

LILY, THISTLE AND ROSE

I draw my weighty cloak around me and gaze out beyond these abbey stones – grey upon grey and mottled with sand. Crucifixes poke skywards on every gable. Small windows appear like clover. A turreted tower points further to heaven. Would that I rested there than here...

Ever more cautious, my latest warden, Sir Amyas Paulet, has bundled me in haste to this bolthole without my womenfolk. Yet vivid grass lies beyond this small chamber and... Aha! A last sprinkle of harebell lightens this louring September day and I remember my tiny, slippered toes skipping along another cloister. An infant of four years was I when first removed – to Inchmahome Priory, as place of safety after the battle of Pinkie. Aye, my life has been a train of removals.

I step back wearily. But what wee maid is that below, chanting an unfamiliar rhyme? Of her own making, perchance? Alas, there are many... and cruel. Grasping the deep stone sill, I lean out as far as these pained hands will bear me. She washes linen, I see and, ah... her poor fists, red as her hair, thump her tune from sodden wood on her washboard:

‘The Queen o’ Scots wad hae my hair
To wear aneath her croon.
Bricht reid is mine
And hers snaw-white,
But that croon she’ll nivver wear.’

A bold, impudent lass! What would she know? I fling the casement wide.

“What crown, say you? Lily? Thistle? Or rose?”

Ah, impetuosity rarely serves me well. The child speaks true... though few ever catch me unwigged. To my chagrin, I see she is affronted. A bald cleric grabs her scrawny arm.

“Quiet! The whore has ears.”

How womankind suffers under men.

“Unhand that bairn,” I shout despite myself. “For she pleases me greatly!”

My ring tugs, cruel over the ugly knuckle, but I fling it out for her.

“For *your* hand alone, child,” I cry. “Upon my word.” Why not, indeed, when Paulet has curtailed my almsgiving and already raided my coffers?

Alas, I stumble back, scarce able to right myself – lame from the rheumatism, confined and ill-exercised these last months – and I must lean against this coarse embrasure. Shrunken monks’ heads cast their stony, disembodied glances from either ends of window arches beyond. Each closed and downcast face is a reminder of my fall, my duty, my burden. For I remain an anointed Queen, though prisoner these seventeen years and must be hid away.

What crown indeed, I ponder, shuffling at last towards my fire – hastily laid and hissing damp in the grate. First was my own tough thistle, the realm of Scotland mine on my despairing father, the Red Lion’s, death. I was but a few days old. Great-uncle Henry, the English King and would-be suzerain of Scotland, betrothed me to his infant son. Both died betimes. I am accursed for men.

Soon, my Scottish kinsmen, in powerful spite, betrothed me – six years old – to François, young Dauphin of the French, then ferried me to France, my crown and lands temptation enough for all. They married me at fifteen, delighted to still keep me at bay. Ah, but I minded not those golden years under my Fleur de Lis crown... So now I let my shoulders droop, coaxing dozy dreams in this fireside chair... Am I not overjoyed? For, once

more, we laugh away our young days... hunting, dancing and scampering over midnight lawns.

Alas, try as I might, I may not hold that shimmering dream, for yon bier comes next – my François, laid out cold. I, widowed and scarce eighteen. As ever, tears dribble into my ear and rouse me.

Aye, they shipped me out from Calais, back across the cold North Sea without safe conduct from yon careful, queenly cousin Elizabeth. She who had styled herself my ‘sister queen’ in copious letters yet has never deigned to meet with me. Why, indeed, would I cede my claim to her English throne, her rose crown, and I a legitimate Catholic heir, descendant of the seventh King Henry? For I returned from France educated, accomplished... the pearls of Catherine de Medici stowed in my casket.

Aye, annals of my stunted reign are writ, but not in my favour now while Lord Cecil holds sway. His plans consign my tenure to a mere end note on history’s page which will omit this very sojourn, all my doings now held most secret. Elizabeth’s unamiable Amyas Paulet guards me well, removing me at will. Yet I endure.

Draughts of unseasonal air now penetrate this casement lead, raking my stiff bones even as I lean over my dwindling fire. Indeed I must rally, cast off my cloak and blow, courting the obstinate flame. Alas, not even bellows in this cursed den... Once long ago, in desperation, they bundled me into old Coventry’s Guild Hall in winter, from a common inn. Aye, forever up a narrow, winding stair and I so very tall and straight. Yet I bent, smiled. For common burgh folk were aye douce with me... and the plain folk of Edinburgh had also loved their Queen.

At last, yon hole glints, livid in this dismal fire. Grasping the poker, I smack the cussed log, releasing resinous sparks and gentle tongues of flame, a reminder of the shy boy

who brought a young hound as companion for me in that fine Guild Hall. Under his drab cape, he bore a secret plate of tricorn God cakes, redolent of spices.

Stroking the trinity of cuts atop them, he blessed me – “Father, Son and Holy Ghost” – lightening my day as he fled.

Not so my dour Scottish Lords.

Was I, as charged, an absent sovereign, then? Favouring her French crown? While I reigned in France, the Scots abandoned our true religion, its fattening church, my pillaging nobles. Yet, I did not suppress Protestant worship on my return, keeping my own faith and middle way, as all advised, despite the insults of yon skirling dissenter Knox who would have had me burn. My status pawned, my own Lords made my Scottish crown a fine political pivot for English, Scots, French, even Spanish ambition. But was I not the equal of that Godly Prince whom they supposedly desired, for all my subjugated sex and pawned status?

Alas, always men... my fortunes tied to their Acts and Confessions – of Settlement, Faith and Supremacy. For I must always be safely married. Elizabeth even mooted a match with her lover Leicester. Aye, the Virgin Queen, though woman, has a heart of steel. How so, and I so gay? Yet, imprudent, I chose all-but-English Darnley, to our mutual regret.

But I must cast aside this fireiron lest my velvet reek of smoke. Nay, I will not turn slattern without my own ladies these last, lonely weeks. What gain is there, furthermore, in raking old embers? Indeed, I must pace these boards awhile, for, without my accustomed exercise outdoors, my limbs seize up in these seeping towers whose narrow, spiral stairs mock me. My hose, though pretty, are too thin and, alas, my bladder now insists...

Ah, to stride the galleries of France again – lithe, waiting on my dear Dauphin. Or my rightful chamber in the Holy Rood Palace in Edinburgh... But there they crept up my husband’s secret stair to butcher my dear attendant for a spy. Would that Riccio’s blandishments had not inflamed my would-be king... and I then with child.

Do I jalouse a footfall on the stair? I gather myself together, sit straight and composed.

“And how long is my stay, madame?” I enquire of this gentlewoman.

“You must speak with Sir Amyas Paulet.”

She curtsies, sets down food, yet fears to look upon me – for they love to tell that I conspired to murder Darnley for Bothwell, the very brute who finally carried *me* off by force to wed and now long dead. They even say I now consort with Spanish Philip. Wily, he ignores my fate. Thus, unbeknown to him, he is not named my successor, as he thinks. It pleases me greatly.

“And, pray, what news of my casket? That farrago of confected letters on which I am to be condemned?”

She sighs, turning her hands over. “Speak with Sir Amyas.”

“Pah! Wait upon me with a chamber pot and basin, then. For I am unattended and have no garderobe.”

She backs away. Fie to weak women, then, and to my false and warring lords who first imprisoned me in yon island castle of Lochleven, forcing me to abdicate long since; who taught my young James that I murdered his father.

Lifting the napkin from my repast, I find myself too sad and chilled for slippery fruits.

Dear James, I was forbidden to see you, rear you... Raised Protestant by my half-brother, you long for that sweet rose, while bearing our prickly thistle crown. Had I materials, I would write that yours is an invidious choice. Heir to Elizabeth, should she die childless, you play Janus – Protestant ally of the English, while communing with Catholic malcontents. A fine jest. Let her think you subservient, then. You are *my* blood and Stuart yet! Was it not for you

and I that I escaped Lochleven, fought on, was quelled, captured, then harried between English castles these seventeen years? I resist, furthermore, the toady wiles of Elizabeth's William Cecil who would dethrone me to bolster Protestant sway throughout these Isles.

Ah, many winds have blown and seas swelled. Corn has seeded, ripened and been cut down; maidens born, beautified and bedded while I became this solitary captive husk.

Lo, he comes. Bolts rattle from their moorings. Paulet bows deep, extends his pasty hand.

"Madam, we must be off."

"So soon? Whither bound? What of my casket, sir, my papers, upon which your excommunicated Elizabeth declines to judge or condemn me?"

He rolls an uninterested hand.

"So, Sir Amyas, you would dance me down these stairs?"

He enjoys not my quip and plays politique. Yet he would fain kill me for I hang heavy on his purse, if not his conscience.

"I would not yet risk your gentle neck in a fall, madam."

The scent of sweet-water orange, arising from his fine linen, scarce belies his cold contumely. So... to *trial*, then? Yon stronghold of Fotheringhay? Touché. I am as ordure upon his puritan shoe, yet I favour him with my fairest smile.

"Ah... *In My Defens God Me Defend*, then, Sir?"

He snatches up my fur, summons his lady, skulking in the doorway, to pack me up once more – my dear sewing box, my Holy Bible and ivory cross for whose sake I am doubly cursed. No casket and, alas, no Medici pearls – long stolen by my brother and sold to envious Elizabeth who still prevails.

And, for myself, I fold in lavender that first white veil, the mourning veil, and pray this will be the last. Fotheringhay...

I wait, then, upon my God to deliver me...

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Tis done.

Now I rise above all, perfect in body as God has promised: White capped, red haired and in my tawny dress which shocked the crowd below as they removed my cloak when first I approached the scaffold.

The stunned axeman required three blows at my old neck while I spoke my prayers, head on the block. My disembodied lips spoke on for many minutes after my bald head rolled free of my body and wig.

And my dear little dog hid inside my skirts till the end although my own son failed me.

Dead I will yet survive. Nemo me impune lacessit.

~

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