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This illustration, circa 1860, is an artist's impression of the execution of Sir Walter Raleigh (who refused a blindfold). Included in "The Popular History of England: An Illustrated History of Society and Government from the Earliest Period to Our Own Times," by Charles Knight, the image (by an uncredited artist) is online via the New York Public Library Digital Gallery.

Sir Walter, happily married to Bess, became a well-known poet during the Elizabethan Age. Away on various expeditions, he was not always home with his family, but he served the Queen for the rest of her life. When she died - on the 24th of March, 1603 - Walter had resumed his post as Captain of her Guard.

Within four months of Elizabeth's death, life drastically changed for the Raleigh family.

Walter was accused of plotting against the new King (James I) who had ruled Scotland (as James VI) since his mother (Mary, Queen of Scots) had abdicated. Tried for treason, the man who had always been loyal to his monarch was condemned to death on the recanted testimony of an alleged co-conspirator (who was not allowed to face him at trial).

People, including Raleigh's wife Bess, lobbied against his sentence. The day before he was scheduled to die, he received a reprieve.

Instead of going to the block (to lose his head), he went to the Tower of London (where he remained for thirteen years). We can still see his living space at the Tower which contains furniture from the time (although not the items which Raleigh personally used).

On the 30th of January, 1617, King James signed a royal warrant for Raleigh's release. His guilty verdict, however - and its accompanying death sentence - were not set aside.

After he left the Tower, Sir Walter sailed to Guiana on a gold-seeking mission. He took fourteen ships and nine

hundred men with him. The expedition was a failure.

On his return to Britain, Raleigh was taken back to the Tower. His still-in-force death sentence would be carried out.

This time, despite all her pleas to high-ranking officials, Bess could not save Walter's life. She did get one concession, though. The executioner would give her Walter's body after her husband was dead.

Walter, whose hair was now graying and whose dignity remained in tact, was unafraid of death. At a time when it was extremely risky to publically disagree with the government's position, he no longer had anything to lose by speaking his mind. Besides, it was the right of a condemned person to speak at the place of execution.

Walter exercised that right.

Point by careful point, the condemned man refuted the government's case against him. Then he addressed the crowd:

For a long time my course was a course of vanity. I have been a seafaring man, a soldier, and a courtier, and in the temptation of the least of these there is enough to overthrow a good mind and a good man. So I take my leave of you all, making my peace with God. I have a long journey to make and must bid the company farewell. (Constance Fecher, *The Last Elizabethan: A Portrait of Sir Walter Raleigh*, page 230)

Wanting to inspect the instrument of his death, he took the executioner's axe in his own hand. Addressing the man who would remove his head, he said:

Let me see it. Do you think I am afraid of it? This is a sharp medicine, but it is a physician for all diseases.

Refusing to have his eyes blindfolded, he instructed the executioner's next moves:

Think you I fear the shadow of the ax when I fear not the ax itself? ... When I stretch out my hand [after he positioned himself], dispatch me.

After bending his head to pray, he held up his hand. Nothing happened. The executioner did not move. Raleigh stretched out his hand again. This time, the masked dispenser of death held up the ax but did not lower it.

Then, in a loud voice, Sir Walter gave an order:

What do you fear? Strike, man, strike!

It is said that the blow fell - then fell again. There were tears in the eyes of the spectators, many of whom believed a just man had been unjustly killed on October 29, 1618. An unnamed poet, who watched the events, wrote this about what he had seen:

*Great Heart! Who taught thee so to die?
Death yielding thee the Victory!
Where took'st thou leave of life? If here,
How could'st thou be so far from Fear? . . .
Farewell! Truth shall this story say,
We died: Thou only liv'st that Day.*

Bess did get her husband's body. In fact, history records that she placed Walter's embalmed head in a bag - which she kept nearby for the remaining twenty-nine years of her life.

[See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:](http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/THE-DEATH-OF-RALEIGH-Elizabeth-I-The-Golden-Age)

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Media Stream



James I - Portrait

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James VI

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Raleigh - Living Space at the Tower of London

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The Tower - Raleigh's Room

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Elizabethan-Period Furniture - Furnishings Like Raleigh Used

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Warrant for Raleigh's Release

Image online, courtesy the [Folger Shakespeare Library](http://www.folger-shakespeare.org/), Washington, D.C. website.

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Sir Walter Raleigh - Engraving

Image online, courtesy the U.S. Library of Congress.

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Execution of Sir Walter Raleigh

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