden half guinea in a little box, with three shillings and a few coppers, including a farthing. The pence she gave to three of her little brothers and sisters. One boy, however, 'had huffed her,' and got no penny. But she relented, and, when she went out, bought for him a mince-pie. Her visit of New Year's Day was to her maternal aunt, Mrs. Colley, living at Saltpetre Bank (Dock Street, behind the London Dock). She meant to return in time to buy, with her mother, a cloak, but the Colleys had a cold early dinner, and kept her till about 9 P.M. for a hot supper.

Already, at 9 P.M., Mr. Lyon had sent to Mrs. Canning's to make inquiries; the girl was not wont to stay out so late on a holiday. About 9 P.M., in fact, the two Colleys were escorting Elizabeth as far as Houndsditch.

The rest is mystery!

On Elizabeth's non-arrival Mrs. Canning sent her lad, a little after ten, to the Colleys, who were in bed. The night was passed in anxious search, to no avail; by six in the morning inquiries were vainly renewed. Weeks went by. Mrs. Canning, aided by the neighbours, advertised in the papers, mentioning a report of shrieks heard from a coach in Bishopsgate Street in the small morning hours of January 2. The mother, a Churchwoman, had prayers put up at several churches, and at Mr. Wesley's chapel. She also consulted a cheap 'wise man,' whose aspect alarmed her, but whose wisdom took the form of advising her to go on advertising. It was later rumoured that he said the girl was in the hands of 'an old black woman,' and would return; but Mrs. Canning admitted nothing of all this. Sceptics, with their usual acuteness, maintained that the disappearance was meant to stimulate charity, and that the mother knew where the daughter was; or, on the other hand, the daughter had fled to give birth to a child in secret, or for another reason incident to 'the young and gay,' as one of the counsel employed euphemistically put the case. The medical evidence did not confirm these suggestions. Details are needless, but these theories were certainly improbable. The character of La Pucelle was not more stainless than Elizabeth's.

About 10.15 P.M. on January 29, on the Eve of the Martyrdom of King Charles--as the poor women dated it--Mrs. Canning was on her knees, praying--so said her apprentice--that she might behold even if it were but an apparition of her daughter; such was her daily prayer. It was as in Wordsworth's Affliction of Margaret:

I look for ghosts, but none will force  
Their way to me; 'tis falsely said  
That ever there was intercourse  
Between the living and the dead!

At that moment there was a sound at the door. The 'prentice opened it, and was aghast; the mother's prayer seemed to be answered, for there, bleeding, bowed double, livid, ragged, with a cloth about her head, and clad in a dirty dressing-jacket and a filthy draggled petticoat, was Elizabeth Canning. She had neglected her little brother that 'huffed her' on New Year's Day, but she had been thinking of him, and now she gave her mother for him all that she had--the farthing!

You see that I am on Elizabeth's side: that farthing touch, and another, with the piety, honesty, loyalty, and even the superstition of her people, have made me her partisan, as was Mr. Henry Fielding,

the well-known magistrate.

Some friends were sent for, Mrs. Myers, Miss Polly Lyon, daughter of her master, and others; while busybodies flocked in, among them one Robert Scarrat, a toiler, who had no personal knowledge of Elizabeth. A little wine was mulled; the girl could not swallow it, emaciated as she was. Her condition need not be described in detail, but she was very near her death, as the medical evidence, and that of a midwife (who consoled Mrs. Canning on one point), proves beyond possibility of cavil.

The girl told her story; but what did she tell? Mr. Austin Dobson, in *The Dictionary of National Biography*, says that her tale 'gradually took shape under the questions of sympathising neighbours,' and certainly, on some points, she gave affirmative answers to leading questions asked by Robert Scarrat. The difficulty is that the neighbours' accounts of what Elizabeth said in her woful condition were given when the girl was tried for perjury in April-May 1754. We must therefore make allowance for friendly bias and mythopoeic memory. On January 31, 1753, Elizabeth made her statement before Alderman Chitty, and the chief count against her is that what she told Chitty did not tally with what the neighbours, in May 1754, swore that she told them when she came home on January 29, 1753. This point is overlooked by Mr. Paget in his essay on the subject.[1]

[Footnote 1: *Puzzles and Paradoxes*, pp. 317-336, Blackwoods, 1874.]

On the other hand, by 1754 the town was divided into two factions, believers and disbelievers in Elizabeth; and Chitty was then a disbeliever. Chitty took but a few notes on January 31, 1753. 'I did not make it so distinct as I could wish, not thinking it could be the subject of so much inquiry,' he admitted in 1754. Moreover, the notes which he then produced were *not* the notes which he made at the time, 'but what I took since from that paper I took then' (January 31, 1753) 'of hers and other persons that were brought before me.' This is not intelligible, and is not satisfactory. If Elizabeth handed in a paper, Chitty should have produced it in 1754. If he took notes of the evidence, why did he not produce the original notes?

These notes, made when, and from what source, is vague, bear that Elizabeth's tale was this: At a dead wall by Bedlam, in Moorfields, about ten P.M., on January 1, 1753, two men stripped her of gown, apron, and hat, robbed her of thirteen shillings and sixpence, 'struck her, stunned her, and pushed her along Bishopsgate Street.' She lost consciousness--one of her 'fits'--and recovered herself (near Enfield Wash). Here she was taken to a house, later said to be 'Mother Wells's,' where 'several persons' were. Chitty, unluckily, does not say what sort of persons, and on that point all turns. She was asked 'to do as they did,' 'a woman forced her upstairs into a room, and cut the lace of her stays,' told her there were bread and water in the

room, and that her throat would be cut if she came out. The door was locked on her. (There was no lock; the door was merely bolted.) She lived on fragments of a quartern loaf and water 'in a pitcher,' with the mince-pie bought for her naughty little brother. She escaped about four in the afternoon of January 29. In the room were 'an old stool or two, an old picture over the chimney,' two windows, an old table, and so on. She forced a pane in a window, 'and got out on a small shed of boards or penthouse,' and so slid to the ground. She did not say, the alderman added, that there was any hay in the room. Of bread there were 'four or five' or 'five or six pieces.' 'She never mentioned the name of Wells.' Some one else did that at a venture. 'She said she could tell nothing of the woman's name.' The alderman issued a warrant against this Mrs. Wells, apparently on newspaper suggestion.

The chief points against Elizabeth were that, when Wells's place was examined, there was no penthouse to aid an escape, and no old picture. But, under a wretched kind of bed, supporting the thing, was a picture, on wood, of a Crown. Madam Wells had at one time used this loyal emblem as a sign, she keeping a very ill-famed house of call. But, in December 1745, when certain Highland and Lowland gentlemen were accompanying bonny Prince Charlie towards the metropolis, Mrs. Wells removed into a room the picture of the Crown, as being apt to cause political emotions. This sign may have been 'the old picture.' As to hay, there was hay in the room later searched; but penthouse there was none.

That is the worst point in the alderman's notes, of whatever value these enigmatic documents may be held.

One Nash, butler to the Goldsmiths' Company, was present at the examination before Chitty on January 31, 1753. He averred, in May 1754, what Chitty did not, that Elizabeth spoke of the place of her imprisonment as 'a little, square, darkish room,' with 'a few old pictures.' Here the one old picture of the notes is better evidence, if the notes are evidence, than Nash's memory. But I find that he was harping on 'a few old pictures' as early as March 1753. Elizabeth said she hurt her ear in getting out of the window, and, in fact, it was freshly cut and bleeding when she arrived at home.

All this of Nash is, so far, the better evidence, as next day, February 1, 1753, when a most tumultuous popular investigation of the supposed house of captivity was made, he says that he and others, finding the dungeon not to be square, small, and darkish, but a long, narrow slit of a loft, half full of hay, expressed disbelief. Yet it was proved that he went on suggesting to Lyon, Elizabeth's master, that people should give money to Elizabeth, and 'wished him success.' The proof was a letter of his, dated February 10, 1753. Also, Nash, and two like-minded friends, hearing Elizabeth perjure herself, as they thought, at the trial of Mrs. Wells (whom Elizabeth never mentioned to Chitty), did not give evidence against her--on the most

absurdly flimsy excuses. One man was so horrified that, in place of denouncing the perjury, he fled incontinent! Another went to a dinner, and Nash to Goldsmiths' Hall, to his duties as butler. Such was then the vigour of their scepticism.

On the other hand, at the trial in 1754 the neighbours reported Elizabeth's tale as told on the night when she came home, more dead than alive. Mrs. Myers had known Elizabeth for eleven years, 'a very sober, honest girl as any in England.' Mrs. Myers found her livid, her fingers 'stood crooked;' Mrs. Canning, Mrs. Woodward, and Polly Lyon were then present, and Mrs. Myers knelt beside Elizabeth to hear her story. It was as Chitty gave it, till the point where she was carried into a house. The 'several persons' there, she said, were 'an elderly woman and two young ones.' Her stays were cut by the old woman. She was then thrust upstairs into a room, wherein was \_hay\_, \_a pitcher of water\_, and bread in pieces. Bread may have been brought in, water too, while she slept, a point never noted in the trials. She 'heard the name of Mother Wills, or Wells, mentioned.'

Now Scarrat, in 1754, said that he, being present on January 29, 1753, and hearing of the house, 'offered to bet a guinea to a farthing that it was Mother Wells's.' But Mrs. Myers believed that Elizabeth had mentioned hearing that name earlier; and Mrs. Myers must have heard Scarrat, if he suggested it, before Elizabeth named it. The point is uncertain.

Mrs. Woodward was in Mrs. Canning's room a quarter of an hour after Elizabeth's arrival. The girl said she was almost starved to death in a house on the Hertfordshire road, which she knew by seeing the Hertford coach, with which she was familiar, go by. The woman who cut her stays was 'a tall, black, swarthy woman.' Scarrat said 'that was not Mrs. Wells,' which was fair on Scarrat's part. Elizabeth described the two young women as being one fair, the other dark; so Scarrat swore. Wintlebury, her old master, and several others corroborated.

If these accounts by Mrs. Myers, Mrs. Woodward, Scarrat, Wintlebury, and others are trustworthy, then Elizabeth Canning's narrative is true, for she found the two girls, the tall, swarthy woman, the hay, and the broken water-pitcher, and almost everything else that she had mentioned on January 29, at Mother Wells's house when it was visited on February 1. But we must remember that most accounts of what Elizabeth said on January 29 and on January 31 are fifteen months after date, and are biassed on both sides.

To Mother Wells's the girl was taken on February 1, in what a company! The coach, or cab, was crammed full, some friends walked, several curious citizens rode, and, when Elizabeth arrived at the house, Nash, the butler, and other busybodies had made a descent on it. The officer with the warrant was already there. Lyon, Aldridge, and Hague were with Nash in a cab, and were met by others 'riding hard,' who had



seized the people found at Mrs. Wells's. There was a rabble of persons on foot and on horse about the door.

On entering the doorway the parlour was to your left, the house staircase in front of you, on your right the kitchen, at the further end thereof was a door, and, when that was opened, a flight of stairs led to a long slit of a loft which, Nash later declared, did not answer to Elizabeth's description, especially as there was hay, and, before Chitty, Elizabeth had mentioned none. There was a filthy kind of bed, on which now slept a labourer and his wife, Fortune and Judith Natus. Nash kept talking about the hay, and one Adamson rode to meet Elizabeth, and came back saying that she said there was hay. By Adamson's account he only asked her, 'What kind of place was it?' and she said, 'A wild kind of place with hay in it,' as in the neighbours' version of her first narrative. Mrs. Myers, who was in the coach, corroborated Adamson.

The point of the sceptics was that till Adamson rode back to her on her way to Wells's house she had never mentioned hay. They argued that Adamson had asked her, 'Was there hay in the room?' and that she, taking the hint, had said 'Yes!' By May 1754 Adamson and Mrs. Myers, who was in the cab with Elizabeth, would believe that Adamson had asked 'What kind of place is it?' and that Elizabeth then spoke, without suggestion, of the hay. The point would be crucial, but nobody in 1754 appears to have remembered that on February 21, three weeks after the event, at the trial of Mother Wells, Adamson had given exactly the same evidence as in May 1754. 'I returned to meet her, and asked her about the room. She described the room with some hay in it ... an odd sort of an empty room.'

Arriving at Mother Wells's, Elizabeth, very faint, was borne in and set on a dresser in the kitchen. Why did she not at once say, 'My room was up the stairs, beyond the door at the further end of the room'? I know not, unless she was dazed, as she well might be. Next she, with a mob of the curious, was carried into the parlour, where were all the inmates of the house. She paid no attention to Mrs. Wells, but at once picked out a tall old woman huddled over the fire smoking a pipe. She did this, by the sceptical Nash's evidence, instantly and without hesitation. The old woman rose. She was 'tall and swarthy,' a gipsy, and according to all witnesses inconceivably hideous, her underlip was 'the size of a small child's arm,' and she was marked with some disease. 'Pray look at this face,' she said; 'I think God never made such another.' She was named Mary Squires. She added that on January 1 she was in Dorset--'at Abbotsbury,' said her son George, who was present.

In 1754 thirty-six people testified to Mary Squires's presence in Dorset, or to meeting her on her way to London, while twenty-seven, at Enfield alone, swore as positively that they had seen her and her daughter at or near Mrs. Wells's, and had conversed with her, between

December 18, 1752, and the middle of January. Some of the Enfield witnesses were of a more prosperous and educated class than the witnesses for the gipsy. Many, on both sides, had been eager to swear, indeed, many had made affidavits as early as March 1753.

This business of the cross-swearing is absolutely inexplicable; on both sides the same entire certainty was exhibited, as a rule, yet the woman was unmistakable, as she justly remarked. The gipsy, at all events, had her alibi ready at once; her denial was as prompt and unhesitating as Elizabeth's accusation. But, if guilty, she had enjoyed plenty of time since the girl's escape to think out her line of defence. If guilty, it was wiser to allege an alibi than to decamp when Elizabeth made off, for she could not hope to escape pursuit. George Squires, her son, so prompt with his 'at Abbotsbury on January 1,' could not tell, in May 1754, where he had passed the Christmas Day before that New Year's Day, and Christmas is a notable day. Elizabeth also recognised in Lucy Squires, the gipsy's daughter, and in Virtue Hall, the two girls, dark and fair, who were present when her stays were cut.

After the recognition, Elizabeth was carried through the house, and, according to Nash, in the loft up the stairs from the kitchen she said, in answer to his question, 'This is the room, for here is the hay I lay upon, but I think there is more of it.' She also identified the pitcher with the broken mouth, which she certainly mentioned to Chitty, as that which held her allowance of water. A chest, or nest, of drawers she declared that she did not remember. An attempt was made to suggest that one of her party brought the pitcher in with him to confirm her account. This attempt failed; but that she had mentioned the pitcher was admitted. Mrs. Myers, in May 1754, quoted Elizabeth's words as to there being more hay exactly in the terms of Nash. Mrs. Myers was present in the loft, and added that Elizabeth 'took her foot, and put the hay away, and showed the gentlemen two holes, and said they were in the room when she was in it before.'

On February 7, Elizabeth swore to her narrative, formally made out by her solicitor, before the author of Tom Jones, and Mr. Fielding, by threats of prosecution if she kept on shuffling, induced Virtue Hall to corroborate, after she had vexed his kind heart by endless prevarications. But as Virtue Hall was later 'got at' by the other side and recanted, we leave her evidence on one side.

On February 21-26 Mary Squires was tried at the Old Bailey and condemned to death, Virtue Hall corroborating Elizabeth. Mrs. Wells was branded on the hand. Three Dorset witnesses to the gipsy's alibi were not credited, and Fortune and Judith Natus did not appear in court, though subpoenaed. In 1754 they accounted for this by their fear of the mob. The three sceptics, Nash, Hague, and Aldridge, held their peace. The Lord Mayor, Sir Crispin Gascoyne, who was on the bench at the trial of Squires and Wells, was dissatisfied. He secured

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