Esther Singleton

Famous Women

Described by Great Writers

NOVA

FAMOUS WOMEN DESCRIBED BY GREAT WRITERS

ABRIDGED

ESTHER SINGLETON (EDITOR AND TRANSLATOR)

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PREFACE

This book is a compilation of sketches of famous and beautiful women by well-known authors. The principle of selection in every case has been the political influence exercised by the celebrity, either actively or passively. Few of the most famous reigning sovereigns of the past have naturally been included on account of their masculine cast of mind, or strength of character. Lady Jane Grey was important politically, on the other hand, by being a tool in the hands of ambitious relatives near the throne.

After sovereigns, we come to a class who held power by deputy, as exemplified by Margaret of Parma. Then follows that large and most important class of queens of the left hand, the Maintenons, Pompadours, etc. The women who held sway by intrigue or open exercise of power in the Courts of Charles II., and Louis XIV. and Louis XV. naturally occupy a large place in this book.

The last class of women who have been important in the councils and movements of nations are the more purely intellectual characters and those who plunged into civil strife for the mere love of intrigue, such as the Duchesses de Longueville, de Chevreuse, and du Maine, La Grande Mademoiselle, Madame Roland, etc. The matter I have selected deals chiefly with their activities in politics.

The heroic type of the woman who plunges into active or militant politics is found in Joan of Arc and Agnes Sorel. There are a few cases in which the real monarch has been a puppet in the hands of a strong woman. The type of the latter is shown in Madame des Ursins; and Lady Hamilton and the Duchess of Marlborough also exercised influence over courts, the results of which affected the world's history. Politics affected the tone of many famous *salons,* and women such as Madame Récamier and Lady Blessington, through their acquaintance

with ministers and nobles, were politically important in their day. These are also included in this collection.

The limited space of such a volume as this naturally prevents me from giving a full gallery of women of political importance, but I have tried to present as many types as possible.

E. S.
New York, September, 1904

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MARY, QUEEN OF SCOTS (1542—1587)

ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE

Mary, Queen of Scots, daughter of King James V. and his wife, Mary of Lorraine, was born in December, 1542, a few days before the death of her father, heart-broken by the disgrace of his arms at Solway Moss, where the disaffected nobles had declined to encounter an enemy of inferior force in the cause of a king whose systematic policy had been directed against the privileges of their order, and whose representative on the occasion was an unpopular favourite appointed general in defiance of their ill-will. On September 9, following, the ceremony of coronation was duly performed upon the infant. A scheme for her betrothal to Edward, Prince of Wales, was defeated by the grasping greed of his father, whose obvious ambition to annex the Crown of Scotland at once to that of England aroused instantly the general suspicion and indignation of Scottish patriotism. In 1548, the Queen of six years old was betrothed to the Dauphin Francis, and set sail for France, where she arrived on August 15. The society in which the child was reared is known to readers of Brantome as well as that of imperial Rome at its worst is known to readers of Suetonius or Petronius,—as well as that of Papal Rome at its worst to readers of the diary kept by the domestic chaplain of Pope Alexander VI. Only in their pages can a parallel be found to the gay and easy record which reveals without sign of shame or suspicion of offence the daily life of a court compared to which the Court of King Charles II. is as the Court of Queen Victoria to the society described by Grammont. Debauchery of all kinds and murder in all forms were

the "daily subjects of excitement or of jest to the brilliant circle which revolved around Queen Catherine de'Medici. After ten years' training under the tutelage of the woman whose main instrument of policy was the corruption of her own children, the Queen of Scots, aged fifteen years and five months, was married to the eldest and feeblest of the brood on April 24, 1558. On November 17, Elizabeth became Queen of England, and the Princes Lorraine—Francis the great Duke of Guise and his brother the Cardinal—induced their niece and her husband to assume, In addition to the arms of France and Scotland, the arms of a country over which they asserted the right of Mary Stuart to reign as legitimate heiress of Mary Tudor. Civil strife broke out in Scotland between John Knox and the Queen-Dowager—between the self-styled "congregation of the Lord" and the adherents of the Regent, whose French troops repelled the combined forces of the Scotch and their English allies from the beleaguered walls of Leith, little more than a month before the death of their mistress in the Castle of Edinburgh, on June 10, 1560. On August 25, Protestantism was proclaimed and Catholicism suppressed in Scotland by a convention of states assembled without the assent of the absent Queen. On December 5, Francis II. died; in August, 1561, his widow left France for Scotland, having been refused a safe conduct by Elizabeth on the ground of her own previous refusal to ratify the treaty made with England by her commissioners in the same month of the preceding year. She arrived nevertheless in safety in Leith, escorted by three of her uncles of the house of Lorraine, and bringing in her train her future biographer, Brantome, and Chastelard, the first of all her voluntary victims. On August 21, she first met the only man able to withstand her; and their first passage of arms left, as he recorded, upon the mind of John Knox an ineffable impression of her "proud mind, crafty wit, and indurate heart against God and his truth." And yet her acts of concession and conciliation were such as no fanatic on the opposite side could have approved. She assented, not only to the undisturbed maintenance of the new creed, but even to a scheme for the endowment of the Protestant ministry out of the confiscated lands of the Church.

Her first step was unconsciously taken on the road to Fotheringay, when she gave her heart at first sight to her kinsman Henry, Lord Darnley, son of Matthew Stuart, Earl of Lennox, who had suffered an exile of twenty years in expiation of his intrigues with England, and had married the niece of King Henry VIII., daughter of his sister Margaret, the widow of James IV., by her second husband, the Earl of Angus. Queen Elizabeth, with the almost incredible want of tact or instinctive delicacy which distinguished and disfigured her vigorous intelligence, had recently proposed as a suitor to the Queen of Scots her own low-born

favourite, Lord Robert Dudley, the widower, if not the murderer, of Amy Robsart; and she now protested against the project of marriage between Mary and Darnley. Mary, who had already married her kinsman in secret at Stirling Castle with Catholic rites celebrated in the apartment of David Rizzio, her secretary for correspondence with France, assured the English ambassador, in reply to the protest of his mistress, that the marriage would not take place for three months, when a dispensation from the Pope would allow the cousins to be publicly united without offence to the Church. On July 29, 1565, they were accordingly remarried at Holy-rood. The hapless and worthless bridegroom had already incurred the hatred of two powerful enemies, the Earls of Morton and Glencairn; but the former of these took part with the Queen against the forces raised by Murray, Glen-cairn, and others, under the nominal leadership of Hamilton, Duke of Chatelheraut, on the double plea of danger to the new religion of the country, and of the illegal proceeding by which Darnley had been proclaimed King of Scots, without the needful constitutional assent of the estates of the realm. Murray was cited to attend the "raid," or array, levied by the King and Queen, and was duly denounced by public blast of trumpet for his non-appearance. He entered Edinburgh with his forces, but failed to hold the town against the guns of the castle, and fell back upon Dumfries before the advance of the royal army, which was now joined by James Hepburn, Earl of Bothwell, on his return from a three years' outlawed exile in France.

Darnley at once threw himself into the arms of the party opposed to the policy of the Queen and her secretary—a policy which at that moment was doubly and trebly calculated to exasperate the fears of the religious and the pride of the patriotic. Mary was invited, if not induced, by the King of Spain to join his league for the suppression of Protestantism; while the actual or prospective endowment of Rizzio with Morton's office of chancellor, and the projected attainder of Murray and his allies, combined to inflame at once the anger and the apprehension of the Protestant nobles. On March 9, the palace of Holyrood was invested by a troop under the command of Morton, while Rizzio was dragged by force out of the Queen's presence and slain without trial in the heat of the moment.

The favour shown to Bothwell had not yet given occasion for scandal, though his character as an adventurous libertine was as notable as his reputation for military hardihood; but as the summer advanced his insolence increased with his influence at Court and the general aversion of his rivals. He was richly endowed by Mary from the greater and lesser spoils of the Church; and the three wardenships of the border, united for the first time in his person, gave the Lord

High Admiral of Scotland a position of unequalled power. In the gallant discharge of its duties he was dangerously wounded by a leading outlaw, whom he slew in single combat; and while yet confined to Hermitage Castle he received a visit of two hours from the Queen, who rode thither from Jedburgh and back through twenty miles of the wild borderland, where her person was in perpetual danger from the freebooters whom her father's policy had striven and had failed to extirpate. The result of this daring ride was a ten days' fever, after which she removed by short stages to Craig-millar, where a proposal for her divorce from Darnley was laid before her by Bothwell, Murray, Huntley, Argyle, and Lethington, who was chosen spokesman for the rest.

On the evening of Sunday, February 9, Mary took her last leave of the miserable boy who had so often and so mortally outraged her as Consort and Queen. That night the whole city (Glasgow) was shaken out of sleep by an explosion of gunpowder which shattered to fragments the building in which he should have slept and perished; and next morning the bodies of Darnley and a page were found strangled in a garden adjoining it, whither they had apparently escaped over a wall to be despatched by the hands of Bothwell's attendant confederates.

Upon the view which may be taken of Mary's conduct during the next three months depends the whole debatable question of her character. According to the professed champions of that character, this conduct was a tissue of such dastardly imbecility, such heartless irresolution, and such brainless inconsistency, as forever to dispose of her time-honoured claim to the credit of intelligence and courage. It is certain that just three months and six days after the murder of her husband, she became the wife of her husband's murderer.

In 1581, Mary accepted the advice of Catherine de'Medici and Henry III. that she should allow her son's title to reign as King of Scotland conjointly with herself when released and restored to a share of the throne. This plan was but part of a scheme including the invasion of England by her kinsman, the Duke of Guise, who was to land in the north and raise a Scottish army to place the released prisoner of Sheffield beside her son on the throne of Elizabeth. After the overthrow of the Scottish accomplices in this notable project, Mary poured forth upon Elizabeth a torrent of pathetic and eloquent reproach for the many wrongs she had suffered at the hands of her hostess, and pledged her honour to the assurance that she now aspired to no kingdom but that of heaven. In the autumn of, 1584, she was removed to Wingfield Manor, under charge of Sir Ralph Sadler and John Somers, who accompanied her also on her next removal to Tutbury in January, 1585. In April, 1585, Sir Amyas Paulet was appointed to

the office of which Sadler, accused of careless indulgence, had requested to be relieved; and on Christmas Eve she was removed from the hateful shelter of Tutbury to the Castle of Chartley in the same county. Her correspondence in cypher from thence with her English agents abroad, intercepted by Walsingham and deciphered by his secretary, gave eager encouragement to the design for a Spanish invasion of England under the Prince of Parma—an enterprise in which she would do her utmost to make her son take part, and in case of his refusal would induce the Catholic nobles of Scotland to betray him into the hands of Philip, from whose tutelage he should be released only on her demand, or if after her death he should wish to return, nor then unless he had become a Catholic. But even these patriotic and maternal schemes to consign her child and reconsign the Kingdom to the keeping of the Inquisition, incarnate in the widower of Mary Tudor, were superseded by the attraction of a conspiracy against the throne and life of Elizabeth. In August the conspirators were netted, and Mary was arrested at the gate of Tixall Park, whither Paulet had taken her under pretence of a hunting party. On September 25, she was removed to the strong castle of Fotheringay in Northamptonshire. On October 6, she was desired by letter from Elizabeth to answer the charges brought against her before certain of the chief English nobles appointed to sit in commission on the cause.

On October 14 and 15, 1586, the trial was held in the hall of Fotheringay Castle. Alone, "without one counseller on her side among so many," Mary conducted the whole of her own defence with courage incomparable and unsurpassable ability. Pathos and indignation, subtlety and simplicity, personal appeal and political reasoning, were the alternate weapons with which she fought against all odds of evidence or inference, and disputed step by step every inch of disputable ground. She repeatedly insisted on the production of proof in her own handwriting as to her complicity with the project of the assassins who had expiated their crime on the 20th and 21st of the month preceding. When the charge was shifted to the question of her intrigues with Spain, she took her stand resolutely on her right to convey whatever right she possessed, though now no kingdom was left her for disposal, to whomsoever she might choose. One single slip she made in the whole course of her defence; but none could have been more unluckily characteristic and significant. When Burghley brought against her the unanswerable charge of having at that moment in her service, and in receipt of an annual pension, the instigator of a previous attempt on the life of Elizabeth, she had the unwary audacity to cite in her justification the pensions allowed by Elizabeth to her adversaries in Scotland, and especially to her son. But except for this single instance of oversight or perversity, her defence was

throughout a masterpiece of indomitable ingenuity, of delicate and steadfast courage, of womanly dignity and genius.

Finally she demanded, as she had demanded before, a trial either before the estates of the realm lawfully assembled, or else before the Queen in council. So closed the second day of the trial; and before the next day's work could begin a note of two or three lines hastily written at midnight informed the commissioners that Elizabeth had suddenly determined to adjourn the expected judgment and transfer the place of it to the star-chamber. Here, on October 25, the commissioners again met; and one of them alone, Lord Zouch, dissented from the verdict by which Mary was found guilty of having, since June I preceding, compassed and imagined divers matters tending to the destruction of Elizabeth. This verdict was conveyed to her, about three weeks later, by Lord Buckhurst and Robert Beale, clerk of the privy council.

Mary received the announcement with majestic tranquillity, expressing in dignified terms her readiness to die, her consciousness that she was a martyr for her religion, and her total ignorance of any conspiracy against the life of Elizabeth. At night she took a graceful and affectionate leave of her attendants, distributed among them her money and jewels, wrote out in full the various legacies to be conveyed by her will, and charged her apothecary, Gorion, with her last messages for the King of Spain. In these messages the whole nature of the woman was revealed. Not a single friend, not a single enemy, was forgotten; the slightest service, the slightest wrong, had its place assigned in her faithful and implacable memory for retribution or reward. Forgiveness of injuries was as alien from her fierce and loyal spirit as forget-fulness of benefits; the destruction of England and its liberties by Spanish invasion and conquest was the strongest aspiration of her parting soul. At eight next morning she entered the hall of execution, after having taken leave of the weeping envoy from Scotland, to whom she gave a brief message for her son; took her seat on the scaffold, listened with an air of even cheerful unconcern to the reading of the sentence, solemnly declared her innocence of the charge conveyed in it and her consolation in the prospect of ultimate justice, rejected the professional services of Richard Fletcher, Dean of Peterborough, lifted up her voice in Latin against his in English prayer, and when he and his fellow-worshippers had fallen duly silent, prayed aloud for the prosperity of her own Church, for Elizabeth, for her son, and for all the enemies whom she had commended over night to the notice of the Spanish invader; then, with no less courage than had marked every hour and every action of her life, received the stroke of death from the wavering hand of the headsman.

Mary Stuart was in many respects the creature of her age, of her creed, and of her station; but the noblest and most noteworthy qualities of her nature were independent of rank, opinion, or time. Even the detractors who defend her conduct on the plea that she was a dastard and a dupe, are compelled in the same breath to retract this implied reproach, and to admit, with illogical acclamation and incongruous applause, that the world never saw more splendid courage at the service of more brilliant intelligence; that a braver, if not "a rarer spirit never did steer humanity." A kinder or more faithful friend, a deadlier or more dangerous enemy, it would be impossible to dread or to desire. Passion alone could shake the double fortress of her impregnable heart and ever-active brain. The passion of love, after very sufficient experience, she apparently and naturally outlived; the passion of hatred and revenge was as inextinguishable in her inmost nature as the emotion of loyalty and gratitude. Of repentance it would seem that she knew as little as of fear; having been trained in her infancy in a religion where the Decalogue was supplanted by the Creed. Adept as she was in the most exquisite delicacy of dissimulation, the most salient note of her original disposition was daring, rather than subtlety. Beside or behind the voluptuous or intellectual attractions of beauty and culture, she had about her the fresher charm of a fearless and frank simplicity, a genuine and enduring pleasure in small and harmless things no less than in such as were neither. In 1562, she amused herself for some days by living "with her little troop" in the house of a burgess of St. Andrews "like a burgess's wife," assuring the English ambassador that he should not find the Queen there,— "nor I know not myself where she is become." From Sheffield Lodge, twelve years later, she applied to the Archbishop of Glasgow and the Cardinal of Guise for some pretty little dogs, to be sent her in baskets very warmly packed— "for besides reading and working, I take pleasure only in all the little animals that I can get."

No lapse of reconciling time, no extent of comparative indulgence, could break her in to resignation, submission, or toleration of even partial restraint. Three months after the massacre of St. Bartholomew had caused some additional restrictions to be placed upon her freedom of action, Shrewsbury writes to Burghley that "rather than continue this imprisonment she sticks not to say she will give her body, her son, and country for liberty"; nor did she ever show any excess of regard for any of the three. For her own freedom of will and of way, of passion and of action, she cared much; for her creed she cared something; for her country she cared less than nothing. She would have flung Scotland with England into the hellfire of Spanish Catholicism rather than forego the faintest chance of personal revenge. Her profession of a desire to be instructed in the

doctrines of Anglican Protestantism was so transparently a pious fraud as rather to afford confirmation than to arouse suspicion of her fidelity to the teaching of her Church. Elizabeth, so shamefully her inferior in personal loyalty, fidelity, and gratitude, was as clearly her superior on the one all-important point of patriotism. The saving salt of Elizabeth's character, with all its well-nigh incredible mixture of heroism and egotism, meanness and magnificence, was simply this; that, overmuch as she loved herself, she did yet love England better. Her best though not her only fine qualities were national and political, the high public virtues of a good public servant; in the private and personal qualities which attract and attach a friend to his friend and a follower to his leader, no man or woman was ever more constant and more eminent than Mary Queen of Scots.

Mary, Queen of Scots