



**ARBELLA: ENGLAND'S  
LOST QUEEN**

SARAH GRISTWOOD

TRANSWORLD  
BOOKS

## About the Book

'I must shape my own coat according to my cloth, but it shall not be after the fashion of this world, but fit for me'

Niece to Mary, Queen of Scots, granddaughter to the great Tudor dynast Bess of Hardwick, Lady Arbella Stuart was born and bred in the belief that she would one day inherit her cousin Elizabeth I's throne. Many at home and abroad anticipated she would be crowned Queen. However Arbella's fate was to make a forbidden marriage, to die a lonely, squalid death in the Tower and to be written out of history.

Drawing on a wide range of contemporary sources, including Arbella's own extraordinary, passionate letters, Sarah Gristwood's acclaimed biography paints a vivid and powerful portrait of a woman forced to tread a precarious path through one of the most turbulent, treacherous periods in British history, and in so doing rescues this 'lost queen' from obscurity.

# ***Contents***



Cover  
About the Book  
Title Page  
Preface  
The Tudor and Stuart dynasties  
Prologue

## *Part I 'So good a child': 1574—1587*

'The hasty marriage'  
'Most renowned stock'  
'My jewel Arbell'  
'Good lady grandmother'  
'Little Lady Favour'

## *Part II 'Lawful inheritress': 1587—1602*

'She will one day be even as I am'  
'Court-dazzled eyes'  
'Exile with expectation'  
'Slandorous and unlikely surmise'  
'The disabling of Arbella'  
'This my prison'  
'They are dead whom I loved'  
'Helping myself in this distress'

## *Part III 'My travelling mind': January—April 1603*

'This unadvised young woman'  
'A mind distracted'  
'So wilfully bent'

'A scribbling melancholy'  
'Disorderly attempts'  
'That strange outlandish word "change"'

*Part IV 'My own woman'? 1603—1610*

'An unknown climate'  
'Much spoken of'  
'A confusion of imbassages'  
'My estate being so uncertain'  
'To live safe'  
'Without mate and without estate'

*Part V 'A pattern of misfortune': 1610—1615*

'Affectations of marriage'  
'Your faithful loving wife'  
'A poor distressed gentlewoman'  
'To break prison and make escape'  
'A spectacle of his Majesty's displeasure'  
'A bird in a cage'  
'The most wretched and unfortunate creature'  
'Far out of frame'  
'I dare to die'

Epilogue

Picture Section

Appendix A: 'One Morley'

Appendix B: Arbella and porphyria

Appendix C: Places and portraits

Postscript to 'Places and portraits'

Family trees

Source notes

Select bibliography

Picture acknowledgements

Index

About the Author

Copyright

SARAH GRISTWOOD

*Arbella*

ENGLAND'S LOST QUEEN

## *Preface*



It would, of course, be a crime to rifle through a volume of centuries-old letters as though it were an airport paperback. You would certainly never get the chance (so vigilant are the staff of the British Library's Manuscripts Room) with the hefty tome labelled BL Harl. MS 7003. But in just one way, it would be an interesting experiment. Those letters that were written by Arbella Stuart would leap out at you instantly.

Amid the cramped, indecipherable hands of many of her contemporaries, often as inaccessible to the novice as if they had been Linear B, Arbella's writing stands out for its sheer size. Capitals are as tall as the top joint of a finger; and never larger, surely, than when she is writing something - like the huge S of 'my Selfe' - that proclaims her identity. Not only her neat, schooled 'presentation' script but her more frequently seen informal hand are clear as a bell to read (even to someone who habitually bins postcards on the grounds of illegibility).

No doubt it would be a mistake to deduce too much from her letters' appearance, especially at a time when the vagaries of a quill might change writing considerably. But it is hard to avoid when, at the end of an appeal to the king, her very signature is split in two, so that 'your Majesty's' follows right after the text, succeeded by half a sheet of blank space before 'most humble and faithful subject and servant' comes with her name at the bottom of the page. These were the letters Arbella wrote from prison, and the management of space was surely a device to prevent

anyone else adding a treasonable postscript, and getting her into worse trouble than she was in already.

One archivist mentioned to me that Arbella obviously cared how her letters were laid out on the page. Another, peering over my shoulder in the library at Longleat, asked: 'Did she actually send that?' - horrified, clearly. But curiously enough, both reactions make sense. Often Arbella Stuart's letters begin in an elegant 'presentation' hand, then degenerate into an angry scrawl as her feelings carry her away. Afterthoughts are squashed sideways in the margin, where a calmer spirit might have broached another sheet. Letters are addressed, on the outside, with the self-conscious formality due a great lady; but marred, on the inside, with the heavy scratchings-out of one who desperately fears being misunderstood - and marred, all too frequently, with the blots of tears.

For me, the attraction of Arbella Stuart's dramatic life almost pales beside that of her passionate and complex character. Here, of course, her letters are key. She wrote of herself with a freedom possible to no other royal woman, and rarely seen again in any woman until comparatively recently. It is her letters that now - when the Stuart dynasty is gone as surely as the Tudor - still give her a claim to posthumous fame in her own, private identity.

But there are other reasons to tell Arbella Stuart's life; reasons beyond even the perennial pleasures of telling a good story. The title of this book, of course, is something of a 'punt', a provocation. But, like every such statement, it contains a kernel of truth. In her own day, many prominent commentators took Arbella Stuart's chances of inheriting Elizabeth's throne very seriously. History has an unamiable habit of losing the losers, and so that has been forgotten today. But I see no way of understanding Arbella's fate, or her personality, unless we give her political importance the weight it had for her contemporaries - the weight it had, most significantly, for Arbella herself.

David Cannadine, in *History in our Time*, wrote of King George VI: 'At no stage in his career did he ever seriously make history. Instead, it was history that happened to him. And that is just about the hardest kind of history to write – or to live.' Perhaps, in the end, history and Arbella Stuart approached on the street and passed each other by, unrecognizing. But it would be a treat to have such an intimate portrait of any woman born four centuries ago, even were there no political dimension to her story. Yet today, despite a good deal of interest in academic circles, to the general public Arbella Stuart has lapsed back into the realms of the almost-forgotten name; one of those ghosts who haunt the fringe of memory.

My own interest in Arbella was first sparked by study of her grandmother Bess of Hardwick, and of Bess's relations with the two queens, Elizabeth I of England and Mary of Scotland. I saw in my mind a curious pattern, like an irregular diamond, its four corners bearing each a miniature of the four women whose destinies were intertwined, two of the Tudor 'type' and two of the Stuart: Bess and Elizabeth, Arbella and Mary. Bess left the great house of Hardwick as her stone memorial. Elizabeth Tudor and Mary Stuart are the stuff of legend, offering an emotive alternative – the charismatic, or the romantic? – to every amateur of history. (My own allegiance was always to the Tudor model. I never heard the Stuart siren song; and to find myself having written the biography of a Stuart still fills me with a kind of incredulity.) But Arbella provoked in me a nagging sense of a story missed, a road not taken; a bewilderment that she – in whose veins ran the blood of all the others – could have disappeared so completely.

In attempting to bring Arbella Stuart's life to a wider audience I have of necessity made certain practical decisions, like modernizing spelling and punctuation to a degree. Selective source notes are given at the end of the book, but precise calendar dates are at a premium; partly



because of the endless explanations necessitated by the two different calendars in use at this time, but partly because so many of the relevant papers are in any case undated. I describe the protagonists by whichever forename, surname or indeed nickname distinguishes them most clearly. These were difficult times for a biographer, with the same names recurring endlessly through a family tree, so that 'William Cavendish' could describe Arbella's grandfather; her uncle; or two of the cousins with whom she had most to do. (It seems a particularly malign disposition on the part of Providence that three of the noblemen unrelated to Arbella who were most instrumental in her career should be the earl of Northampton, the earl of Northumberland and the earl of Nottingham, two of whom share the surname Howard and two the forename Henry.) Courtiers of the Jacobean years changed titles with promiscuous frequency - but Robert Cecil (who in the space of a mere fifteen became successively Sir Robert Cecil, Baron Cecil, Viscount Cranborne and the earl of Salisbury) remains Robert Cecil throughout the story; just as Gilbert and Mary Talbot remain Gilbert and Mary Talbot even after they followed their parents as earl and countess of Shrewsbury. Again in the interests of simplicity and readability, I have also kept capitalization of titles to the absolute minimum. Thus I refer to 'King James' but 'the king' and 'the king of Scotland'; to the 'earl of Essex'; and to the 'privy council'. In a narrative so closely concerned with the affairs of the titled and the institutions of state, to do otherwise can produce a bewildering array of capitals that after a short time becomes exhausting to the eye.

There are many people I want to thank for their help with this book. First Margaret Gaskin, who gave me not only huge amounts of her time and skill, but also her knowledge of the period - and her collection of books on the sixteenth century. Alison Weir, for her unfailing kindness and support

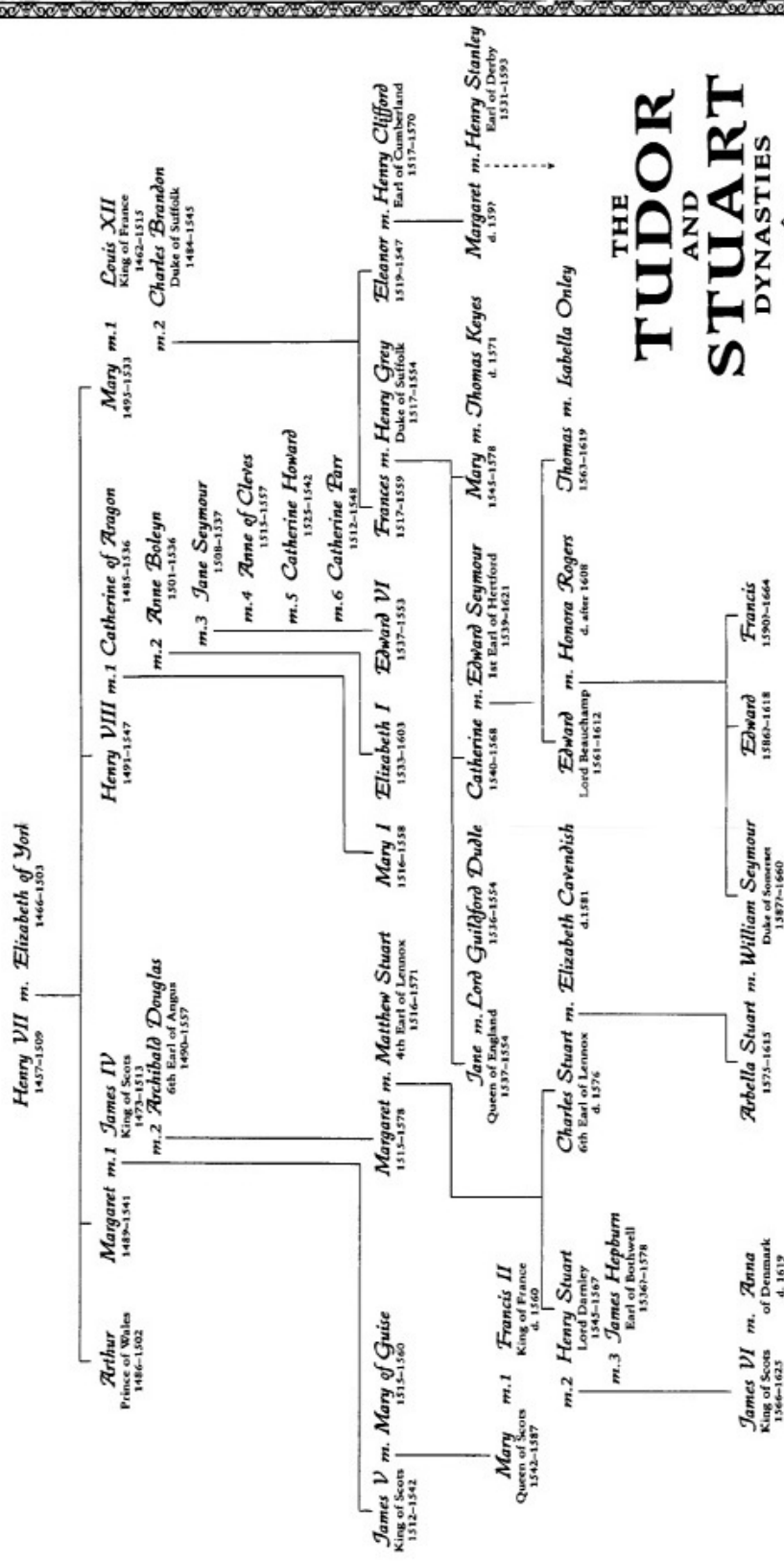
to a novice in the field; my commissioning editor Selina Walker for equally unfailing patience; Araminta Whitley and Celia Hayley at Lucas Alexander Whitley for their continuing belief in the project, and Gillian Somerscales for copy-editing so sensitively. Carole Myer, Leonie Flynn and Daniel Hahn for their practical help and constructive comments, and Peter Bradshaw for the title. A handful of experts have given of their time and knowledge: Pauline Croft, Alan Cromartie, James Daybell, Kenneth Fincham, with Jeffrey Boss and Ralph Houlbrooke, Heather Wolfe at the Folger Shakespeare Library, Kate Harris and Robin Harcourt Williams. Anna Keay and Jeremy Ashbee at the Tower of London steered me towards some important conclusions; James Daybell and Sara Jayne Steen allowed me to see their papers on, respectively, Bess of Hardwick's information networks and the political interests of the Cavendish-Talbot women. Their generosity is their own; any mistakes I may have made in interpreting their suggestions are of course all mine. When it comes to interpretation, I owe especial thanks to Duncan Harrington for his help in transcribing those texts which - unlike Arbella's own! - did prove quite beyond me.

The support of family and friends - like my husband Derek Malcolm, Richard West, Jane Eastoe and Carol Jardine, like Philip and Jill Janaway - tends to be taken for granted. But I have also met with kindness from very many strangers: from John Entwhistle and Kate Wheeldon at Hardwick Hall, who understandingly took me behind the scenes to see Arbella's own room; to the chance-met lady in Great Bedwyn church who lent a total unknown the records of the local history society. Thanks for permission to use quotations from Arbella's letters are due to the British Library; to the Marquess of Bath, Longleat House, Wiltshire, for use of quotations from the Talbot Papers; and to the Marquess of Salisbury, Hatfield House, Hertfordshire, for quotations from the Cecil papers.

The source notes show what I owe to Arbella's other biographers - but that hardly seems adequate to acknowledge one particular debt. In 1994 Sara Jayne Steen's edition of the letters of Arbella Stuart was published by Oxford University Press. Her insight, her commentary, her interpretation represent a huge gift bestowed upon anyone else who approaches Arbella's story.

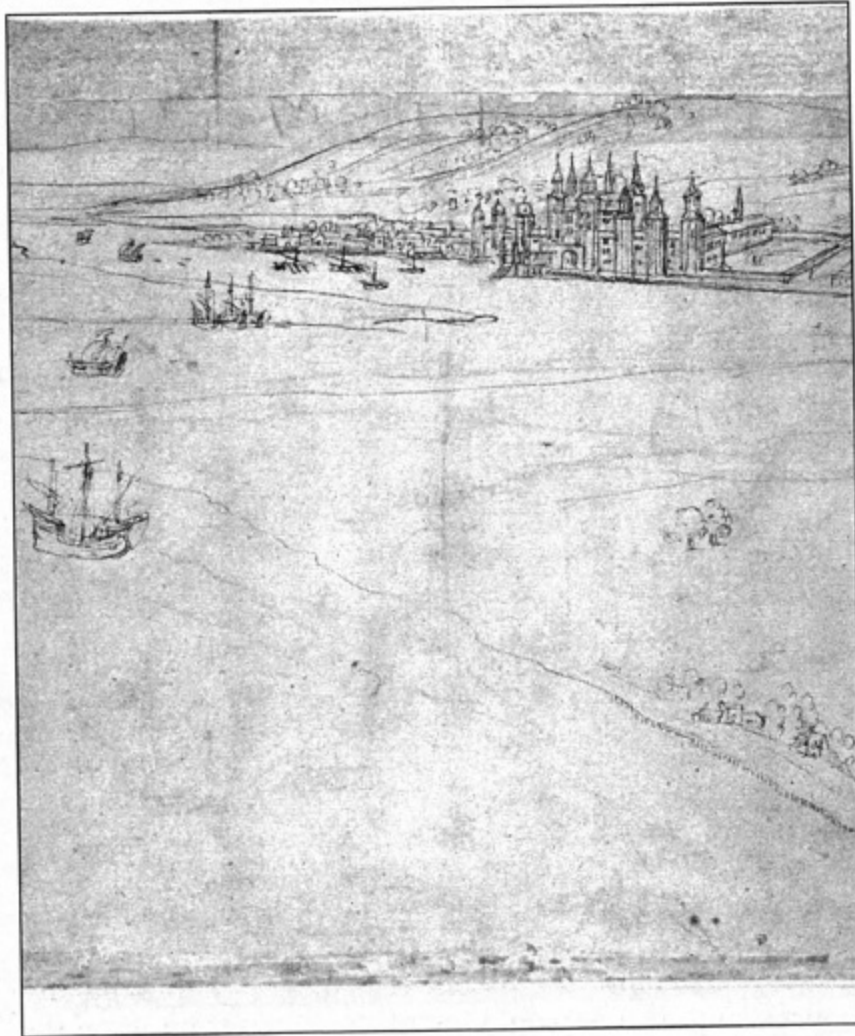
To all these, and more - I only hope the book is worthy.

S.G.



# THE TUDOR AND STUART DYNASTIES





Greenwich Palace from the north bank of the Thames, 1544

## *Prologue*



Even in the height of summer, there is always a breeze off the Thames - and this was still early in the season. When the small party put out onto the river from Blackwall at eight o'clock in the evening, the sun had already set. The tension, and the cold salty air off the water, each brought its own chill.

It was more than eight long hours' rowing from Blackwall to the ship that lay waiting by the open sea. Long enough for the clunk and scrape of the oars in the rowlocks, the slap and suck each time the blades sliced through the tiny waves, to become a torment of monotony. Long enough to suspect that every light and every craft threatened pursuit, every curious question from the watermen betokened a government spy.

Behind them to the west lay the swamps of the Isle of Dogs, and beyond that, the City. Somewhere in the dark down to the south lay Greenwich Palace, where king and court would be sleeping. One of the little group upon the water should by rights have been there among them, lapped in the comfort and homage due to royalty. But her goal lay elsewhere.

At least she and her followers had already accomplished the first leg of their illicit journey. On the afternoon of Monday, 3 June 1611, at around three o'clock, a party of three had ridden out of a 'sorry inn' near the village of East Barnet, towards the Great North Road. The ostler who had held their stirrups later recalled that one young rider, as he swung his leg over the saddle, seemed 'very sick and faint'.

'The gentleman would hardly hold out to London,' the ostler remarked, none too perceptively. For, beneath the male attire, the rider was no gentleman, but the Lady Arbella Stuart, kinswoman to King James I. She would have to 'hold out': her aim was to flee the country. A leading contender for the English throne and throughout her life the focus of plot and intrigue, Arbella had recently dared to wed - secretly, and without the permission of her royal cousin. It was an act that, in one so close to the throne, was accounted virtual treason, especially since her choice of husband seemed more than suggestive to the authorities.

At the age of thirty-five, Arbella had fallen in love with a man twelve years her junior: William Seymour, who, like Arbella herself, had a prominent place in the English succession. The news of their marriage had, a twelve-month before, sent the king into a frenzy. Since then, they had been kept apart - William held under lock and key in the Tower of London, Arbella under a kind of house arrest. Now, a double escape had been arranged, and this disguised ride was Arbella's first stage in her plan to start a new life abroad with a young man whom she loved sincerely.

'We may by God's grace<sup>1</sup> be happier than we look for in being suffered to enjoy ourselves with his Majesty's favour,' Arbella had written to William from her imprisonment, 'but if we be not able to, I for my part shall think myself a pattern of misfortune in enjoying so great a blessing as you so little a while.' No separation but death, she continued, 'deprives me of the comfort of you, for wherever you be, or in what state so ever you are, it sufficeth me you are mine ... Be well,' she ends her letter, 'and I shall account myself happy in being your faithful loving wife.' Perhaps James need not have been so quick to suspect a coup. Love had come late to Arbella, and from an unlikely source - but this hardly sounds like a match born of mere political expediency.

Arbella had been appalled when word came to her custodian in London that, for even greater security, she was to be taken north to Durham - 'clean out of this world', as she wrote despairingly. She had written to the lord chief justice of England, claiming the right of *habeas corpus*, and demanding 'such benefit of justice as the laws of this realm afford to all others'. Arbella, with brains and education, was never one to give up easily - but it was no use. The great right enshrined in the Magna Carta was denied her by her very royalty. Next, she besieged with letters all those who might intercede for her with James. 'Sir, though you be almost a stranger to me ...' began one missive, desperately. After hopes failed her one by one, she resorted to simple stubbornness. When the time came to set out for Durham, she refused to leave her bed, and the king's men had to carry her into the street, mattress and all.

But the journey north gave her an opportunity. Barely ten miles outside the city, in Barnet, she fell ill and the party had to halt. King James suspected that she was faking. But her physician Dr Moundford declared that, while she might yet be 'cherished to health', she could not undertake long travel. Unable, so it was said, to walk the length of the room unaided, she was not closely guarded. She had, moreover, lulled the vigilance of her captors with 'a fair show of conformity'. She had then deceived her female attendant - Mrs Adams, a minister's wife - with the tale that she was going to the Tower, to bid her husband goodbye in 'a private visit'. The unsuspecting woman 'did duly attend her return at the time appointed', recounted one contemporary. But there was never to be any return. On that June morning Arbella pulled a pair of 'great French-fashioned hose' over her petticoats, feeling for the first time the stiff unaccustomed padding of fabric between her thighs. She donned 'a man's doublet, a manlike peruke with long locks over her hair, black cloak, russet



boots and a rapier' - and, with her gentleman servant William Markham, simply walked away.

Even the mile and a half's trudge to the inn where the horses and her trusted steward Crompton waited must have tried Arbella in her weakened state, unused to exercise for some weeks; and to ride her 'good gelding' astride, in masculine fashion, was an awkward new experience. 'Yet the stirring of the horse brought blood enough into her face,' as the courtier Sir John More, in the long account he wrote to a friend, reported vividly. South and east they rode, through the suffocatingly lush greenery of early June ... until, at six o'clock in the evening, the trio clattered into Blackwall on the River Thames, fourteen miles away.

In a life that often followed the pattern of a tragedy, this dashing ride seems like a scene from an altogether more rumbustious style of drama. Arbella, normally studious and easily distressed, could behave with courage and vigour on occasion, and all her adult life she fought against the unjust exercise of authority. 'I must shape my own coat according to my cloth,' she once wrote defiantly, 'but it shall not be after the fashion of this world but fit for me.'

At a tavern in Blackwall more of her servants were waiting, with baggage and a change of clothes. But there was no sign of William, whose carefully arranged escape from the Tower should by this time have brought him here in safety. For an hour and a half - as one of the watermen later told it - the group lingered, fearfully. At half-past seven Arbella's companions urged that night was falling, the tide would soon turn, and they must be away. They were to be rowed downriver to where a French captain called Corvé would wait until nightfall, equipped with a password by which to know their party.

Arbella insisted on giving William yet another half-hour's grace before she would leave Blackwall. She had no means of knowing what had happened to him - delay, capture,

even a change of heart. The phrase 'time and tide wait for no man' can never have made itself felt more agonizingly.

Eight o'clock on a moonless night, and still no sign of William. They had to go now, or wait until morning. Leaving a pair of servants behind to direct William on after them, two boats put out onto the water, the one rowed by 'a good pair of oars' for Arbella and her companions, and the other for the luggage that had been smuggled out of William's lodgings. They slipped past Woolwich, through deserted marshland and down the flat featureless banks of the Thames estuary. At Gravesend the tired boatmen, wearied with dodging shoals and obstructions, refused to row further in the dark and had to be persuaded on with a double fare. Even then they insisted upon stopping for a drink at Tilbury, while the fugitives waited miserably in the boats.

As the oarsmen steered blindly in the dark, the river widened until the further shore would have been almost out of sight even on the brightest day. They were navigating a path through a maze of creeks and inlets, with the great beds of eelgrass blurring river and land, and sticky mudbanks to trap the unwary. Trying to find one ship among such a watery wilderness must have seemed like seeking a needle in the hay.

Dawn, heralded by the cries of the estuary birds, was breaking as they approached the tiny port of Leigh around four o'clock on Tuesday morning. But the light was a potential danger, too. Soon men would be stirring in the shipyard. (Vessels - the *Mayflower* among them - would soon regularly be plying the New World route.) Corvé's ship should lie a few miles further on; but would he still be waiting there?

Seeing a brig close at hand, they hailed the master, John Bright, and asked him to take them to Calais. Bright<sup>2</sup> refused - but the curious incident stuck in his memory. Later, he described the five passengers in vivid detail.

Among the three men, he noticed one for his long flaxen beard, and the steward Crompton for the urgency with which he pressed on Bright a large sum of money. There were two women, he said. One, 'bare faced, in a black riding safeguard with a black hat', he took to be the notorious thief and cross-dresser Moll Cutpurse, already the Roaring Girl of stage fame, 'and thought that if it were she, she had made some fault and was desirous of escape'. It was rather a fantastical guess on the part of Bright, but still not as dramatic as the real story.

The other woman, Bright reported, 'sat close covered with a black veil or hood over her face or head. He could not see her - only that under her mantle she had a white attire and that, on pulling off her glove, a marvellous white hand was revealed.' Forty years before, it was the whiteness of a hand that had betrayed Arbella's aunt, the queen of Scots, in one of her vain attempts to escape across Loch Leven.

But Arbella herself was not caught yet. Eight miles beyond Leigh, she finally reached Corvé's barque, hung with the pre-arranged flag, in safety. Arbella begged for another delay but, with a contrary wind blowing over high seas, the 'importunity of the followers' convinced her they had to get away. In fact, the tides held them for another two hours before, through the advance whisper of a rising storm, they weighed anchor and set sail for Calais.

Behind them in England - though Arbella's party had no means of knowing it - William had indeed escaped the Tower. He was even now on the water, not far away. But the alarm had been raised soon after his departure. The king had been alerted and a proclamation issued against the fleeing couple for their 'divers great and heinous offences'. Letters were dispatched to ambassadors abroad, 'describing their offence in black colours, and pressing their sending back without delay'.

Everyone connected with the pair was brought in for questioning:<sup>3</sup> Dr Moundford; the gullible Mrs Adams; even the man who had made Arbella's wig was urgently sought. The fugitives' route was easily traced - thanks, in part, to the observant John Bright - from Blackwall to Leigh. Every vessel in the port was searched, every house in Leigh. In London, the earl of Nottingham, the lord high admiral, reassured James that, the wind being against them, the party could hardly have reached Margate. But nothing could abate the king's panic and fury. The messengers who were sent scurrying to order the pursuit had 'Haste, haste! Post haste! Haste for life. Life' written on their dispatches, with the figure of a gallows ominously scrawled alongside. The admiral of the fleet<sup>4</sup>, Admiral Monson, hastily flung after Arbella every vessel he could raise in a hurry - one for the Flanders coast, one towards Calais. He even ordered an oyster boat, loaded with six men and shot, to set out while the bigger ships were still getting under way, and himself put to sea in a light fishing craft to watch the action from as close as may be.

Nottingham, the experienced hero of the Armada, had been right about the winds; but pursuers and pursued alike, knowing that each hour mattered, had to battle on over the choppy sea. Most of Arbella's life had been lived far inland. As the brisk, short waves of the estuary waters softened into the deeper swell of the open sea, perhaps the wide expanse around her convinced her that she really had got clean away. The little barque bucked its way across the Channel to within sight of Calais; but there again she insisted on waiting. This time, the pause was fatal.

Griffen Cockett<sup>5</sup>, captain of the English pinnace *Adventure*, sent from the Downs, was not 'half channel over' when he first saw a sail ahead. 'Under the South Sundhead we saw a small sail, which we chased,' he reported afterwards to Monson. It was indeed Arbella's vessel, which lay 'lingering for Mr Seymour'. But the winds

would not let the *Adventure* overtake its quarry; so the resourceful Cockett packed his men, armed 'with shot and pikes', into a smaller boat, and it must have been this that Arbella's party saw being rowed towards them over the sea.

It cannot have been, on the face of it, a very dramatic sight. But it was definitive enough, in its way. Corvé threw out all his sail and tried to make a run for it, but again the winds were against Arbella's party, and the French barque hardly moved. The *Adventure's* boarding party opened fire. Corvé bravely endured several volleys. ('Thirteen shots straight into his vessel' was how Sir John More, safe at home in London, heard the story later. Perhaps the small sea battle had been turned into something more spectacular along the way.) It was against the tinny rattle of musketry that Arbella at last came forward and surrendered herself, still defiant: 'not so sorry for her own restraint as she should be glad if Mr Seymour might escape,' wrote Sir John, not unadmiringly.

Resistance was at an end. Corvé stood to and struck his flag. The party from the *Adventure* had to commandeer the larger French barque to take the whole party, prisoners and captors, back to Sheppey. Monson sent for 'his Majesty's directions how to dispose of my lady, for that I am unwilling she should go ashore until I have further authority'. But in the meantime, he said gallantly, 'she shall not want anything the shore can afford, or any other honourable usage.' It was the last time she was to be treated so courteously.

# I



1574-1587

***'So good a child'***

***'Your sweet jewel is so good a child as can be  
this day.'***

Elizabeth Wingfield to her half-sister Bess of Hardwick

## *'The hasty marriage'*



TODAY, RUFFORD ABBEY is an evocative ruin, incongruously set in a neat country park run by the local authority. The bulldozers that moved in during the 1950s seem to have sliced cleanly through the huge Nottinghamshire house, exposing the strata of the centuries: clear as the layers of rock in a geologist's sample, and just as illustrative of history.

Half buried in the ground are the remains of the twelfth-century Cistercian abbey, where birds now fly straight through the glassless windows of the cellarium. Above them gawp the gigantic windows - ruined in their turn - of the Tudor mansion built by the noble Talbot family, after the Cistercians were turned out in the dissolution of the monasteries. The hound dogs of the Talbot crest still prance above the stable doorway. The formal grounds, and yet more brickwork, were laid out in time for the royal house parties of Rufford's second, Edwardian, heyday: the epoch which led D. H. Lawrence to borrow it for 'Wragby Hall', oppressive home to his Lady Chatterley. Finally - after the Second World War, after the county council took over - there were added the railings and notices, the disabled access ramps, of the late twentieth century.

Rufford has everything, including a ghost. Several of them, actually, including a clammy baby, with a penchant for nestling up to lady guests, and a huge Black Monk - blame him for the man buried in a nearby churchyard, who 'died after seeing the Rufford ghost', as the parish register

solemnly records. There is also a White Lady, flitting through the trees and weeping in classic style. This, so the guide books say, is Arbella.

But there seems no particular reason why Arbella Stuart's spirit, however restless, should choose Rufford for her return. Surely Hardwick Hall - or the Tower of London - would be more likely? On the other hand, Rufford Abbey was where it all began. This, almost forty years before that wild June ride to the river, was where Arbella Stuart's parents met and married. Another 'hasty marriage', another source of controversy. But no-one will ever be sure whether the brief drama enacted at Rufford in November 1574 was a romance or a political story.

Rufford lies a mere twenty-odd miles from Sheffield Castle and Chatsworth - the principal homes Arbella's grandmother (Bess 'of Hardwick', as she is usually known) shared with her fourth husband, George Talbot, the sixth earl of Shrewsbury. It lies, too, hard by the Great North Road along which the widowed countess of Lennox, with Charles Stuart, her only surviving son, set out from London to visit their Yorkshire estates that autumn. On the way north they stopped at the house of an acquaintance at Huntingdon, and Bess, who was visiting Rufford, made the comparatively easy trip down to join them. No surprises there, surely. Company fresh from the court was always welcome - and there had, after all, been some talk of marriage between Bess's daughter Elizabeth and 'young Bertie', son of the Huntingdon acquaintance. No surprise at all that Bess should invite the Lennox party to pause again at Rufford, and make another break in the wearisome winter journey.

So far, so likely. But Bess also happened - happened? - to have brought Elizabeth, her only unmarried daughter, with her to Rufford. And Lady Lennox no sooner arrived at the Talbot house than she found herself so fatigued by travel as to keep to her rooms for several days with Bess in



close attendance, thus leaving the young people to each other's company. It would have been easy for them to lose themselves in Rufford - especially if no-one were trying to find them. The house was 'a confused labyrinth, underneath all vaults, above entries, closets, oratories ... I was never so puzzled in my life,' reported a neighbour, Sir John Holles, the then sheriff of Nottingham, disgustedly.

Did Bess have an ulterior motive in issuing her invitation? Did Lady Lennox have an ulterior motive in accepting? Elizabeth Cavendish (Bess's daughter by her second marriage) was twenty years old to Charles Stuart's nineteen. Perhaps the young people, thrown thus together, did start to fall in love. Whatever the feelings of the two principals, Bess had not got where she had by failing to seize an offered opportunity, and within days the wedding ceremony was performed at Rufford, with a speed that reflected the need for secrecy.

Young love was certainly the version of events their families offered to the authorities in London, when news of the sudden marriage was broken at court. But only a few vulnerable lives stood between Charles Stuart and the English, as well as the Scottish, throne. The unlicensed marriage of a possible royal heir was something like treachery; and each of those two formidable dames, the Ladies Lennox and Shrewsbury, had a past history that made a plot seem likely. When news of the match reached court, the queen and the privy council, her closest advisers, were unconvinced, and furious. A wave of arrests, accompanied by threats of the Tower and of torture, surrounded Arbella Stuart's conception.

Trouble was in her very bloodlines; and it dwelt with one blood relative particularly. The real concern over the events played out at Rufford Abbey was the suspicion that they were just one move in a deep-laid plot involving that perennial bugbear of Elizabeth's reign, the imprisoned Scots Queen Mary. Not only had Charles Stuart's elder

brother been that Lord Darnley who had married Mary, but now the deposed queen was being held in English custody, just a few miles away from Rufford, by no other than Bess's husband, the earl of Shrewsbury.

Mary's arrival in England in the spring of 1568 had signalled a fresh series of shocks to the realm's stability - a stability never easily preserved by a small Protestant land in a continent of covetous Catholic superpowers. In 1574 it was only three years since the queen of Scots had plotted Elizabeth's murder; two since the duke of Norfolk had gone to the block for his part in that conspiracy. Just two years ago, in 1572, the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre in Paris had seen thousands of Protestants slaughtered for their religion; now a new wave of Catholic missionary priests had begun to infiltrate England from the Jesuit seminaries. One year ago Queen Elizabeth had turned forty, and the chances of her marrying and bearing a child were beginning to look scant. The uncertainty about England's future, and in particular the danger of a Catholic challenge, explain why events at Rufford were taken so seriously at court.

From the isolation of the midlands, exculpatory letters were galloped south. Lord Shrewsbury wrote to the queen's chief minister Lord Burghley (William Cecil) that the young people 'hath so tied themselves upon [their] own liking as they can not part. The young man is so far in love as belike he is sick without her.' Shrewsbury - unlikely to have been included in any scheme of Bess's devising - was at a disadvantage here. Relaying his tale of young love to Burghley, he appended, dismally, 'as my wife tells me'. He wrote to Queen Elizabeth herself that the marriage:

was dealt in suddenly<sup>6</sup>, and without my knowledge ... my wife, finding herself disappointed of young Bertie ... and that the other young gentleman was inclined to love with a few days' acquaintance, did her best to further her daughter to this match, without having therein any other intent or respect than with reverent duty towards your Majesty she ought.



Mary Stuart, queen of Scotland, and Henry Stuart, Lord Darnley, Charles Stuart's brother and Arbella's uncle

Lady Lennox wrote in a similar vein to Burghley: 'Now my Lord<sup>2</sup>, for the hasty marriage of my son after that he had intangled himself so that he could have no other ...' But as she wrote she was already on the way back to London, delayed only by her 'overlaboured mules'. She had been ordered south, with her son and new daughter-in-law, while the authorities conducted an inquiry into the affair.

She knew as well as anybody what had frightened Queen Elizabeth so severely. It was, as Lord Shrewsbury put it trenchantly, 'not the marriage matter ... that makes this great ado. It is a greater matter.' But he firmly dismissed the possibility of any 'liking or insinuation' with Queen Mary. He was sticking to his story of young love. He added a significant comment: that surely 'that benefit any subject may by law claim' should also be given to his family. All her life, Arbella's rights as an individual would come up against her royalty.

One can hardly blame the council for their suspicions. Around the proffered picture of a romantic young couple entwines a cat's cradle of strings pulled by older and more powerful people: the two queens, of England and of Scotland; and those two forceful ladies, Arbella's grandmothers. The latter were to be the dominant influences on her early life. It was certainly they - rather than Arbella's short-lived parents - who most concerned Queen Elizabeth and her advisers.

Bess of Hardwick, Arbella's maternal grandmother, was by now almost fifty. This greatest of all the Elizabethan dynasts had been born into small gentry obscurity, but the cumulative gains of four marriages had made her one of the richest women in the land. The second, to Sir William Cavendish, had produced her children. The third had helped make her wealthy. Her fourth, to the earl of Shrewsbury, put her in a position to purchase for her daughter an alliance with royalty.

Bess and her fourth husband had not long been married when Queen Elizabeth found herself in need of a custodian for the deposed queen of Scots, newly landed in England. The choice fell on Shrewsbury - loyal, incorruptible and wealthy - and it was at his country houses (Sheffield Castle, Sheffield Lodge, Chatsworth) that Mary spent the next several years. Mary and Bess struck up a kind of friendship, and though the earl assured Lord Burghley that their talk together was all of 'indifferent trifling matters', they were much in each other's company. If Bess did later scheme to see her grandchild Arbella on the throne, then perhaps her dream was born here, as she sat at her needlework in the exalted company that in her obscure girlhood would have seemed so unlikely.

Arbella's grandmother on her father's side, Margaret, Lady Lennox, came from a very different background. Like Queen Elizabeth, Lady Lennox was a granddaughter of Henry VII of England, and hers was the illustrious bloodline that made Arbella's birth a matter of such moment. The survivor of nearly sixty years of intrigue and catastrophe, Lady Lennox was a bitter and disappointed woman, one with whom life had dealt harshly. In contrast to the ever-rising Bess, Lady Lennox was facing an old age of poverty - poverty, at least, for one who never forgot that she was royalty.

She was born from the second marriage of Henry VIII's elder sister Margaret Tudor (whose first marriage to James IV of Scotland had produced the Scottish royal line). It had been a stormy match that saw the dowager queen finally hounded out of Scotland, and Margaret Lennox's youth had not been happy. As a teenager, 'Little Marget' had been taken by her uncle Henry VIII to be brought up with his daughter Mary, and there was a time (after both Mary and her half-sister Elizabeth had in turn been declared illegitimate) when Margaret, though herself a Catholic, was officially her uncle's heir. At the same time, unfortunately,

she was thrown into the Tower for an unsanctioned betrothal to Thomas Howard, a near relation to the disgraced Anne Boleyn. (This, interestingly, was the alliance which prompted parliament to pass an act imposing the death penalty for royal marriages undertaken without the monarch's approval.) Then the birth of Prince Edward released her from her perilous pre-eminence in the succession, Thomas Howard died of 'Tower fever', and Margaret was thrust into a diplomatically useful alliance with Matthew Stuart, earl of Lennox, a powerful Scottish noble with a good claim to be the next heir to the Scots crown after the infant Mary.

Lennox was 'a strong man, of personage well proportioned ... very pleasant in the sight of gentlewomen'; Margaret was 'sensible and devout'. Their arranged marriage in 1544 turned into some sort of love-match. But their life was far from easy, for Lennox's alliance with the English cause cost him his Scottish lands. The couple lived as pensioners of the English throne in Yorkshire, Margaret's fortunes rising during the reign of her fellow Catholic and old classmate Mary Tudor (who gave her precedence, in court and succession, over the Protestant princess Elizabeth) and sinking when Elizabeth came to the throne. As the likelihood of acquiring power in England diminished, the Lennoxes' eyes turned again north of the border. In 1564 Lord Lennox was allowed to return to Scotland and attempt to repossess his confiscated lands there, but Lady Lennox, remaining in England, was soon in trouble, suspected of disloyalty, and spent a second period in the Tower for her part in planning the match between her eldest son, Lord Darnley, and Mary, queen of Scots.

The Lennox or 'Darnley' Jewel<sup>8</sup> - still in the British royal collection - was made to commemorate the changing fates of Matthew and Margaret's royal claims. 'Who hopes still constantly with patience shall at last obtain victory' reads the Latin motto. A winged crown reposes amid figures of