

A SHORT THRILLER SEQUEL TO THE NOVEL
THE
TOURNAMENT

MATTHEW REILLY

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AND THE
DEAD QUEEN'S COMMAND



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**LONDON, ENGLAND
JANUARY 1559**

**After the brutal reign of her mad half-sister, Mary,
Elizabeth I ascends the throne of England.**

**The country is on edge.
During her time as queen, Mary,
a staunch Catholic, executed thousands
of Protestants.**

**Elizabeth is Protestant.
She is 25 years old.
And in a palace filled with many
of Mary's old courtiers, it is difficult
to know whom she can trust.**

But there is one man...

1.

His longcoat and boots caked in mud, Roger Ascham strode quickly down the length of the throne room before he dropped to one knee and bowed his head.

‘Your Majesty, I came as quickly as I could.’

He had indeed. He’d ridden through the night.

And when he announced himself at the palace gates, they’d ushered him directly here.

They even let him carry his bow and quiver—the queen had been very specific about allowing that. Being the new queen’s childhood schoolteacher afforded Ascham a few minor privileges, but never that. No one but the queen’s personal guards were allowed to be armed in the presence of the sovereign.

Something must be very wrong, he thought.

Before him sat the newly crowned Queen Elizabeth I, in all her regal glory.

Twenty-five years old, beautiful and confident, she was clad almost entirely in gold: glittering dress, high collar and a sparkling golden headdress that set off her flame-red hair. The freckles of her youth had been covered with powder, but nothing could mask her penetrating stare.

It was the 18th of January 1559.

She had been Queen of England for exactly three days.

‘Mr Ascham,’ the queen said evenly. ‘I thank you for your haste. A difficult matter has arisen and I need your help.’

Ascham looked at the collection of advisors and courtiers gathered around her and wondered what help he could possibly give her that they could not.

'I am yours to command, Your Majesty,' he said.

The young queen's lips curled into a wry smile. 'I pray that my education was good enough to make my commands worth following, Mr Ascham.'

'Believe me, so do I, Your Majesty,' Ascham said.

Some of the courtiers gasped. Elizabeth's chief advisor, William Cecil, shook his head at the sheer cheek of the remark.

The queen turned to her retinue. 'Leave us. Everyone but Cecil, Sir William and Mr Ascham here.'

The courtiers left and soon Ascham was alone in the great room with only the queen, Cecil and Sir William St Loe, the Captain of the Queen's Body Guard.

The queen cocked her head at Ascham. 'I could have you beheaded for making tart comments like that, you know.'

'I am keenly aware of that, Your Majesty.'

'Oh, stop all this "Your Majesty" poppycock, Roger. Call me Bess, like you used to. We have been through too much together for such formalities. Besides, I can't cut off your head. I need the mind that resides inside it.'

Ascham saw the worry on her face and he got serious. 'An urgent summons to the palace. My weapon allowed in your presence. And now a private audience with only these two gentlemen. What's wrong?'

'Someone wants to kill me,' the queen said simply. 'And they plan to do it tomorrow.'

2.

‘Tell me everything,’ Ascham said.

Elizabeth turned to Cecil. ‘Bring out the dolls.’

William Cecil produced a small sack and extracted from it three small rag dolls. He placed them on a table for Ascham to examine.

They depicted a protestant minister, a member of the Queen’s Body Guard—indicated by his red surcoat with a gold crown on it—and a military commander with a Protestant coat-of-arms embroidered on his chest.

Each doll had been stabbed in its chest with a full-sized arrow.

Ascham immediately noticed the dolls’ quality: the stitching was tight and evenly spaced; the miniature clothing was incredibly reproduced, from the Guardsman’s red uniform to the armour of the commander; the painted faces were marvellously detailed.

Ascham raised his eyebrows. ‘Dolls shot by arrows. So?’

Cecil said, ‘Over the last fortnight, there have been three horrific murders here in London. A minister from a reformist parish in Lambeth, then a lieutenant from the Queen’s Body Guard, then Lord Radcliffe.’

Ascham frowned. ‘Radcliffe? Wyatt’s co-conspirator?’

‘The very same,’ Cecil said. Radcliffe, like the more famous Thomas Wyatt, had been a well-known opponent of Elizabeth’s predecessor, Queen Mary. ‘In each case, *two days before* each poor soul was killed, a rag doll in their

likeness—with an arrow piercing its chest—was delivered to the palace for the attention of the queen.’

Ascham frowned. ‘And in each subsequent murder, was the victim *shot* by an arrow?’

‘Yes,’ the queen said.

‘Through the heart?’

‘Yes.’

Ascham thought some more. ‘The bodies of these victims,’ he said. ‘How were they found? Were they put on some kind of *public display*?’

The queen’s advisors swapped amazed glances.

The queen did not. She had seen this sort of thing before.

‘That is correct,’ Cecil said. ‘Each washed up against the base of London Bridge the day after the matching doll was received. Each body—still with the arrow lodged in its chest—was tossed into the river somewhere upstream affixed to a wooden raft. In all three cases, the raft was too wide to pass through the arches of London Bridge, so it lodged against the piers and was found very publicly.’

‘And in every instance these dolls were received two days before the murder took place?’ Ascham asked.

‘Yes,’ Sir William St Loe said. ‘It is like the murderer is taunting the queen by sending her a warning.’

Ascham sighed. ‘All right, then, get on with it. Time is clearly of the essence. Show me the fourth doll. The one of the queen.’

Cecil and Sir William St Loe once again exchanged shocked looks.

The queen again seemed totally unsurprised.

Ascham explained for them. 'I was summoned at great haste, asked to be here within a day. You fear for the queen's life and you say she will be killed tomorrow. This means you received a doll in her image yesterday.'

The fourth doll was the finest of the lot.

It depicted Elizabeth in her coronation gown: with glorious gold stitching and edging and an exquisitely detailed crown. Even her red curls had been lovingly reproduced. It would have been a work of art, Ascham thought, were it not for the grim arrow jutting out of the doll's chest.

'One more query,' Ascham said, holding the doll in his hand. 'The killer does not ask for money, does he? He makes no attempt at extortion?'

'No,' Cecil said. 'No message of any sort accompanied the delivery of any of the dolls.'

'Hmmm,' Ascham said. 'I assume your coronation festivities continue tomorrow. What is planned?'

In the three days since Elizabeth had been formally crowned Queen of England, a whirl of celebrations and fairs had been staged throughout London. They were planned to last for four more days.

Cecil said, 'Only the biggest event of the entire week. At noon tomorrow, the queen is scheduled to partake in a flotilla on the Thames: a huge floating pageant that will pass through the whole of London. There will be forty boats surrounding the royal barge. Given the immense crowds we have seen at all the other celebratory events, it is expected that the shores of the river will be packed with citizens. It will be a gigantic affair and...I mean...well—'

‘What he means, Roger,’ the queen said, ‘is that I will look a fool if I cancel it now.’

‘You will look far worse with an arrow in your heart,’ Ascham said.

‘An eventuality I am keen to avoid,’ the queen said. ‘Which is why I brought you here. I need you to find this killer and stop him before the flotilla commences at midday tomorrow.’

Ascham looked at her hard. ‘You do realise what you are up against here? Nothing can stop the person who sent these dolls. He does not ask for money. He does not seek the release of a prisoner. He threatens to kill and then he kills. He *wants* to murder you. You can always cancel this flotilla.’

‘No. I can’t.’ Elizabeth’s voice was firm, firmer than Ascham had ever heard it.

It was not the voice of a girl anymore. It was the voice of a woman—a woman who had endured a harrowing time during the capricious rule of her mad half-sister, a time that had included a stint in the dreaded Tower of London.

‘These are dangerous times, Roger. After the schism in the church created by my father, Henry VIII, England has been a land divided. My father broke from the Catholic Church and my half-brother Edward followed his lead as a Protestant ruler. But then came Mary, as staunch a Catholic as there ever was and ruthless in her evangelism. Half of England is stained with the blood of the many Protestants she executed during her reign. I hear that no sooner was she dead than the people on the streets started calling her “Bloody Mary”.

‘And now I, a Protestant woman, sit on the throne. And while every Catholic in England might wish me dead, it is my mission to make them love me. For I am not just the Queen of *Protestant* England, Roger. I am the Queen

of *all* England and I would like that to be an England where Protestant and Catholic can live together in harmony.

‘To do that, I must make people of all faiths see that I *am* England. You taught me this. I cannot bow to anonymous issuers of threats, even if they have drawn blood before. This fellow wants to make *England* bend to his will and this I cannot allow. Little does he know that this Queen of England has more in her arsenal than just armies, ships and cannons. She has one more very potent weapon.’

‘And that is?’ Ascham asked.

‘You,’ the queen said. ‘One thing can stop this man, Roger: your brilliant mind. The flotilla will go ahead tomorrow. It must go ahead tomorrow. Which means you have twenty-four hours to find this assassin. My life depends on you, Roger.’

3.

Two hours later, Roger Ascham walked quickly down a dark, forbidding tunnel deep within the Tower of London, accompanied by a fresh-faced twenty-year-old ensign from the Queen's Body Guard named Jonathan Hopgood.

Ascham had asked the queen specifically for a *young* member of her Body Guard to accompany him on his investigations and so the youth had been assigned.

Hopgood was most puzzled by the first address Ascham wished to visit.

'Sir, if I might be so bold, why are we here?' he asked.

'It's nice to know that some of my lessons left a mark on Her Majesty,' Ascham said, maintaining his vigorous pace.

'What do you mean?'

'She kept the bodies of the victims,' Ascham said. 'When it was brought to her attention that the manner of death of the second victim so closely resembled that of the first, she ordered the bodies be kept in a snow-filled cellar here in the Tower. She suspected something was amiss. Now that things have escalated, keeping them has proven to be very wise.'

'You taught her to keep dead bodies?'

Ascham cocked his head. 'Let's just say that on one memorable occasion, I showed her how the dead can reveal much to the living.'

They came to a thick armoured door guarded by two troopers. One of the troopers opened it and Ascham felt a gust of chilly air waft out of the chamber within.

He and Hopgood entered the space. It was actually a prison cell. Snow lined its floor.

Three bodies lay in the snow, in a row. They lay face up and were still wearing the clothes they had been killed in—and each still had an arrow sticking out of its chest: the minister, the Body Guard and Lord Radcliffe.

As Hopgood watched in both fascination and horror, Ascham examined them closely for a full hour. At one stage, he removed the arrow from each corpse, pausing for a longer time as he examined the arrow that had killed the last victim, Lord Radcliffe.

When he was done, he stood and frowned. 'This is most alarming. We are dealing with a formidable and dangerous adversary.'

'How do you know this?'

'Several reasons,' Ascham said. 'First, each victim was shot precisely through the heart. Second, the depth of each arrow-wound is about five inches; this suggests each victim was hit with substantial force. And third, all the arrows entered their victims' chests at a downward angle.'

Ascham nodded at Hopgood. 'Every member of the Queen's Body Guard is an accomplished archer—including yourself, I presume—so why don't you tell me what this suggests?'

Hopgood started, unprepared for a surprise examination. 'Uh...er...the angle of the wound would suggest, I suppose, that the shot was fired from a considerable distance, because it arced downward through the air at the end of its flight.'

‘Well done,’ Ascham said. ‘A close-range arrow flies fast and horizontally. The arrow itself is also shorter. These are all longbow arrows, designed to be fired from range. They flew high and in an arc. But now consider the accuracy. Our assassin was able to shoot three people from long range *directly in the heart*. This means he is more than just an accomplished archer. He is an *extremely skilled* archer. A perfect assassin. A Bowman who is more than capable of hitting the queen from almost any vantage point along the Thames during tomorrow’s flotilla.’

‘By God...’ Hopgood gasped.

Ascham strolled over to the dead bodies. ‘The arrows embedded in the first two bodies appear unremarkable, but the arrow that killed Lord Radcliffe’—Ascham held up the arrow in question—‘is very remarkable. It has a yellow-painted shaft, yellow feathers and a gold point.’

As an archer, Hopgood knew what that meant immediately. ‘The killer is a champion.’ At archery tournaments, the champion of the day was commonly awarded a golden arrow as his trophy.

Ascham said, ‘Usually, gilded arrows are inscribed with the name of the champion, plus the date and location of the tourney, but the markings on this arrow have been scratched off. The killer wanted to make a statement with this killing. Perhaps a statement as to how good he is. Have you ever partaken in an archery tournament, Hopgood?’

‘Of course, sir.’

‘And how did you fare?’

‘My best result was third at an event in Sussex.’

Ascham gazed at the golden arrow. He was widely known to be an enthusiast of the bow.

'I have participated in a few myself but, alas, I have never done any better than reaching the final eight. I have often said that archery contests should also have an element of *speed* to them. To be able to pull back one's arrow with all the time in the world does not reflect a real battlefield scenario. In battle, it is not just accuracy that matters, but also speed: the speed with which one raises their bow, nocks an arrow to the string with shaking fingers, *and then* fires it accurately. But on this matter, the world doesn't care for my opinion.'

Ascham nodded at the dead Body Guard, still dressed in his distinctive scarlet coat. 'Who was he?'

'He was Sir Peter Cavendish, Lieutenant of the Royal Body Guard, second in command to Sir William St Loe.'

'I would imagine that the role of Captain of the Guard is largely a ceremonial one while that of Lieutenant is quite a task. The Captain stands beside the queen while the Lieutenant does all the work behind the scenes, no?'

'That would be correct, sir,' Hopgood said.

'Tell me, while Elizabeth was only formally crowned a few days ago, she has been in charge for a few months, is that not so?'

'That is right.'

'Did she purge the court of Queen Mary's advisors?'

'Not all but many of them.'

'What about Catholic members of her personal Body Guard?'

'She didn't have to remove them,' Hopgood said. 'They all resigned immediately after Queen Mary died.'

'All of them?'

'Yes, sir. All twenty of them. Although...'

'Although *what?*'

'Well, one Catholic member of the Guard, Silas Maynard, resigned a few months before that, about three weeks before Mary died. We were given no reason. One day he was there, the next he was gone.'

Ascham said, 'Hopgood, do me a favour, will you? Go back to Whitehall and check the records of the Royal Body Guard. Find out for me if any of the Catholic Body Guards ever won an archery contest and when they did.'

Ascham made to leave the grim chamber.

'Where are you going, sir?' Hopgood asked.

'I,' Ascham said, 'am going shopping for dolls.'

4.

For the rest of the afternoon, Ascham scoured the markets and alleyways of London, visiting the stores of toy and doll makers.

He took with him the doll of Queen Elizabeth that had been sent to the queen, of course having taken care to remove the arrow that had been so provocatively stuck into it.

He discovered very quickly that with the coronation of a beautiful new queen, London had become awash with dolls in her image. At every tinker's stall and knick-knack shop, he found a dozen Elizabeth dolls, most of them depicting her in a gold coronation gown.

Ascham compared the artistry of the dolls on display to the one that he possessed. None of them matched the workmanship of the doll that had been sent to the queen.

Night was falling when Ascham came to London Bridge.

The multi-level monstrosity stretched across the Thames atop its twenty mighty stone arches. Even then, in 1559, it was close on 350 years old and, thanks to many fires and inconsistent innovation, it looked like a ramshackle village that had been built and rebuilt many times over: shops and homes jutted out from it at all angles, some of them projecting over the water, others rising to ungainly and awkward heights.



View of Old London Bridge (c.1600) by Claude de Jongh

Over the course of his inquiries that afternoon, Ascham had learned of a dollmaker by the name of Mrs Emily Wimple who operated a small shop on the bridge. Apparently, her work was of the finest quality, so much so that she had made dolls at the command of Queen Mary, as gifts for the children of foreign kings.

Ascham hastened down the bustling bridge.

Cows and sheep milled about. Sailors, prostitutes, mothers and shopkeepers all haggled and traded: Ascham had often said that if any one place could represent the many facets of English life, it was London Bridge.

Amid the general hubbub of the bridge's central thoroughfare, Ascham spied the modest shingle of the establishment he was seeking. It read:

DOLLS AND OTHER TOYS FOR GIRLS
PROPRIETOR, MRS EMILY WIMPLE

Ascham entered the shop.

A hundred dead-eyed dolls stared at him from its shelves.

They were mainly fashioned in the form of little girls, but there were also a few soldier-dolls and—to Ascham’s dismay—a *lot* of dolls of Elizabeth in different outfits.

The store itself was a dim room, shot through with light from a lone window that overlooked the Thames to the west. It was getting late in the day and in the light of the setting sun, the dolls’ unblinking gazes made Ascham feel uneasy. The shop was empty.

Ascham reached for one of the Elizabeth dolls: a coronation model. With its gold colouring and expert stitching, it was, he realised, *exactly the same* kind of doll as the one that had been sent to the queen—

‘Can I help you?’ a woman appeared suddenly from a side room. She was perhaps forty with a sturdy frame and a rough voice. She wore an apron and had her sleeves rolled up.

Ascham glanced from the doll to the woman.

‘Hello, madam. My name is Roger Ascham and I am here in search of a coronation doll. You are the proprietor, Mrs Wimple?’

‘I am. And that doll there will cost you twopence.’

‘It is most superbly made.’

‘I make the best dolls in London, I do,’ Mrs Wimple said. ‘That one is my biggest seller. Can ’ardly make ’em fast enough. The people of London do love their pretty new queen.’

Ascham turned to the shelf again.

There must have been twenty identical dolls on it—all depicting Elizabeth in her coronation gown. This wasn’t a unique doll and that disappointed him. The killer could have been one of many customers to have purchased a doll from this store in recent weeks.

'You've sold a lot of these coronation dolls, you say?'

'Aye. Close on fifty of the things.'

'The stitching is the best I have seen.'

'Why, thank you. I've been blessed by the Lord with nimble fingers. Never sold near as many of the old queen—Mary, God rest her soul—even though she was a much better woman and a right good Catholic. Better than this skinny new strumpet. Brought us back into the fold with Rome, Mary did, you know.'

'I did know that, yes,' Ascham said. Mary had also burned three hundred Protestants at the stake and in his opinion would be remembered more for the cruelty of her faith than its purity.

Ascham looked about the shop—and he again saw the window looking straight down the river at the setting sun: it was a commanding vantage point from which to watch life on the river...or to shoot an arrow at an oncoming royal barge as it passed under London Bridge.

He sighed. He had found the source of the dolls, but there was nothing else for him here.

'So, is you gonna buy the doll or not?' Mrs Wimple demanded.

'No,' Ascham said, thinking. 'Thank you for your time. It is not what I am looking for.'

Before he left London Bridge, Ascham examined the immediate area around the doll shop. A narrow alley between two of the nearby shops led to the western edge of the bridge. It ended at a little stone balcony that also afforded an excellent view of the river.

Ascham visited a few of the neighbouring shops.

Here he found the office of Mrs Wimple's landlord—a Mr Albert Rimington, a merchant who occupied the much larger store beside hers. He owned the whole building and the two on either side of it, making him the landlord of no less than twelve shops and upper-level flats from which he collected substantial rent.

But he was nowhere to be found that day, so Mr Ascham left him a note asking for a list of the names of all his tenants on the bridge.

In the note Ascham stated that he acted on behalf of the queen herself and demanded that Rimington forward the list promptly on the morrow to the palace at Whitehall.

With nothing else to investigate, Ascham left London Bridge and returned to Whitehall.

Night had fallen by the time he began to make his way back across London.

A thick fog had descended on the city, cloaking everything in a dismal grey mist.

As Ascham rode on his mare through the gloom, he had an unsettling feeling, a queer sensation that he was being followed.

Glancing surreptitiously behind himself as he rode, he saw that a shadowy figure was indeed trailing him, lurking back in the fog, a burly fellow wearing a three-cornered hat.

Ascham's heart raced. He tried to remain calm or to at least look like he was calm. He continued on, feigning ignorance of the stalker.

Then, amid some of the newer factories beside the Thames, Ascham took a sharp left turn and quickened his pace. He then doubled back, tied his horse

to a tree and dashed through an empty factory so that he could peer through its windows at the road he had been travelling on moments earlier.

He saw the shadowy figure arrive on the scene and look about the area, perplexed to have lost his quarry.

Ascham held his breath.

It was frightening to stalk someone who had been stalking him.

Ascham got a fair look at him: he was a big man, stocky, with shoulders as broad as his ample belly. Ascham couldn't see the man's face underneath his triple-sided hat; all he could make out were his bushy black whiskers that curled up to become a moustache.

And he held in his hand a longbow with an arrow notched.

Ascham swallowed at the sight of it.

Having lost sight of Ascham, the fellow snorted and went back the way he had come.

Ascham watched him go and exhaled in relief. He waited a full twenty minutes before he resumed his journey back to the palace.

He was met at the palace gates by Hopgood.

'Sir,' the young Body Guard said as they headed inside. 'One of our former Catholic Guardsmen did indeed win an archery tournament last year: Silas Maynard.'

'The one who resigned earlier than all the others?'

'The very same,' Hopgood said. 'I also found his service records. Maynard was the best shot in the Guard. He won not one but two archery contests at Hampton Court. Both were presided over by Queen Mary herself and she was

delighted with his victories. He was something of a favourite of the old queen and it was she who awarded him the golden arrows on both occasions.'

Ascham grimaced. 'Do we have any idea where this Maynard fellow went after he resigned from the Royal Body Guard?'

'I asked around. No-one knows.'

'Tell me, Hopgood, did you ever meet him?'

'A few times, yes.'

'What did he look like?'

Hopgood thought for a moment. 'Large fellow, tall and sturdy, and he had these giant whiskers that he fashioned into a moustache.'

'Hmmm.' Ascham bit his lip.

So his shadow the previous night had been Maynard. He had been stalked by a master archer.

Ascham felt he was lucky to be still breathing.

'This is not good,' he said.

'Sir,' Hopgood said tentatively. 'I found something else in the course of my inquiries, pertaining to Silas Maynard. A few of the men mentioned it but it seemed, well, more a rumour than a fact.'

'Let me hear it anyway.'

Hopgood said, 'As Queen Mary lay dying, she summoned Maynard to her bedside. There was only one other person in attendance at that meeting, the Bishop of London, Edmund Bonner. The following day, Maynard resigned. Three weeks later, Queen Mary died.'

'A private meeting with Mary on her deathbed?' Ascham said, his mind turning. 'And no-one has any idea where Maynard went after he resigned?'

'No, sir.'

'But Bishop Bonner still resides here in London,' Ascham mused.

He did not need to add that Edmund Bonner was a notoriously fearsome individual. Known to many as 'Bloody Bonner' for his role as Mary's religious enforcer, he had enthusiastically helped her burn hundreds of Protestants alive at the stake. Even after her death, courtiers still feared his power and many openly wondered what Elizabeth would do with the prominent Catholic bishop.

'And as the only participant of that meeting still within reach,' Ascham said, 'it would serve us to pay him a visit. We shall see him first thing tomorrow.'

5.

The following morning, Ascham and Hopgood left the palace early, heading for the London residence of the Catholic bishop, Edmund Bonner.

In those first months following Mary's death and Elizabeth's accession, Bonner's position was a most peculiar one.

He existed in a kind of limbo: he was a living, breathing reminder of the old regime. While the Catholic queen was dead and her reign of terror over, her enforcer was still very much alive—only now he was a bishop without a cathedral, a prince without a kingdom. He did not live in a church or presbytery, but rather in the sumptuous mansion of a sympathetic Catholic lord not far from Westminster.

At first, Ascham and Hopgood were denied entry to the bishop's residence. It was only when Ascham stated that they were there in the name of the queen that they were admitted.

Despite that, the bishop made them wait...

And wait...

And wait.

Ascham began to fret as he heard some church bells outside toll the ten o'clock hour. They had only two hours until the queen's flotilla on the Thames began.

They were running out of time.

And then the bishop—finally—granted them an audience.

Roger Ascham sat before Edmund Bonner.

The bishop had a broad round face and a pair of cruel black eyes that were completely devoid of compassion or pity. The old Catholic enforcer stared at Ascham as if he were an insect deserving only to be crushed.

‘Your Grace,’ Ascham said. ‘Thank you for seeing us. I am Roger—’

‘I know who you are,’ Bonner said. ‘You were Elizabeth’s tutor when she was a girl, the so-called “enlightened” teacher, the one who took her to that chess tournament in Constantinople, the one who believed in broadening her mind rather than leading her down the true path of faith. You are the one who made our new young queen a heretic. What do you want?’

‘I want to ask you about a meeting you attended, a special meeting at the old queen’s bedside. About six months ago, you sat in Queen Mary’s bedchamber with a member of her Royal Body Guard, a Catholic Guardsman named Silas Maynard. Immediately after that meeting, Maynard resigned his commission and vanished. I want to know what was discussed at that meeting.’

Bonner’s lips twisted into a sinister smile. ‘Mr Maynard is a fine Catholic, a soldier of God who is steadfast in his beliefs, very devout. Mary gave him a final order, one last command, to be carried out *after* her death when Elizabeth became queen. She also gave him a huge payment for this—all in gold—enough to live out the rest of his days in luxury in a quiet corner of the realm once the deed is done.’

Ascham felt his blood go cold. ‘And what was that last command?’

‘Oh, dear man, I cannot tell you that,’ Bonner grinned. ‘But I do know that if the new young queen were to meet an untimely end, her cousin once removed, Mary Queen of Scots—a most fervent Catholic—would inherit the throne of England. And *that* would be something that, if she is watching us from Heaven, would make our dear departed Queen Mary smile. Good day to you, Mr Ascham. I do wish you luck in your mission because, by God, you’ll need it.’

And then Bloody Bonner started laughing, a cruel cackle that echoed throughout the mansion’s halls and corridors as Ascham and Hopgood left.

Ascham and Hopgood stood on the street outside the bishop’s opulent home.

It was almost eleven o’clock. Elizabeth’s flotilla was probably venturing out onto the Thames at that very moment.

Ascham swore. ‘We’re almost out of time and we have no more lines of inquiry.’

‘*Mr Ascham!*’ The call of his name made him turn.

A boy from the palace came running up the street, holding a red envelope and a rolled parchment in his fists. He stopped before Ascham, breathless.

‘Mr Ascham, sir! I have a note from the queen for you.’

He handed Ascham the scarlet envelope. It bore the queen’s seal.

‘And this also just arrived at the palace for you. From Mr Rimington, a landlord on London Bridge. His messenger said you would be expecting it.’ He handed over the rolled sheet of parchment.

‘Thank you.’ Ascham opened the queen’s envelope first. A note inside it was written in her gorgeous handwriting:

MY DEAREST TEACHER,

I CAN WAIT NO LONGER. I MUST GO TO MY BARGE NOW
AND COMMENCE THE FLOTILLA. I PRAY THAT YOU HAVE
SUCCEEDED IN YOUR MISSION. IF YOU HAVE NOT AND
TODAY SHOULD BE MY LAST, I DO HOPE WE MEET AGAIN
IN THE HEREAFTER.

IT HAS BEEN MY HONOUR TO LEARN FROM YOU.

YOURS,

BESS

'Damn it, she's gone to the river,' Ascham said.

He unrolled the parchment from Rimington. It was a list of all the tenants in
Rimington's shops and flats on the bridge:

20A DOCKRILL

20B GAMBLE

20C CORBETT

20D BALCOMB

22A FREEMAN

22B LAWTON

22C RUSSO

22D MOLES

24A WIMPLE

24B MAYNARD

24C WATERWORTH

24D HOLMAN

Ascham examined the list, hawk-like.

It listed the tenants in ascending order, as was the custom in those days: the
shop on the ground level of a building was marked A, the one above it, B, and
so on going up to D. Mrs Wimple's ground-floor shop, for instance, was 24A.

Ascham saw the next entry: 24B MAYNARD.

'Maynard,' he said aloud. 'The flat *above* the Wimple doll shop is rented out to Silas Maynard...'

Ascham broke into a run, dashing for his horse.

Hopgood gave chase. 'What is it?' he called. 'What have you deduced?'

Ascham flew up into the saddle of his mare. 'Maynard must have been watching me from the upper flat when I went to the doll shop on London Bridge. It was indeed he who followed me home. He knew I was getting close, so he followed me and probably would have killed me had I not doubled back when I did. Make haste, my good man! We must get to London Bridge, to the flat above the doll shop, before the queen's barge does! That's where he's going to shoot her from!'

They galloped at full tilt through the city of London, thundering past wagons and stalls and fist-waving citizens.

They could see the vast crowds gathered on the riverfront, waving at the royal barge as it floated by, parallel to their gallop. In between the buildings that he passed, Ascham caught flashing glimpses of the royal barge on the Thames.

On the glittering barge, Queen Elizabeth—young and resplendent in an enormous golden dress and sun-like crown—sat on her throne, waving, and smiling at her adoring people.

Ascham came to London Bridge and even though no-one was permitted to ride on horseback down its central thoroughfare, he just galloped straight onto it, yelling, 'Make way! Make way in the name of the queen!'

Hopgood chased after him, mouth agape.

They came to the doll shop and Ascham was off his mare before she had even stopped, charging for the staircase to the first floor.

Just before he reached the stairs, he glimpsed the river through the alleyway: and he saw the royal barge not five hundred yards away, almost within range of an archer on the bridge.

He bounded up the stairs, trying to untangle his bow from his back as he did so.

He reached the flat marked '24B' and kicked open the door with a bang.

And he found himself staring at the man he had beheld the previous night in the darkened streets of London, the man with the three-sided hat and the bushy whiskers and moustache: the former queen's Body Guard and champion archer, Silas Maynard.

He was crouched at the window overlooking the river with a longbow and an arrow in his hands. The arrow was not yet notched, although it was, Ascham saw, another golden one.

From his position by the window, Maynard gazed directly down at the approaching royal barge, with a clear shot at the queen.

When Ascham kicked open the door, Maynard spun in surprise and for the briefest of instants, both men froze, recognising and assessing each other from a range of fifteen feet, separated by the length of the room.

And suddenly it was a duel.

A duel of bowmen.

Whoever proved the fastest and the most accurate would leave with his life. And his prize: killing the queen or saving her.

Both men moved, quick as cobras.

They raised their bows and whipped up an arrow each, expertly notching it to their bowstrings and at the same moment...

...they both fired.

6.

The two arrows crossed in mid-air.

Whoosh-whoosh!

Maynard's arrow slammed into Ascham's left shoulder, throwing him back against the doorframe, pinning him to it, so forceful was the shot.

It wasn't a fatal wound, but it was a winning one: stuck to the door, Ascham dropped his bow and now he couldn't reload it for a second shot. Maynard could kill the queen at his leisure.

Ascham looked up, beaten—

—to see Maynard sitting on the floor with his feet splayed wide and his mouth hanging open, slack-jawed, blood trickling from it...

...and with Ascham's arrow protruding from his chest, lodged in his heart. Ascham had got off his shot!

Maynard did not move.

He just sat there dumbly. Ascham's arrow had penetrated deep into his heart. He was probably dead before he'd hit the floor.

Ascham sighed with relief. 'I always said archery contests should measure accuracy *and* speed...' he said to no-one.

Moments later, Hopgood arrived, beheld the scene and leapt to Ascham's aid.

After he had carefully pulled Ascham off the door, Ascham said, 'Take me to the window, lad.'

Hopgood helped him to the window, where they saw the royal barge cruising toward them.

Ascham looked out at his queen—his former student—and for what it was worth, waved with his good arm.

And as Elizabeth's barge passed under London Bridge, she caught his eye and started for a brief moment as she saw and recognised him.

He nodded to her and she smiled back, nodding almost knowingly, and then she continued waving happily to her subjects as if nothing untoward had happened at all.

7.

The following day, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth I received Roger Ascham in private at Hampton Court.

His left arm was in a sling, his shoulder heavily bandaged. Once again, William Cecil and Sir William St Loe were the only others present.

‘A plot hatched by my dead sister?’ Elizabeth said, shaking her head. ‘As if I don’t have enough enemies among the living, I have to contend with the dead, too.’

Ascham said, ‘She gave Maynard the funds to rent the flat on the bridge, a considerable expense. And Bishop Bonner has informed us—from his new cell in the Tower—that the dead queen’s command to Maynard also included, and I quote “to make sure the little bitch squirms in fear before she is killed. I want her to feel the wrath of the true Catholic God.” That was the reason for the taunting dolls and the three prior murders.’

Elizabeth shook her head. Then she smiled. ‘You have excelled yourself, my wonderful teacher. I doubt I would have survived this without your remarkable deductive abilities. You may name your prize.’

‘My prize?’ Ascham said. ‘My prize would be to have no more missions like this, Your Majesty. I don’t think my heart can take many more adventures of this kind.’

‘Then you will just have to make do with a title and some land, Roger,’ the queen said. ‘For saving my life, I am giving you a canonry in York Minster.’

Enjoy it, my dear teacher, till I call on you again. And when next we meet, please, call me Bess like you used to.'

Roger Ascham just bowed to his former student. 'As you wish, *Your Majesty.*'

THE END