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The Girl in the Glass Tower

Written by Elizabeth Fremantle

Published by Michael Joseph

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THE
GIRL
in the
GLASS
TOWER

Elizabeth
Freemantle

‘Terrifically entertaining’ *The Times*

The Girl in the Glass Tower

ELIZABETH FREMANTLE

MICHAEL JOSEPH

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First published 2016

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Set in 13.5/16 pt Garamond MT Std by Palimpsest Book Production Ltd, Falkirk, Stirlingshire
Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN: 978-0-718-18046-1
Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-405-92005-6

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



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PART I

‘The name of a successor is like the tolling of my own death-bell!’

Elizabeth I

Is the hammering inside my head?

Tap, tap, tap, in the soft place beneath my temple, in the matter where my thoughts live.

Something, someone tapping, wants to be heard, to escape.

It is a subtle and prolonged species of torture, this noise, reminding me of the impossibility of freedom.

I am the pane in the window overlooking the courtyard; I am cracked in two places but still manage to hold my form. Through the glass the world is distorted, divided into three parts, each with its own perspective, none of them quite true.

Tap, tap, tap.

It is the sound of my youth. For months and months they have been renovating the rooms beneath mine. I try to keep my mind on the clean smell that drifts up: whitewash and freshly sawn timber. My maid surprises me on the floor, nose pressed to a crack in the boards to breathe it in. It takes me far into the past and somewhere back there I believe I will find a way to make sense of things, of the shape of my life, the shape of me.

I am taken back to another tower, the little Stand Tower at Chatsworth; I was nine. I know that because it was the year the boy to whom I was betrothed died. He was the Earl of Leicester's son, not even out of babyhood; I never met him but there was much talk of it among the servants. They said that since Leicester, despite all his efforts, never achieved the throne by marriage to the Queen, then his son might instead, by wedding the Queen's most likely heir – that was me.

The walls inside the Stand Tower were cool to the touch

and left a powdery residue on the tip of my finger. The door was propped up to one side, waiting to be fitted. Everything was coated in a film of fine sawdust and the stone flags were scattered with pretty curls of shaved wood. I picked one up and threaded it on my finger, holding up my small hand to admire. Noticing the dirt beneath my nails, I imagined the fuss Nurse would make later, glad Grandmother was away in London on business, otherwise, never mind my grubby nails, I would not have dared to be up at the Stand Tower without permission and with only a stable lad for company.

I poked my head out from the entrance to ensure Tobias was not peeping, but he was seated on the bottom step humming tunelessly, with his back to me, as good as his word. The ponies were tearing at a tussock of grass nearby; everything was green and full of promise. Or was it? Surely it was late summer then and the land must have been parched – though perhaps there had been rain, for I feel sure I remember the soft squelch of mud underfoot.

Memories are like that cracked pane of glass with its subtle distortions. *Tap, tap, tap.*

I stepped into the shady interior and unbuckled my satchel, pulling out a crumpled pair of breeches pilfered from the laundry, giving them a shake. Little eddies of dust danced and wood shavings skittered over the floor.

I remember clearly the thrill that passed through me as I held those breeches up to my body. ‘If only you’d been a boy.’ Grandmother’s refrain circled about my head. I stepped into them, tugging them over my shoes, not caring about the mud that smeared up my white stockings. Bunching my layers of skirt in one hand, I tied the breeches’ tapes as best I could. They were much too big, puffing out wide and cuffed above the knee.

The idea had come to me from a troupe of players that had visited Chatsworth in the spring. I was allowed to stay up

that night and watch them perform a comedy with a girl disguised as a boy – though truly it was a boy actor pretending to be a girl disguised as a boy – which had us all, even Grandmother, laughing until our cheeks ached. I had thought a good deal about it, tried to imagine what it might be like to be a boy, to go about unencumbered by skirts, to ride astride, to be at the heart of things instead of on the edges, to be listened to even when you spoke nonsense, like my baby boy cousin whose infant burlblings were a source of wonder for Aunt Mary and Uncle Gilbert.

I fumbled with the fastening of my skirt; the knot was too tight, tied double and wouldn't undo. I was tempted to ask Tobias for help but didn't dare; it was enough already, persuading him to go up there with me; though he didn't seem to mind that it might have caused him misfortune if we were caught. Exasperated with the stubborn knot, I yanked hard; something gave, with a crack of broken threads, and the skirt, petticoats, bum-roll and all, fell to a heap at my feet.

I began to experiment with my newfound liberty, striding back and forth, one hand on my hip as if perched at the hilt of a sword, drawing it, lunging forward with a jabbing motion towards an imagined adversary. Girding myself then, I sidled out to stand at the top of the steps. Tobias was busy scraping mud off his boots with a penknife. I hollered, a kind of battle cry, as much as a nine-year-old girl can make such a sound, and took the steps two at a time, making a final running leap to land before him.

He jumped up in shock and then, seeing me, clapped a hand over his mouth. Only then was I aware of the sight I must have been, my boned satin bodice atop the voluminous creased breeches and my filthy stockings all wrinkled about my ankles.

'Highness!' was all he could manage.

'Don't call me that. Just for today can you not pretend I

am any old girl playing dress-up?’ I secretly wanted to tell him to call me Charles, to make-believe just for an hour that I was a boy and named after the father who was an empty space in my memory.

He looked aghast, as if I had asked him to denounce God. ‘What should I call you, then?’

‘Call me whatever you want, anything but *that*.’

He opened his mouth to speak but said nothing.

Not knowing what to do with the awkwardness, I sprang at him, thrusting with my imaginary sword. ‘*En garde!*’

He laughed then, drawing his own pretend blade from its pretend scabbard, raising it to meet my own. We danced back and forth, slashing and swiping until he saw his chance and pounced forward. ‘*Touché!*’

I collapsed to the ground, clutching my chest with a terrible howl.

He was still laughing, quite red-faced with it, as I prepared to mount my pony. Dancer tossed his head, rattling his bridle, sensing my excitement.

I whispered into the hollow of his ear, ‘Just you wait, boy, together we’re going to fly,’ then realized with a thud of disappointment that of course he wore a woman’s saddle. There would be no flying, just the usual sedate lumbering canter. I began to unravel, as if a thread had been pulled somewhere inside me, and didn’t know what to do so I did nothing, just stood looking into the valley, fighting my distress.

I had a clear view of Chatsworth. I could see Uncle Henry in the mews with the head falconer, I recognized his bright blue cape. I liked Uncle Henry. He said he had ‘magic hands’ and could make things disappear. When he got his cards out and began flicking and flipping them, people were drawn to wager he couldn’t, but he could; I had seen it with my very own eyes.

Someone was shaking a red Turkey carpet from one of the

windows like a flag and threads of pale smoke rose from the chimneys in the forbidden wing where the Queen of Scotland was housed. Her convoy had arrived from Wingfield a few days before, under heavy guard, and the Chatsworth staff were all grumbling about the extra work. I could see the day-watch in the courtyard below her apartments and a mounted pair, with muskets slung over their shoulders, patrolling the east entrance.

All at once I knew what to do; I unbuckled Dancer's girth strap, lifting that wrong-shaped saddle off, propping it on the steps.

'Are you sure?' Tobias had the same look of concern he'd worn when I'd asked him to accompany me to the tower. 'What if some harm should befall you? Riding bareback is –'

'You may be four years my senior, Master Toby, but I am at least as good a rider as you and you know it.' It was true; I was a natural in the saddle, everyone said it. 'Besides –' I was about to remind him that he was obliged to obey me but stopped myself, for I had stepped into a place where the normal rules didn't apply.

I led Dancer to the steps and swung my leg over his round, piebald rump, marvelling once again at the freedom the breeches offered. 'Good boy.' I leaned forward, resting my cheek against his neck, whispering, 'You'll fly like Pegasus.'

Once out of the copse and on to open land we picked up our speed, galloping faster and faster, hooves thundering, the wind in my face, hair streaming in my wake. Pleasure simmered in me; it was as I had imagined, exactly: being a comet shooting over the sky, an arrow fired from a bow, a bird soaring, a lead bullet whistling. In that moment I was untouchable; I wanted to wrap the feeling in my handkerchief and keep it in my pocket for ever. The sensation returns to me across the years – the illusion of freedom is so complete I feel as incorporeal as a current of air that could blow through the crack in the window.

We slowed eventually to a walk as we reached the cover of trees. Tobias, who had been following on his own horse in anxious pursuit, drew alongside me, saying, 'Why did you want to do this?'

'I don't know . . . to know what it would be like.' I couldn't find adequate words to describe the sensation of joy, of liberty, of vigour, but he seemed satisfied. I realize now, after all this time, the thing I always sought above everything, above the crown, above love or matrimony, was freedom.

'You won't tell anyone?' I said, but didn't really need to ask, for Tobias had already pledged his silence and he was good at keeping secrets; he had kept secrets for me before. He'd said nothing when he'd found me once on the roof leads after dark. I had gone up there to look at the moon, or so I told him, but truly I had gone there out of curiosity and too much curiosity was not supposed to be a good thing in a girl, or so Grandmother liked to remind me. I hadn't thought to ask Tobias what *he* was doing up there, when he belonged in the stables. Nurse said I was a secretive child. Which I took to mean that Nurse thought me dishonest, but there is a difference between keeping secrets and telling lies.

'You have my word,' he assured me.

'Let's not go back just yet.' We were already at the Stand Tower, dismounting. I wanted to eke out that moment of stolen freedom before having to truss myself back into my dress and return to the house where my tutor awaited with his book of Latin verbs. 'Let's go up!'

The staircase was tightly spiralled and steep and unlit. I mounted cautiously with one hand on the wall, which was cool and damp as pastry. I imagined I was a knight rescuing a maiden. Round and round the stairs went, until we arrived at a chamber flooded with light from four large curved windows. There was a rotten stench from the corner.

It was an ordinary, small, brown speckled bird, lying belly up, its twig claws clutched into tiny fists.

‘Nightingale,’ said Tobias. He picked it up firmly as if shaking someone’s hand. ‘Must have flown in through an open window and not found its way out again.’

I couldn’t get the thought of that small bird out of my head, flapping wildly, bead eyes swivelling, flying terrified at the panes, mistaking the glass for sky and eventually losing all hope. *Tap, tap, tap.*

Tobias opened the window and threw the little carcass out. For some reason I had expected it to float down like a feather but it dropped hard, as if its bones were filled with lead. We stood for a while in silence.

‘You been up here before?’ he asked.

‘Yes.’ I could see the guards searching a delivery cart in the Chatsworth courtyard. ‘Before this tower was built. With my mother.’ Remembering Mother felt as if someone had tied a rope about my heart with a slipknot. ‘She’s dead.’

Tobias lowered his head and, after a silence, pointed towards the house. ‘She’s your aunt on your father’s side, isn’t she?’

I didn’t understand immediately that he was talking of the Queen of Scots until he added, ‘It’s a terrible thing that she should be shut away for all those years and her own son sitting on *her* throne.’

It was not clear to me how the Queen of Scots’ situation had come to pass; I only knew what Grandmother had told me, with lips pursed in undisguised disapproval: ‘She was foolish in love and paid insufficient heed to good advice. Given half a chance she’d push our queen off her throne and take it for herself.’

What I did know was that she had been in my step-grandfather’s custody, at one or other of his houses, for a very long time. She used to have greater freedom and walk in the

gardens, even ride out and hunt occasionally under guard. But things had changed and she was now kept under close watch with no visitors and had to take her air on the roof leads. Those were the orders of Queen Elizabeth.

‘She’d like to see you’ – Tobias was whispering, despite the fact that there was no one to hear – ‘I promised I would bring you to her.’

‘But it is forbidden . . .’ I stopped. Was this why he had so readily agreed to accompany me up to the Stand Tower; he wanted a favour in return? ‘Do you serve her? I thought you served my grandmother.’

‘In a manner of speaking.’

I didn’t question him further, for it was clear from his crossed arms and floorward gaze that he wouldn’t say more. Suddenly I felt very young, too young to understand things, but I could not deny my desire to see the Scots Queen, and what greater temptation is there than that which is forbidden?

As I slunk across the great high chamber, a sound startled me, sending my heart thudding as if it had a mind to burst right out of my chest, but it was only a log falling in the fire. Once in the long gallery I moved faster, keeping close to the wall. I stopped, holding my breath as I heard the unmistakable slap of slippered feet. Ducking behind a tapestry, I waited as the steps moved past, their rhythmic *pat, pat* punctuating another sound, a *clickety-click* that conjured in my mind the chink of Grandmother’s fat pearls that she wore in four heavy strands to below her waist. But no, Grandmother was in London. All sorts of imagined scenarios assaulted my thoughts: a change of plan, a lost wheel on the coach, plague in the capital. Only as the sound was receding did I dare peep to see the back of one of the laundry maids with a creaking basket of linens. Relief gushed through me; but I sensed

myself drawn to the danger and the idea of having a proper secret, something real and important.

As Tobias had told me, there was only a single guard outside the forbidden apartments. I suppose, now I think of it, it must have all been carefully arranged, but at the time my understanding was slight. He knocked on the door with the butt of his halberd; three sharp knocks in quick succession, a pause, and then two slow ones. It opened and a hand reached out, beckoning me into the room. The latch clicked shut behind me.

The chamber was dimly lit and there was a general rustling as the women, who were scattered about, put their embroidery frames and books to one side and dropped to the floor, heads bowed. I felt a laugh pressing at my throat. I was used to the servants' deference but these were well-born ladies and I a mere child. Unsure of the correct way to behave, I stood gawping at them for what seemed an age, wondering if I was supposed to give some command, a gesture, to indicate that they were free to go about their business. Then by some invisible cue they all rose and returned to their needlework or whatever it was I'd interrupted.

I cast my eyes around for the Queen, who was said to be a great beauty; one or two of those women were comely enough but I reasoned that a queen got on her knees for no one, save God. A pebble of disappointment dropped into me. I had expected to find her glorious, seated beneath a canopy of state, festooned in jewels and haloed in gold light, like in the cobwebby paintings of the saints that were stored away in the cupboard at the back of the chapel. Grandmother had scolded me for 'putting my nose where it didn't belong' when I'd asked her what they were doing there. I was puzzled by those paintings, for I knew it was wrong to revere the saints and supposed that must have been the reason they were gathering dust in the dark.

There was a movement in the corner and a woman I hadn't noticed heaved herself up from a prayer stand, stepping into view. She was tall as a man and stout with it. 'Ah,' she said, opening her arms wide. 'Let me look at you; come, my eyesight is not what it was.' Her voice was odd, not quite French like the dance master and not quite Scottish like the head falconer, but a mixture of the two.

I stood rooted to the spot, unsure of how to behave. This great lumpen matron dressed in black was surely not the beautiful Queen of Scotland. That pebble of disappointment seemed to swell. But then I saw something, a haughtiness in her demeanour, a spark of pride in the eyes, which made me drop in a curtsy all the way down to the floor.

'Up, up,' the Queen said. 'Come and sit with me.'

The ladies hustled round, procuring a pair of chairs, which they placed by the hearth. The Queen lowered herself into one, fitting her bulk tightly between its arms, and patted her lap with the command, 'Up, Geddon,' for a small dog to jump on to it.

'Mary, would you bring us something to drink,' she said. 'We have three Marys here: Mary Devlin,' she pointed to a woman who was filling two cups from a ewer, 'and two more there,' she waved an arm in the general direction of the embroiderers. 'And *I* am Mary, of course. There is your aunt Mary Talbot too, though we never see her these days. It's a shame. I was fond of her.'

She crossed herself, something I had only ever seen done once by one of the stable lads; the head groom had cuffed him for it. 'All named for the blessed Virgin.' She waved her arm towards the prayer stand, where a painting of the Virgin, puce-cheeked with a brilliant blue gown, dandling a plump, haloed baby, was hung. Only then did I notice a large jewelled crucifix in a corner and the rosary beads that hung from all the ladies' girdles. Everybody knew the Scottish

Queen was Catholic but, seeing those prohibited objects, things the household chaplain denounced in his sermons as the tools of heresy, reminded me of the strangeness of that other faith.

I couldn't help but think about the stories I had heard the servants whisper, of Catholics who tried to poison Queen Elizabeth, who sought to destroy all we knew to be good and right, and the priests being dragged from hiding places hardly bigger than rat holes and taken to the Tower for interrogation. My maids often sat in my bedchamber when they believed me asleep and discussed what happened there. I would spread my limbs out in the bed and try to imagine what it might be like to be stretched on the rack. I had never questioned the wickedness of Catholics, but the Scottish Queen, smiling and petting her dog, seemed as far from an enemy as a robin from a raven.

'Your parents chose a Scottish name for you; not really a name you think of for an English queen, is it? But just as well you are not a Mary too. That would be most confusing, though I would like to think you had been named for me. I suppose that would have been too much to expect, given that I am such a wicked woman.' She emitted a small, bitter laugh. 'But I am so very glad to have this chance to see you, Arbella.' She reached out and squeezed my hand tightly.

My first instinct was to snatch it back. It had been drummed into me from infancy that I, as royalty, must never be touched without permission, but I reasoned that would not apply to a queen and so left it sitting limply in hers. She smiled openly and warmly. Grandmother never really smiled, though she often told me she loved me; she said a smile made a person seem meek. I wondered about that, for the scriptures said meekness was a virtue, that the meek would inherit the earth, but Grandmother was not to be questioned.

She was strict and inflexible and capable of turning a

whole room to her attention just by clearing her throat. By contrast, the Scottish Queen's smile made me feel safe and, in some peculiar way, though that royal aunt of mine was a complete stranger and an enemy of sorts, profoundly loved.

'I am to be moved to Tutbury and it occurred to me that we might never be under the same roof again.' She sighed, sinking into her seat, like an ancient house settling. 'Tutbury is hell itself.' She crossed herself once more.

Leaning in close enough for me to smell the aniseed on her breath, she continued, 'You see, I have always thought of you as something like a daughter. My son' – her voice cracked as she said it and I was aware of all the women craning in to listen – 'I fear my son is lost to me.'

'I am sorry for that.' I meant it from the bottom of my heart, thinking of my own mother and how even death could not break our bond.

'My little James, your cousin, the King of Scotland' – her tone was momentarily hard and then softened – 'what a bonny infant he was.' She gripped my hand very hard. 'His mind has been poisoned against me.'

I didn't know how to reply, just repeated, 'I am very sorry for that.'

'Now, I *know* you have been raised in the new faith, my dear, but you are yet young. What age are you? Nine, I think. Am I right?'

I nodded.

'Fresh as a new shoot.' There was that tender smile once more. 'I want you to remember this. Whatever you have been taught to believe, the Catholic faith is the true faith; it is the only path that leads to the Kingdom of Heaven.' She placed her palms together as if in prayer. 'Despite what has befallen me, I know it is God's plan and I have faith in His wisdom. If He had meant for me to have the throne of England, then it would have been mine – I suspect He has other plans for me.'

I had never heard anyone talk of God in such a way; it was as if the Queen knew Him intimately, as if He was her own father. God for me was something intangible and frightening.

‘It is my hope that one day, my dearest child, you will see what a comfort the true faith is. Ask your Aunt Mary, Mary Talbot, she will tell you.’

‘Aunt Mary?’ My head had begun to churn with all that new information.

‘If the English throne was not my destiny then it is surely yours and when you have achieved it, I will be up there watching over you and your Catholic England.’ She had a beatific look on her face as if she had been visited by a host of angels. ‘You are my hope, Arbella.’ With that she released my hand again and took something out from beneath her gown, a small wooden box, which she opened, removing a flat elliptical object from it. ‘I want you to have this, as a reminder of our meeting.’

I took it. It was like a ring without its shank; one side was a smooth disc of translucent red stone, on its other, set into a bed of gold, was an oval of translucent milky substance bearing the impression of a lamb. I didn’t know what to say; it seemed so very precious.

‘It is an Agnus Dei,’ she told me.

‘The Lamb of God.’

‘You know your Latin. Good girl.’ There was that smile again, deep and inviting. ‘It has been blessed by His Holiness the Pope,’ she whispered, ‘and will protect you. But do *not* let anyone see it. I’m afraid these days an Agnus Dei can visit trouble on its owner.’ She sighed and the smile disappeared. ‘But earthly trouble is sometimes the price we must pay for heavenly grace.’

I wanted to ask what she meant, how could it at once protect and visit trouble; but I said nothing.

Less than three years later the Queen of Scotland was gone. I wondered if she had been executed because she no longer had the protection of her Agnus Dei.

Tap, tap, tap.

My fingers wander now to the silk purse that hangs from my girdle containing my treasures: the weighted die that Uncle Henry gave me once, to remind me things aren't always as they seem; the tiny bell from Geddon's collar; the fold of parchment containing a lock of my husband's hair; the smooth crystal drop from the glassworks at Hardwick; the scrap of paper bearing Mistress Lanyer's poem; it is about me, but a me I no longer know. Right at the bottom, beneath everything, is the Agnus Dei, blessed by the Pope. It has not protected me very well.

Tap, tap, tap.