

One

The Queen of Scots is dead and they say I killed her. They lie! Those who say so are the foulest traitors that ever drew breath in my kingdom, and they shall suffer all the agonies of a traitor's death before they draw their last. May the stink of burning entrails linger in their nostrils before merciful oblivion descends upon them. I want them to scream for mercy, to beg for it, all the while knowing it will not be forthcoming until death. I will give no quarter to those who schemed to bring this about, who have stained my hands with the blood of a fellow queen. Their only hope for mercy is with God.

I am seized with coughing, there is spittle on my hands and salty snot runs into my mouth. I cannot stem the tears that course down my cheeks. Dear God, let me not be mad. Such imaginings rise up before my eyes that I fear for my reason.

It was not my wish to kill a queen; any queen.

It was never my wish that Mary should die. God knows I, of all his creatures, have good reason for a horror of killing queens. The tears that spill fast down my cheeks and onto the warrant that carries my signature (God forgive me) authorising her execution bear witness to that. Would that they could wash my name away. It is the mark of Cain, for I have killed a sister queen.

Oh God, dear God, why have you allowed this fearful deed to be done? I have thought upon it oftentimes and shuddered. Not so the great lords and peers who surround me; not so those men of hard heart and even harder prejudice. They have pleaded with me to execute my cousin for twenty years or more, and I have fought them. I alone have stood between my cousin and the executioner's axe. Every year that passed since I ascended to my throne she made it harder for me to fight them: so many conspiracies, so much fanaticism, so many men who sought to take my throne and make it hers. Men she supported – aye, though she often piously denied it. She merely sought her freedom, or so she said. And who am I to blame her? Twenty years a prisoner is a hard fate for any to bear; it is a fate I once feared might be my own.

But Mary made it so hard for me to keep her alive. Virtually born to her throne (her father died when she was but seven months old) she seemed to have no aptitude for it, no talent for statecraft, no understanding of the discipline required to lead a country and survive.

Perhaps it is no blessing to be born a queen. I have always known I hold my throne by the grace of the English people. Should I misuse my power and, by doing so, misuse them, they would soon rise up and have me off it. Thrones are held by skill as much as by right. I knew this well from the day I was first called Majesty. I was a woman and my kingdom was afraid of queens. My poor deluded sister – that other Mary – had seen to that. I was one that many called a bastard, not only those of the Catholic faith: my father horrified the English when he divorced his legal wife and married my poor mother. I had to earn my right to keep my seat, aye, and my head. Had there been a prince with any claim to the succession, I doubt I would have acceded with so little difficulty. Fortunately for me, God has seen fit to fill Christendom with what some call a monstrous regiment of women. Mary did little to help her own cause, but that does not mitigate the treachery of those who question the monarch on the throne. We achieve our thrones by divine right; it is monstrous for mere mortals to defy God's will and crown another in our place.

Oh God, I feel ill. The vomit rises in my throat and my innards cry out in terror at what has been done. I will loosen my bodice and unlace my stays. There is no one here with me. I have ordered them all from my presence, with great oaths and much shouting. I threw a ledger at William Cecil – who I had raised from commoner to

both Lord Burleigh and Lord High Treasurer and can just as easily cast down – as I commanded him to leave my sight and my court. The ledger did not hit him, more’s the pity. Would that I had drawn a little of his self-righteous blood.

All the great men fled, cringing and bowing. I threatened to have them sent to the Tower: Cecil, Robin Dudley – who I made Earl of Leicester, Sir Christopher Hatton – who I raised to Lord Chancellor, and Sir Francis Walsingham – again, a man I raised from nothing to be my principal secretary. I bellowed that if they should have a mind they could join their puppet, Master William Davison, who is this minute clapped in irons, in my meanest dungeon, contemplating what he has done. I would not listen to their excuses that they thought only of my safety. Theirs, more like. They well know that their continued prosperity depends on my own.

But mightily as I may roar, I am terribly afraid. I fear for my mortal soul and I—? I know not exactly what I fear, but the dread of a nameless something rises up in me and renders me helpless. I tear at my clothes and my hair and beg God to forgive me. I fear for my reason.

Robin, now Earl of Leicester, told me how Mary died. Only he dared do so. It was not a pretty death and not well done. They forbade the poor woman her rosary and it took two strokes – oh, sweet Jesu, two strokes – to sever her head from her body. When I close

my eyes it is the axe I see, descending not once but twice, so I cannot close them at all and they are red with weeping and exhaustion. When they grasped her head by the hair and lifted it to show those with a thirst for blood, it fell from the executioner's hand and left him clinging to a wig. Beneath it she was fully white-haired, an old woman, her once famous charms faded by time and imprisonment. We were alike in our choice of headwear in more ways than crowns.

Would that I could shake such images from my mind's eye. I did not wish them to come to pass and now they will not leave me. How glad I am that I never did see her face in life. I yearned to, I confess it. I wanted to know how we compared, not just as queens, but as women. She was nine years my junior and many men have loved her – much good that it has done her. But glad I am that when the ghastly execution rises unbidden before my eyes, the woman I see is not just headless, but faceless. If I could also see her expression as the axe fell, I would go mad.

Strange that the woman who haunted my existence for all those years was unknown to me. We wrote each other letters. In the early years we always addressed one another in terms of the greatest affection, however grim or desperate the contents may have been. But I was hardly upon my throne six months before her then husband, the dauphin, became King Francois and so the Queen of Scots, scarcely sixteen years old, became

Queen of France. Not satisfied with two crowns, she immediately declared herself to be the rightful wearer of mine as well.

Dear God, I pity the Queen of Scots. I pity her the years she spent in dreary captivity and the seconds she waited for the axe to fall. How did she so restrain herself that she did not attempt to flee or squirm and cry out against her fate? Yet they say she did not, that she went to it calmly and with great dignity befitting a queen. Would that I could quell my physical fear, my greedy desire for life, with such courage if ever my time should come. I hope I never have to find out.

Oh God, forgive me this terrible crime. Forgive me for taking the life of an anointed queen. If there is anything I can do to expiate this stain upon my soul, I will do it. As Henry II did penance all the way to Canterbury to atone for the murder of Thomas Becket, so I will crawl to Fotheringay on my knees if need be. Please, God, tell me what I should do.

And what brought me to do what I did. I do not understand how circumstance – aye and the ambitions of the men who surround me – caused me to do that which I always swore I would not do. Perhaps I need to think back to the beginning of my fatal dance with the Queen of Scots to understand what brought us to this terrible fate, before I can know what penance I must make.

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Burleigh, or Secretary Cecil as he was then, told me of the new Queen of France, my cousin Mary, Queen of Scots, impudent claim to my throne.

‘No doubt she has been manipulated by her Guise uncles, Your Majesty, but it means we must regard the French as our enemy.’

Cecil was but newly my secretary, yet I trusted him then as I trusted no other on my council, and looked to him for disinterested guidance as I struggled to learn how to be a queen. He had left the service of my sister Mary to work for me a few years before I inherited her throne. Together we had worked steadily and calmly to prepare ourselves for the great task that lay ahead. The groundwork we did then, so many years ago, when I was young and carefree, has stood us in good stead. We have worked together well all these long and turbulent years. I have raised him from master to lord and given him land and sinecures and, no doubt, a few of his white hairs. Until this day, he had proved himself well worthy of my trust, and worthy of my original judgment of him. When I made him secretary I told him as much.

‘I judge that you will not be corrupted by any manner of gifts and that you will be faithful to the state.’

And so the old man was, until now. It is upon his conniving, aye and that of the fanatic Walsingham, that I lay the blame for the death of my cousin. They plotted to rid themselves of the woman they regarded as the greatest threat to my kingdom – Cecil by manipulating

policy and Walsingham through his network of spies. Cecil, old friend or no, is banished from the court. As for the rest, I have locked all of them out of my inner chamber: Robin, Walsingham, Hatton, my cousin Francis Knollys and all of my ladies including my cousin Philadelphia Carey, and yes, even Blanche Parry, my oldest friend and my dearest.

I wish to be alone, with my grief, my conscience and my God.

Two

Ah, sweet Jesu, I began so well and with such hopes! Where my brother and sister had divided and persecuted, I hoped to unite and accept. I was determined to be a good and just queen. I knew what it was to live in fear of my life because my way of worshipping God was contrary to the way others worshipped. For myself, to this day, I care not how men carry Christ in their hearts. For me it has always been that there is but one Lord Jesus. The rest is a dispute over trifles. It is why I prefer men of action to men of piety. The first would take your earthly life for their own profit, the other would take it for the sake of your immortal soul. I prefer a man who would kill you honestly for his own good, to one who pretends he is doing it for yours.

My cousin Mary (tears rise again at the mere thought of her name) fell victim to such stern and righteous men, the very same who in the end forced my hand. Although, it must be said, she also fell prey to men

of action such as her last husband, that devil James Hepburn, Earl of Bothwell. God's breath, I pray they all burn in hell forever – righteous and sinner alike. They have already cast me there.

I remember when I opened my first parliament – so much then that was new and exciting but now is dull duty or, worse, fractious and combative. I knew even then that religion would cause me the greatest difficulty. How was I to transition from my sister's Catholic monarchy back to the Church of England of my father's and brother's reigns – and the church so close to my mother's heart? So much blood spilt over the right way to worship God. How was I to return England to the true faith without having to resort to cruelty and coercion? Yet, I was determined to do what I must do gently. I have never wished to create martyrs. It turns out, of course, that if a man is determined to be a martyr there is not much that will thwart him – or her.

I was not in those days used to the power I wielded, and still secretly worried that someone would snatch the crown from my head and send me scurrying back to the schoolroom. How could such an upstart chit of a girl have dared take hold of the reins of a kingdom? Now, as a weathered old monarch, I know that many near me harboured just such seditious thoughts, but none had the temerity to voice them. I was an unknown quantity, the last living child of my father, and – for most of the new men – a child of the right religion. But perhaps my

greatest asset in those far-off days was simply that I was not my sister.

When I was not pondering the complexities of England and worship, my mind turned to the upcoming ordeal of my coronation. I had watched my sister's ceremony in the company of my beloved stepmother Anne of Cleves. She had died two years before I came to the throne and I still felt her loss (I feel it even now). So, unlike my sister, I had only kin from my mother's side at my coronation – the Careys and the Howards. There were few friendly faces as I made my way down the aisle.

Despite my fears, however, it is not the ancient ceremony that I remember well – that passed in a blur of finery, ritual and aching feet. What I recall vividly is the excitement of the preparations. I dressed strategically for my coronation.

'This brocade is the finest I have ever handled, Your Majesty,' Kat whispered as she knelt behind me, carefully lacing up my bodice of silver and gold.

'It weighs a very great deal, I fear.'

'Aye, but the cape is heavier.' Blanche staggered under its weight, as she carried it laid across her arms.

'My back will ache by ceremony's end.'

'I will order hot and cold compresses, Your Grace, to be ready upon your return.'

'Thank you, Kat. The thought of them will stiffen my resolve – and my back.'

‘Have you ever felt ermine, my la— I mean, Your Grace?’ asked Blanche. I forgave their slips. After all, it was only with them that I could relax a little and it is still with Blanche that I feel most able to throw off the carapace of Elizabeth the Queen and become for a moment just Elizabeth. On Kat’s death (how I long for her gruff comfort now) Blanche took her place as chief gentlewoman of my privy chamber and mistress of my jewels. Yet even she is barred from my sight at the moment. I wish to be alone with my memories and God’s judgment. I want no comfort.

In those more hopeful and innocent days there was much to enjoy about being newly a queen – not only that I had survived against the odds to inherit. I still remember the sensation of the royal ermine collar around my neck. I put my cheek to it and the fur seemed strangely warm against my skin. The grand garment smelt faintly of beeswax and the softest leather. Unable to resist, I buried my features in it and laughed with delight. It was intoxicating to know that such luxury was mine. My ladies laughed with me, equally delighted. They may not wear the finery that was meant for the monarch (even a monarch with her hair as yet unbrushed), but their circumstances as my attendants were vastly better now that I was queen.

‘Oh!’ I exclaimed as they lowered the full weight of the cape upon my shoulders. Despite Kat’s warning, I was not ready for the shock of it. ‘My attendants must

carry my train stoutly,' I said, 'or I will stagger and fall like a drunken sailor.' My ladies giggled at this and Kat pushed my stool towards me. I sat upon it, but only after my attendants had lifted the rich folds of the cape and fanned them out around the stool so that none of its glory would be either marred or crushed. Another of my ladies of the bedchamber, Robin Dudley's sister Mary Sidney, came into the room, carrying a beaten gold cap covered with magnificent pearls. It was such a thing of beauty, we all gasped.

'Oh, my lady!' exclaimed Blanche, so enamoured of the exquisite thing she fully forgot her manners.

'Your Majesty,' Kat corrected her, but not unkindly. Dear Kat, none could talk to me as she did and none – not Cecil, not even Robin – ever protected me for as long or as fiercely. Had she lived, perhaps I could have talked to her in a way that I cannot talk to anyone else. Perhaps Kat could have comforted me in my guilt and terror, as she did if I started up from a terrible dream when I was young.

'Quickly brush my hair and let me try it on!' I clapped like a greedy child and turned to gaze upon my face in the mirror as my hairdresser wrestled with my hair.

I was young then, and my skin was smooth and fair. It gave me pleasure to look upon my face. I wanted to dazzle all who saw me. I wanted to look to the ordinary people of England and the arrogant men of the court

and the parliament like an angel sent from heaven. (Aye, but which heaven?)

At first I needed to lean on the arms of Blanche and Kat, while I practised walking up and down my chamber, fully robed. Slowly I grew used to the weight and could release their steadying hands, but still I had to walk slowly and with concentration, counterbalancing myself against the weight of the great velvet and ermine train carried behind me.

It is what I remember most about the day itself – that sense of balancing myself with every step. The sights and sounds of the crowds who marked the route to Westminster Abbey, the glittering finery of the great ones of the land who filled the pews, even the blast of the trumpets that greeted my entry into the grand medieval church are all mere snatches, fleeting moments as a great weight was lowered upon my shoulders. They tell me it was snowing on that January day in 1559, but I have no recollection of it.

‘My lord bishop, it seems you have ignored my message.’

It was Christmas: mere weeks after my sister’s death and my accession. I had drawn Owen Oglethorpe, the Bishop of Carlisle, aside. The conversation we were about to have was my first attempt to grapple with the devilish complications of ruling a country that was moving from one way of worshipping the Lord God to another.

The Bishop of Carlisle walked with me away from the noisy Christmas Eve revels. I wished to have privacy for this conversation, not just for my sake, but for the sake of the nervous prelate beside me. All the princes of the church, most of whom had been appointed by my sister, were on tenterhooks and who could blame them?

As I look back upon it now, I can see the religious differences that so bedevil this modern world had already caught me in their snare. I was aware of the need to tread carefully, of course, but I never dreamt that the conflict between men over God would one day bring me to such a terrible place, and my cousin to such a dreadful end. Indeed, my cousin hardly registered in my mind in those halcyon days. My thoughts were taken up with smaller difficulties, although they loomed large enough at the time. Cecil and I knew that the leaders of my church needed to conform to certain necessary rituals – whatever their personal beliefs – but I did not want to have direct confrontations with any of them. My plan was to tread softly and move mountains with generosity and reason. In those days I was still foolish enough to believe that such puny weapons had real force. It only strikes me now that Cecil – canny though he has always been – must also have been somewhat naive to allow me to deceive myself in such a way. How much we have both learnt and how painfully! The sticking point for public ceremonies was transubstantiation. Was the Elevation of the Host

a literal worship of the blood and flesh of Christ, miraculously transformed from the bread and the wine, or blasphemous idolatry? My Catholic subjects believed one thing, my Protestant subjects another. Both thought the other's position was heresy.

This desire to avoid unnecessary confrontations and win friends rather than enemies was why I needed a discreet word with the Bishop of Carlisle. It was only a matter of time before I could solve the (I thought) minor problems of form and ceremony and reassure my subjects that as long as they were loyal to me and obeyed the law, the way they worshipped privately was their own concern. With that amicably settled, I believed I could then move on to issues of greater substance. How naive I was! The symbolic importance of religious differences has haunted my every waking moment from that day to this. But challenging Oglethorpe's loyalty to certain Catholic rituals was not my only reason for wishing to talk to this somewhat obscure prince of the church. Frankly all the other bishops had refused my overtures.

Plump and gorgeous in his robes of office, Oglethorpe took a deep breath, his colour rising with nerves. 'I did not ignore your communication, Your Grace. As I told your messenger, you are the mistress of my body and my life, but not of my conscience.'

His voice shook a little as he spoke, though he need not have feared. Had he dissembled I would have had less respect for him.

‘So you will persist in elevating the bread and wine at tomorrow’s Christmas service?’

‘Aye, Your Majesty, I will.’

‘I respect your conscience, my lord, but I must also respect my own.’

‘I would expect no less, Your Grace.’

‘Well, we agree on that, at least. I have another favour to ask of you.’

‘Name it. I will do anything that is within my power – and my conscience.’

I raised a quizzical eyebrow and saw him blanch a little.

As I said, I was still an unknown quantity to the men of my court, particularly those who had served my sister. Equally they were an unknown quantity to me, and my major task was to test these men and discover what they were made of and where their loyalties really lay. So I watched the good, if nervous, bishop carefully. ‘Can you find it within your conscience, my lord, to officiate at my coronation?’

‘Within my conscience?’ He dropped to his knee – his relief and surprise palpable. ‘It would be my greatest honour and delight to place the crown of England upon Your Grace’s head, in accordance with God’s will. My loyalty towards you is first among all earthly men, and second only to God. I am your humble servant and a loyal Englishman, Your Majesty.’

‘I am grateful to you for that. There are others who

lack your faith in God's intentions.' (Every other senior clergyman in the land, it seemed.)

'Then it strikes me they are great fools, Your Grace, and not good Englishmen.'

I smiled as I looked down upon him and then bent and handed him up. He was a little stiff and staggered slightly as he rose to his feet. He put real weight upon my steadying hand. I can see now that he was already weakened by the malady that was to kill him only a few short months hence.

'Unused to being on your knees, my lord bishop,' I chided him. 'Surely not!'

He had the grace to laugh ruefully. 'So used, good madam, that as you see, I find it hard to rise from them.'

And then we laughed together and were good friends, despite our religious differences.

It was a pleasant interview. Perhaps that is why it remains in my mind, but it was also a deceptive one. It lulled me into thinking that I could solve the deep divisions in my realm with a smile and a jest.

A few weeks later, when the time came for the Elevation of the Host at my coronation, I withdrew. I could not stop the bishop worshipping God in his own way, but I would not give his actions tacit approval by remaining in his presence while he did so. I did not believe the bread and wine became the literal flesh and blood of Christ and I would not pretend that I did. The eyes

of Christendom were upon me; no matter what each man believed, they all asked themselves the same question: what signals would my behaviour send about my attitudes to religion? Would I be a fanatical Protestant like my brother, or a pragmatic one like my father? If I had submitted to the full form of the ancient service – as my sister had so often entreated – my Catholic subjects would not have been reassured and my Catholic rivals across Europe would not have been convinced, but my Protestant subjects and allies would have been outraged. Cecil and I knew the message I needed to send: I was a Protestant queen, but not a fanatical one. When I declared that I did not wish to make windows into men's souls, I knew that it was not enough for me to sincerely mean what I said: I must send messages through my actions that my words would be matched by my deeds.

Three

‘The King of France is dead, Your Majesty.’ Cecil stood before me brandishing a letter from Ambassador Nicholas Throckmorton. It was July, the excitement over my coronation had faded and I was embarking upon what I now realised was the stark reality of ruling a kingdom. Nevertheless, after only eight months on the throne, I was still new enough at my job to hope that if I applied myself diligently to my papers, I could escape into the sunshine to ride and stretch my limbs. As I look back on it now, I see that I was approaching my task as if I were still a resident of my schoolroom, working hard to please my tutor. The sheer relentlessness of my role had not yet become apparent. Before Cecil entered the room, I had been within sight of the end of my labours, and had allowed myself glances at the still bright sunshine outside. As I heard his startling news, all hope of escape was immediately dashed.

‘How so, my lord? The last we heard he was hale and hearty.’

‘A jousting accident. A lance splintered in his face, piercing his eye and brain. The doctors hoped to save him, but to no avail. It was Montgomery’s lance, Your Grace – the captain of his Scots guard. Fortunately for him, the king pardoned the Scotsman as he lay dying.’

‘God have mercy on his soul.’

‘Amen, Your Grace.’

The news was disturbing, but it also gave us reason for cautious optimism. King Henri had been a wise and wily ruler, a man who perforce had to be taken seriously. His son was fifteen and, according to all reports, physically frail and deficient in both character and wit. A weaker France is always to be greeted with pleasure in England. But, as I have said, our optimism was cautious. As I knew from my own recent experience, a change of ruler changes everything, and fear is sharpened by change and danger follows the sharpening. I poured myself a glass of wine from the pitcher by my table. If I could not access one form of relaxation then I would allow myself another.

‘Will you share a glass with me, Cecil?’

He nodded and, waving away the servant who had leapt forward to do the task, I poured another for my friend and secretary. I rose from my table and walked towards the window. I could at least look at the gorgeous afternoon.

‘So, if Francois is king, the Queen of Scots is now Queen of France.’

‘Aye, madam.’ Cecil drank deeply from the glass. ‘It is a fine vintage, Your Grace.’

‘Aye, French burgundy, fittingly enough.’ And we enjoyed it together, silently contemplating what this changing of the guard in France might mean for us.

As I have said, I had thought little about my cousin Mary since gaining my throne. I had much else to occupy myself with, not least, despite all my efforts, the delicate game of placating the most zealous of my Protestant subjects. A jest and a smile might have worked well with Bishop Oglethorpe, but they were not proving as effective with the sterner members of my court.

The ranks of fanatical Protestants in my kingdom were swelling, as those who had fled from my sister’s Catholic tyranny returned from Flanders and Geneva and other parts of Protestant Europe where they had taken refuge. They came back to England with their prejudices hardened and their demands for religious conformity ever more vociferous. Of course it was not just my Protestant subjects I could not satisfy; my Catholic ones were just as discontented. I had already begun to realise that it is beyond the powers of even monarchs to please both sides at once, or, as I grumbled increasingly to Cecil, any of them *ever*. Now – thanks to

the fatal lance of one of her countrymen – the Queen of Scots had become the focus of my attention for perhaps the first time.

‘A Scotsman, was it?’ I broke the silence, a suspicious thought about the splinter that had entered King Henri’s brain now entering my own. There was rebellion in Scotland, an uprising against Mary Stuart’s formidable mother, Mary of Guise, who ruled Scotland as regent in her daughter’s stead.

‘There has been some speculation about that, Your Majesty, but according to Throckmorton it is baseless gossip. Montgomery did not wish to joust with the king and tried to cry off. It was Henri himself who insisted on one final bout.’

‘Bah! How foolish to tempt fate when your own is not the only one at stake. At least that is one fear you need not have for me, Cecil. I will never be foolhardy on the jousting field.’

‘Nay, Your Majesty, but I have seen you fearless on a horse.’

‘You do my fearing for me, good master secretary, so I have no need of it.’ I jested with my councillor, but I was already aware of just how many men’s necks relied on my continued good health. At least Henri had an heir of his own blood and his own religion. Mary of Scotland was the natural heir to me, and a follower of the old faith. A fact not lost on those who most feared it, nor on those to whom it offered great comfort and

hope. ‘She has styled herself Queen of England from birth, has she not?’

‘Aye, madam. That she has.’

‘I remember. I was only nine when she was born, but even then I thought her a greedy little infant, hungry for crowns.’

‘Now she has the crown of France, perhaps she can be persuaded to give up her claim on that of England.’

‘Perhaps, my lord – though if I were the new Queen of France, I would not do so. It remains a chip to be bargained with and I would never give one of those away without receiving something of value in return.’

‘Not all women are as wise as Minerva, Your Grace. Indeed, I have only ever met one.’ He smiled at me shyly. Cecil has always been a ponderous flirt, but unlike others with more honeyed tongues, he meant what he said.

Damn that Scotsman and his deadly lance! I have always loathed his brutish race: they have caused me to lose more sleep than even those savages the Irish. A jousting Scot may have inadvertently brought me to the state that I find myself in almost thirty years later – with my head aching and my eyes red and sore from the tears I have shed. Had Henri retired from the field that day, as he was advised, Mary may yet have kept her head and I my unblemished conscience. But these are foolish longings. Fate is as fate does. There is no avoiding it.

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How little I worried about the young Queen of France in that golden summer of 1559, the first year of my reign. She was safely across the Channel, married to the young king of another country. Her likeliest fate was to be the mother of kings of France and of Scotland. Cecil, my privy council and I discussed the possibility that a son of hers could perhaps one day unite the kingdoms of Scotland, England and France. Indeed, it caused my privy council and me some amusement, as I recall, to think of the consternation such an outcome would cause our common enemy, the King of Spain. But such a future seemed remote. I was young and newly on my throne. The men around me were still certain that I would marry and have sons of my own. Little did we then realise that the problem of the Queen of Scots would one day be England's and England's alone. In other words, the problem would be mine.

Ah! Another storm of tears threatens to undo me. I double over, clutching at my belly; the pain of my guilt and shame grips me in my innards and clutches at the softest parts of me. I must have howled aloud, because the door has opened and I can see the face of my cousin and lady-in-waiting Philadelphia Carey peering timidly around it. She reaches towards me as if to enter and offer comfort, but I have had my fill of cousins. I grab blindly at the first object that comes to hand – a large and valuable wineglass half full with a fine bordeaux that I cannot bear to taste. Even in

my extremity, I notice a fly floating on its surface.

‘Get out!’ I shriek at the poor woman and hurl the glass in her direction. It smashes into a thousand blood-red pieces on the door she has hastily closed.

‘Please return my compliments to His Majesty King Francois, Monsieur l’ambassadeur, and my congratulations on his accession to the throne.’

The new French king’s ambassador, Michel de Castelnau, was presenting his credentials.

‘And may I compliment you, Your Grace, on your mastery of the French tongue. It is rare to hear my language spoken with such elegance and refinement by an Englishman, let alone an Englishwoman.’

I had begun to feel slightly irritated by the constant surprise at my ability to string two words together, or wield my authority with a lightness of touch and some wit. Many of the ambassadors, envoys and plenipotentiaries who came to present their credentials as representatives of their masters (and they were, at that time, all masters) reacted to meeting me as if I was an amusing small dog able to perform all manner of tricks. I disliked the assumption of inferiority that was behind their praise, but I held my tongue.

‘My kinswoman, the queen. What can you tell me of her?’

‘She is in fine health, Your Majesty, and will be gratified to hear of your kind enquiry.’

‘She is my closest living relative, as you know: the granddaughter of my father’s oldest sister, Margaret, who was also Queen of Scotland. But, alas, we have never met, so I am curious, Monsieur l’ambassadeur, to know what the young Queen of France is like.’

It was not precisely true that she was my closest living relative: my Carey cousins, the children of my mother’s older sister, had that honour. But while I could (and did) prefer them and shower them with favours, royal they could never be. Nor could our closeness of blood ever be referred to out loud. They reminded people of my mother and that did me no good at all.

‘She is a great lady.’

‘But what does she look like? Is she dark or fair? Is she tall or short? What colour are her eyes, what colour is her skin, her hair? Is she considered beautiful or not so well-favoured?’ I knew I was unlikely to receive plain answers from de Castelnau, but my desire to know more about my royal cousin burned fiercely. I had written to Throckmorton with similar enquiries, but he was clearly besotted with the woman and sent me a description that bordered on that of a lover. My interest was not simply because she was my closest relative; it was also that she was a fellow queen. With the deaths of my brother and my sister, of Queen Catherine Parr and Queen Anne of Cleves, I had gained a throne, but lost all my peers.

‘She is considered fair of face, Your Grace, and has brown eyes and dark hair leavened with flecks of gold. She is tall for a woman. Many men must stretch their necks to meet her eye. She is young and charming and kind. King Francois is lucky indeed to have such a consort.’ His answer depressed me. He confirmed what Throckmorton had written. Here was a woman who was indeed formidable. She could bind men to her with charm and beauty. She was nearly ten years my junior and in the flower of her youth. No doubt she would bear the King of France many children. It was as well she was safely across the Channel, where I heartily hoped she would stay.

‘And is she accomplished, my lord? Can she play musical instruments and dance gracefully, read, write and sew a fine seam? Is she a good horsewoman; does she enjoy the hunt?’

‘Indeed, majesty, she is generally considered an accomplished young woman. Not in your league, of course, Your Grace. The superiority of your rare talents is acclaimed throughout Europe.’

‘And is the French queen curious about me?’

‘Ambassador Throckmorton has told me that she asks detailed questions about your appearance, clothing, jewellery and accomplishments at every opportunity.’

This news gratified me more than any flattery. Just as she was my only peer, I was hers. I began to hope we might be of value to one another, as fellow queens. France and

England were allies. Our mutual enemy was my erstwhile brother-in-law, King Philip of Spain. But my hopes were dashed almost as soon as they were formed.

‘The King of France is dead, Your Majesty.’

‘Another one?’ It was not the news I had expected to hear.

‘Francois.’

‘They are rather careless with their kings in France, it seems.’

‘Aye, madam, it is as well that Henri’s widow, Catherine de Medici, has had so many children.’

It was December, just over a year after the young king first sat upon his throne, and not much longer since I occupied mine. I was again at my desk when Cecil came to tell me the news, but I was not yearning to leave it as I had been on that similar occasion a few months before. Not simply because it was now cold and snow fell in flurries outside the window, but also because I had become more realistic about the demands of my office.

Much had happened in the year of 1560. As my ministers and I had long expected, my late sister Mary’s widower, Philip of Spain, offered me his hand in marriage. He did it perfunctorily and I was only too happy to reject him – an action that was greeted warmly by my advisors and my countrymen. There were too many bad memories of his Catholic influence upon my sister. No one then thought that my refusal to marry

this one man might indicate my intention to refuse any other.

I told everyone I did not wish to marry, but my sister did not believe me, Philip did not, Cecil did not, no one at court believed me, least of all Robin Dudley. My ladies: Kat, even Blanche – who also never married – thought my protestations mere maidenly modesty. Indeed, in those early days, most approved of my reticence. It was seen as becoming and protective of my virginal reputation. But it was not taken seriously.

‘A wise decision, indeed.’ Robin Dudley brushed a stray hair from his fine scarlet doublet.

‘There are many more suitable applicants for Your Majesty’s hand than the King of Spain. Archduke Charles of Austria remains ardent in his declarations.’

I think Cecil was trying to comfort me in case I felt disappointed that no other man would ever want me. He need not have worried. I knew that I was referred to as the best match in my parish – by which was meant the world.

I was standing beside my chair at the head of the table; I took my seat and motioned my privy councillors to do the same. ‘I am only too happy to refuse my brother-in-law, despite the fact that he is, as yet, the only one of my suitors that I have actually met. You will remember, my lords, that we spent time together during my sister’s confinement.’

‘England would not have stood for another Spanish marriage, Your Grace.’ Sir Nicholas Bacon was also attempting to commiserate with a young woman on the loss of a very grand suitor.

‘Nor would England’s queen. You forget, my lords, that I saw firsthand how miserable the Spanish marriage made my poor sister and the terrible effect it had on her hold over her kingdom and the loyalty of her subjects. Do you think me so foolish that I have not learnt such lessons? Have you forgotten Calais? My sister went to her grave with it carved upon her heart.’

‘Nevertheless, Your Grace, it is important that you marry and that England has an heir.’ One of my senior councillors, Sir Francis Knollys, added his voice to the rest.

‘Would that I could marry as well as you have done, my lord.’ My remark drew a great shout of laughter from the men gathered around the table. Francis Knollys had married Mary Boleyn’s daughter, my first cousin Catherine Carey.

I surveyed the men of my council and marvelled at the new sense I now had of being surrounded by friends and supporters, where once I had felt so alone. Whatever differences my council and I may have had over policy or, repeatedly, my unmarried state, I knew that they saw their interests inextricably entwined with mine. Most of their desire to see me safely wed was for fear of a Catholic heir, either Mary of Scotland or

her future progeny. But some of their desire was, by their reasoning, kindly intended. To these men it was the natural role of women to marry and bear children. At that point I think they saw my rule as temporary, although they would have stoutly denied it. To them, as men, I held the kingdom of England in trust and would hand it on to the tender care of my husband once I had one. What they could not realise was that, while I feared a Catholic heir as much as my ministers, I feared a husband more.

The death of Mary's first husband, King Francois, the sickliest of Catherine de Medici's large brood, was a turning point between my only royal cousin and me. No longer the Queen of France and childless, she had no role at the French court. Her mother, Mary of Guise, had died a few months before Francois, and so her daughter had no one she could trust at the helm of her distant kingdom. Unlike other royal princesses unluckily widowed, she had a crown of her own and could take possession of her throne by birthright. There would be no need to retire piously to a nunnery. Aye, no one knew then how little like a nun my lusty cousin would turn out to be. Strange that I – Christendom's Protestant queen – am temperamentally much better suited to the celibate and contemplative life of a nun than my Catholic cousin ever was. Sometimes I think that God must have a sense of humour.