



Historical Association
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Write your own Historical Fiction 2023

By Alice Finnie

Catherine sat stiffly in the wooden chair, watching the world unfurl outside her window. The endless downpour of rain, irritating her to the point of a headache with its constant pitter-patter, had done little to dampen the festivities outside. The torches still burnt, even in the early hours of the morning, in alcoves and niches dotted all over the courtyard, lighting the path of drunk aristocrats and misbehaving servants. Warm tea burning in her hand, she barked for another maid to come and assist the useless girl who was already unpinning her hair from its coil. After another five minutes of both girls pulling and tugging at the pins, she sent them away, her hair cascading in silvery white waves down her shoulders. An agonising silence descended upon the suite as Catherine picked up the book on her dresser, flicking through the pages. Knock. Knock.

“Come in” she called, infuriated by the disruption.

A young man, barely older than her son, looked frantically around the chamber, then sank into a deep bow. In his hands was a small scroll which he passed to Catherine, his hands trembling. She could not blame him for his nerves. She had imprisoned subjects for less. With a single nod, she dismissed him, and he scurried out, a look of relief on his face.

The hand-written note was from her son, Francis, who begged her to return to the coronation festivities. She had protested a headache soon after the ceremony had completed and had not laid eyes on her son or his new Queen since. She wanted to support him, but she yearned for the weight of a crown on her own head. She could hardly believe that she was now an old widow while young, beautiful Mary was now Queen of not one, but two of the most powerful nations in Europe.

Catherine stood with the scroll in her hand, pondering what she should do. She needed to show France, to show the world that she was more than the King’s decrepit mother - she was Catherine De’Medici, Queen Mother of France. Calling for her ladies in waiting, she waited impatiently as they dabbed at her face, reapplying white lead to her cheeks to give her skin a pallid glow. After they had finished, she rushed back down the stairs to the Grand Hall of the Palais du Louvre, the glittering heart of Paris. Catherine felt the decision to hold the coronation in the largest palace in Europe sent the wrong message. She herself had been crowned in the Château de Rambouillet, the deathplace of her late husband’s father, where the proprieties surrounding the mourning period had been correctly observed. Her son’s new Queen had convinced him that they needed to make a spectacle of this event, so naturally the palace was adorned with new tapestries and wild flowers.

“Your Majesty,” a feminine voice drawled, and Catherine turned to see the Countess de Lorraine fall into a deep curtsy, “It is good to see that the true Queen of France has returned to save the festivities.”

Catherine glared at her, the gaze so harsh it could almost have cut through the wine glass she was holding. Still, the Countess continued to mutter something unsavoury about Mary, who sat atop a raised dais, a smile planted on her face as she waved to her adoring subjects.

“It truly is a tragedy that we could not teach her proper French etiquette,” the Countess continued, “but the King does seem enamoured with her, and the people adore her. The solution is, of course, to spread an unpleasant rumour. Do we know if she dabbles in witchcraft?”

Another glance from Catherine sealed the Countess’s lips; she was tired with the company of endless gossips. She needed the masses to flock to her, not this Scottish Queen sitting upon her throne. She felt her bodice cut into her back, the whalebone as sharp as a dagger, as she made her way towards the raised dais.

The surrounding aristocrats parted slightly as she slipped through the masses, watching intently as her son conversed with some of the most powerful men in the whole of France. How disappointing he appeared next to them, his thick, brown hair curling slightly under the Crown of Charlemagne that sat with pride atop his head. The whole display made him look less like a king and more like a timid schoolboy.

Catherine reached her son, curtsying slightly as she approached, before pulling him into her arms. She could feel the gaze of surrounding aristocrats on her back, however, she knew it was only jealousy. Her son was twisted around her little finger, and she could get whatever she wanted. Or she could before he fell head over heels for the Scottish Queen.

Years ago, in her youth, Catherine had dabbled in poisons, masking deadly doses of belladonna and mandrake with expensive wines. She had quickly learnt that they were unpredictable, sometimes taking weeks to dispose of her and her late husband's enemies. Catherine could not wait a couple of weeks. Besides, Mary had won over the court with her intelligence: she would easily be able to detect if drinking from her goblet was a death sentence. There was only one other option.

"How regal you look, my son." Catherine brushed the ermine of his robes, pretending to fuss over Francis. His cheeks reddened, glancing back at Mary who sat stiffly, picking at the food sat in front of her.

"Thank you, Mother," he almost pushed her away, embarrassed to be coddled in front of all his advisers, "Have you met the new Count of Toulouse?"

Catherine spent the next hour, smiling and nodding as the young man from Toulouse, no older than 25, recounted the many tales of his family estate and how he had single-handedly restored the family fortune after his father's sudden passing. The story was drearily long, so she spent a good deal of it glaring daggers at her son and his wife, who sat on the high table, whispering in hushed tones. The hall was so loud that even if they had been shouting, it would have been unlikely that she heard a thing.

Eventually, she managed to detach herself from the rambling Count, slinking into the corner of the room. Catherine knew that she could not afford to be dragged into another conversation with some clueless aristocrat. She had a job to do. Laughter echoed through the hall, singing a sweet melody for the oblivious crowds who were too drunk on fine wine to notice the Dowager Queen slip from the room. Candles illuminated the stone stairwell, painting shadows onto the walls. A couple of servants passed Catherine, each one sinking into a low bow when they realised who she was. She paid them no heed, barking at a couple of servants would do nothing to quell the anger bubbling inside her.

Marching across the courtyard, she realised how cold the night air was, a chilling gust of ice down her spine, compared to the warmth of the great hall, at the heart of the coronation festivities. She wrapped her arms around herself as if to ward off the frigid wind but hurried on quickly, not wishing to catch a chill. The carefully curated topiary exploded into unkempt wilderness as Catherine ventured further from the castle into the woods, the eerie silence hitting her like a brick wall. She had been here many times before but never at night. There was something disconcerting about the forest at this hour.

Soon a small wooden cottage came into view, smoke pouring from the chimney and settling like mist across the forest floor. Catherine had to crouch down to fit through the doorway, the knob coated in layers of dirt that stained her fingers brown. The warmth hit her almost immediately, the cold banished from the room into the depths of the forest outside. An old man sat rocking in his chair, huddled around the blazing embers as he flicked through the pages of a huge tome. She had called Nostradamus to court five years ago to read her children's horoscopes, but since her husband's death had been fascinated by his predictions.

"You are here about the young Queen, I presume."

"I am the Queen. She is but an annoyance." Catherine restrained herself from flying into a rage about her daughter-in-law.

Nostradamus peered at her, through thin metal spectacles, before hobbling over to the large bookcase that stretched the whole length of the opposite wall. "Let us see what we can do."