

The following is an excerpt from *Celebrated Crimes: Mary Stuart*, by Alexandre Dumas. A biography of Mary, Queen of Scots, *Mary Stuart* follows her life from her ascension to the throne of Scotland through her execution as a prisoner of England. The complete text is available for purchase from Rogue Publishing at www.roguepublishing.com.

“Let him speak, Robert,” returned the queen. “We have in our conscience armor as well tempered as that with which Lord Lindsay is so prudently covered, although, to the shame of justice, we no longer have a sword. Continue, my lord,” the queen went on, turning to Lord Ruthven: “is this all that my subjects require of me? A date and a signature? Ah! doubtless it is too little; and this second paper, which you have kept in order to proceed by degrees, probably contains some demand more difficult to grant than that of yielding to a child scarcely a year old a crown which belongs to me by birthright, and to abandon my scepter to take a distaff.”

“This other paper,” replied Ruthven, without letting himself be intimidated by the tone of bitter irony adopted by the queen, “is the deed by which your Grace confirms the decision of the Secret Council which has named your beloved brother, the Earl of Murray, regent of the kingdom.”

“Indeed!” said Mary. “The Secret Council thinks it needs my confirmation to an act of such slight importance? And my beloved brother, to bear it without remorse, needs that it should be I who add a fresh title to those of Earl of Mar and of Murray that I have already bestowed upon him? But one cannot desire anything more respectful and touching than all this, and I should be very wrong to complain. My lords,” continued the queen, rising and changing her tone, “return to those who have sent you, and tell them that to such demands Mary Stuart has no answer to give.”

“Take care, madam,” responded Ruthven; “for I have told you it is only on these conditions that your pardon can be granted you.”

“And if I refuse this generous pardon,” asked Mary, “what will happen?”

“I cannot pronounce beforehand, madam; but your Grace has enough knowledge of the laws, and above all of the history of Scotland and England, to know that murder and adultery are crimes for which more than one queen has been punished with death.”

“And upon what proofs could such a charge be founded, my lord? Pardon my persistence, which takes up your precious time; but I am sufficiently interested in the matter to be permitted such a question.”

“The proof, madam?” returned Ruthven. “There is but one, I know; but that one is unexceptionable: it is the precipitate marriage of the widow of the assassinated with the chief assassin, and the letters which have been handed over to us by James Balfour, which prove that the guilty persons had united their adulterous hearts before it was permitted them to unite their bloody hands.”

“My lord,” cried the queen, “do you forget a certain repast given in an Edinburgh tavern, by this same Bothwell, to those same noblemen who treat him today as an adulterer and a murderer; do you forget that at the end of that meal, and on the same table at which it had been given, a paper was signed to invite that same woman, to whom today you make the haste of her new wedding a crime, to leave off a widow’s mourning to reassume a marriage robe? for if you have forgotten it, my lords, which would do no more honor to your sobriety than to your memory, I undertake to show it to you, I who have preserved it; and perhaps if we search well we shall find among the signatures the names of Lindsay of Byres and William Ruthven. O noble Lord Herries,” cried Mary, “loyal James Melville, you alone were right then, when you threw yourselves at my feet, entreating me not to conclude this marriage, which, I see it clearly today, was only a trap set for an ignorant woman by perfidious advisers or disloyal lords.”

“Madam,” cried Ruthven, in spite of his cold impassivity beginning to lose command of himself, while Lindsay was giving still more noisy and less equivocal signs of impatience, “madam, all these discussions are beside our aim: I beg you to return to it, then, and inform us if, your life and honor guaranteed, you consent to abdicate the crown of Scotland.”

“And what safeguard should I have that the promises you here make me will be kept?”

“Our word, madam,” proudly replied Ruthven.

“Your word, my lord, is a very feeble pledge to offer, when one so quickly forgets one’s signature: have you not some trifle to add to it, to make me a little easier than I should be with it alone?”

“Enough, Ruthven, enough,” cried Lindsay. “Do you not see that for an hour this woman answers our proposals only by insults?”

“Yes, let us go,” said Ruthven; “and thank yourself only, madam, for the day when the thread breaks which holds the sword suspended over your head.”

“My lords,” cried Melville, “my lords, in Heaven’s name, a little patience, and forgive something to her who, accustomed to command, is today forced to obey.”

“Very well,” said Lindsay, turning round, “stay with her, then, and try to obtain by your smooth words what is refused to our frank and loyal demand. In a quarter of an hour we shall return: let the answer be ready in a quarter of an hour!”

With these words, the two noblemen went out, leaving Melville with the queen; and one could count their footsteps, from the noise that Lindsay’s great sword made, in resounding on each step of the staircase.

Scarcely were they alone than Melville threw himself at the queen’s feet.

“Madam,” said he, “you remarked just now that Lord Herries and my brother had given your Majesty advice that you repented not having followed; well, madam, reflect on that I in my turn give you; for it is more important than the other, for you will regret with still more bitterness not having listened to it. Ah! you do not know what may happen, you are ignorant of what your brother is capable.”

"It seems to me, however," returned the queen, "that he has just instructed me on that head: what more will he do than he has done already? A public trial! Oh! it is all I ask: let me only plead my cause, and we shall see what judges will dare to condemn me."

"But that is what they will take good care not to do, madam; for they would be mad to do it when they keep you here in this isolated castle, in the care of your enemies, having no witness but God, who avenges crime, but who does not prevent it. Recollect, madam, what Macchiavelli has said, 'A king's tomb is never far from his prison.' You come of a family in which one dies young, madam, and almost always of a sudden death: two of your ancestors perished by steel, and one by poison."

"Oh, if my death were sudden and easy," cried Mary, "yes, I should accept it as an expiation for my faults; for if I am proud when I compare myself with others, Melville, I am humble when I judge myself. I am unjustly accused of being an accomplice of Darnley's death, but I am justly condemned for having married Bothwell."

"Time presses, madam; time presses," cried Melville, looking at the sand, which, placed on the table, was marking the time. "They are coming back, they will be here in a minute; and this time you must give them an answer. Listen, madam, and at least profit by your situation as much as you can. You are alone here with one woman, without friends, without protection, without power: an abdication signed at such a juncture will never appear to your people to have been freely given, but will always pass as having been torn from you by force; and if need be, madam, if the day comes when such a solemn declaration is worth something, well, then you will have two witnesses of the violence done you: the one will be Mary Seyton, and the other," he added in a low voice and looking uneasily about him, "the other will be Robert Melville."

Hardly had he finished speaking when the footsteps of the two nobles were again heard on the staircase, returning even before the quarter of an hour had elapsed; a moment afterwards the door opened, and Ruthven appeared, while over his shoulder was seen Lindsay's head.

"Madam," said Ruthven, "we have returned. Has your Grace decided? We come for your answer."

"Yes," said Lindsay, pushing aside Ruthven, who stood in his way, and advancing to the table, "yes, an answer, clear, precise, positive, and without dissimulation."

"You are exacting, my lord," said the queen: "you would scarcely have the right to expect that from me if I were in full liberty on the other side of the lake and surrounded with a faithful escort; but between these walls, behind these bars, in the depths of this fortress, I shall not tell you that I sign voluntarily, lest you should not believe it. But no matter, you want my signature; well, I am going to give it to you. Melville, pass me the pen."

"But I hope," said Lord Ruthven, "that your Grace is not counting on using your present position one day in argument to protest against what you are going to do?"

The queen had already stooped to write, she had already set her hand to the paper, when Ruthven spoke to her. But scarcely had he done so, than she rose up proudly, and letting fall the pen, "My lord," said she, "what you asked of me just now was but an abdication pure and simple, and I was going to sign it. But if to this abdication is joined this marginal note, then I renounce of my own accord, and as judging myself unworthy, the throne of Scotland. I would not do it for the three united crowns that I have been robbed of in turn."

"Take care, madam," cried Lord Lindsay, seizing the queen's wrist with his steel gauntlet and squeezing it with all his angry strength, "take care, for our patience is at an end, and we could easily end by breaking what would not bend."

The queen remained standing, and although a violent flush had passed like a flame over her countenance, she did not utter a word, and did not move: her eyes only were fixed with such a great expression of contempt on those of the rough baron, that he, ashamed of the passion that had carried him away, let go the hand he had seized and took a step back. Then raising her sleeve and showing the violet marks made on her arm by Lord Lindsay's steel gauntlet—

"This is what I expected, my lords," said she, "and nothing prevents me any longer from signing; yes, I freely abdicate the throne and crown of Scotland, and there is the proof that my will has not been forced."