

THE LIFE OF CARDINAL WOLSEY

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The Life of Cardinal Wolsey by George Cavendish & Mary Tout

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GEORGE CAVENDISH & MARY TOUT

**THE LIFE OF
CARDINAL WOLSEY**



CARDINAL WOLSEY

From the picture in the National Portrait Gallery

The Life of Cardinal Wolsey

By
George Cavendish
His Gentleman Usher

Edited with Notes and an Introduction by

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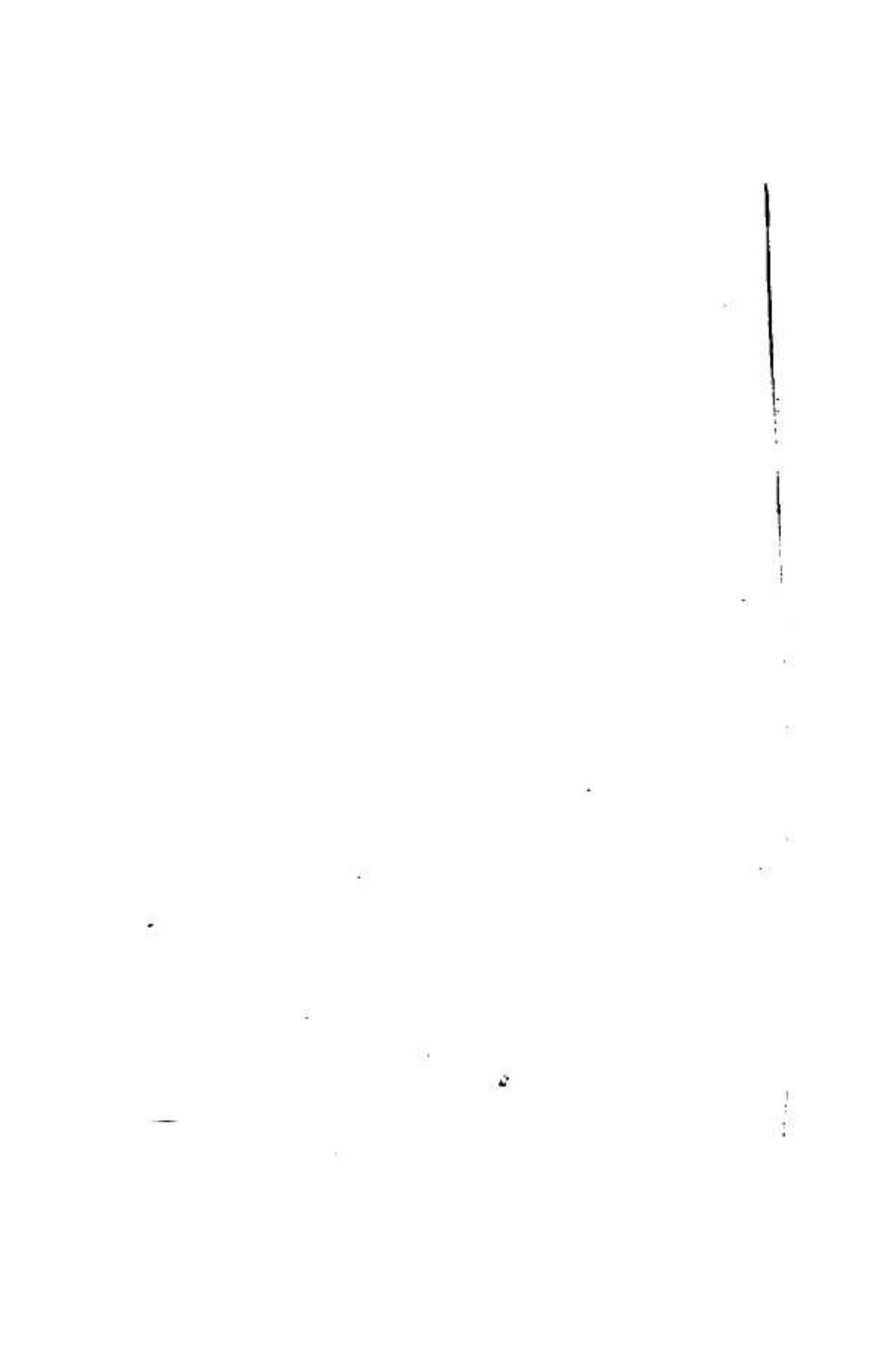
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INTRODUCTION.

CAVENDISH'S *Life of Cardinal Wolsey* is one of the most moving biographies in any language. Cavendish entered Wolsey's service as "gentleman-usher" in 1527, or even earlier. At that date Wolsey was at the height of his power. Archbishop of York, Cardinal and Papal Legate, Lord Chancellor of England, he was guiding King Henry VIII's policy both at home and abroad. Wolsey's skilful diplomacy had raised England from a third-rate power to an independent place in the European state-system; his foresight and care for the Church had led him to strive to reform the Church from within; his respect for learning had caused him to found a great school at Ipswich and Cardinal College at Oxford. He was the king's right hand, and the greatest subject in England, a ruler as truly as the king himself, a statesman feared throughout Europe. During the three years between 1527 and Wolsey's death in 1530, Cavendish was with him when the cloud, at first no bigger than a man's hand, arose on the horizon of his fortunes, was with him while that cloud grew big till it had blackened the cardinal's sky: he was with him when the king's favour turned from him, when the Great Seal, the symbol of his Chancellor's office, was taken from him, when he was deprived of his goods, and bidden retire to Esher, where poverty replaced the sumptuousness that was his wont; he was with him throughout the torturing time at Esher, when the malice of his enemies added petty persecutions to his grief at the loss of the king's favour; he was with him on his journey towards York, with him when at Cawood he was arrested on a charge of high treason, with him on his painful journey south towards London, where he was to stand his trial, with

him when disease fell upon him, and with him when at Leicester Abbey, lonely and friendless, he died. So the picture Cavendish paints of his master must in the main be true to life, though love and loyalty brightened the high lights, blinding him to the shadows. The biography, told simply and sympathetically by one who was intimately associated with Wolsey through evil and through good report, gives us clear insight into that side of Wolsey's life that was hidden from the world. It makes us realise the loneliness of his triumph and the tragedy of his fall. Ambitious, overbearing, unscrupulous, greedy of place and power, Wolsey served the king from mixed motives, from selfishness and loyalty combined. He staked all upon the king. Yet there can be no doubt that another motive besides self-interest led to his devoted service,—and that was, love for his king and country. The headstrong Henry VIII. cared more for the gratification of his own will than for right and wrong. Wolsey did not shrink from risking Henry's anger by opposing him, as on his death-bed he told Kingston: "He is sure a prince of a royal courage, and hath a princely heart: and rather than he will either miss or want any part of his will or appetite, he will put the loss of one half of his realm in danger. For I assure you that I have often kneeled before him in his privy chamber on my knees, the space of an hour or two, to persuade him from his will and appetite: but I could never bring to pass to dissuade him therefrom."¹ But Wolsey always yielded in the end, letting ambition override justice, when continued opposition might have meant an earlier fall. His service was ungrudging and constant: he renounced for it his own comfort and ease, working early and late, passionately and untiringly. The tragedy of his life was that he put his trust in a vain thing, and lost the royal favour. That loss meant the failure of his grandiose schemes for the advancement of learning and for the reform of the Church from within.

¹ See p. 88.