

"My God, is it possible!" exclaimed the king, with an agitation that surprised both the listeners.

"Why is your majesty so struck?" asked the minister. "We have long known him as a most pestilent rebel."

"Yes, that is true," said the king; "but still I did not think it conceivable that any—any gentleman of the party could be found capable of this. It shows how frightful is the danger we have escaped—even if it be yet escaped! I could understand meaner men—poor, disbanded, discontented wretches—as ready for any deed of violence, even one so atrocious as this; but Sir George Charter—It is too, too horrible!"

The king turned his face from them, and was evidently quite overpowered with emotion, but for a moment there was a pause.

"Where is the spot?" asked the earl, in a low tone.

"The precise spot where his majesty is accustomed to land, on recrossing the river, in returning from Richmond."

"It is well chosen!" said the earl. "Your majesty has then only your guard—and half of those are left behind on the other side. Forty such mere cut-throats as this gentleman describes—"

"I described no mere cut-throats," said the stranger. "There are men among them whom I would trust, apart from this terrible infatuation, with my life, my honour, my all!"

"He's little better than one of them, after all, your majesty!" whispered the earl.

"No, no," replied the king. "But go on—we must learn everything!"

"Well, sir," said the earl, loudly, "we wait for you to fulfil your compact—the names!"

"Their leader you know—Sir George Charter. The next in importance is the Earl of Stanbury."

"Stanbury!" said the king, with renewed emotion. "Why the man swore to me, in my private closet, he had given up all his rebel inclinations, and desired only our personal favour. Note him well, Bridgeminster."

The earl held tablets in his hand, and was writing. Hence the remark of the king, the vindictive meaning of which was perfectly understood.

"Sir William Larkyns I name next," said the stranger.

"What, the gouty lawyer! He one of the forty thieves!" exclaimed the earl—again trying, by the sarcasm, to irritate the informer.

"No. I was about to say that both these men, and another—Maltby, the rich brewer—are professedly hostile to the scheme, and only submit to it because they will not injure their comrades by exposure."

"Do they lend no aid in other ways?" asked the king—"say by the sanction of their rank, by money, arms—"

"And beer!" interposed the earl.

"Had I believed they did not help, your majesty would not have had their names from me to-night. I know they do help—indirectly. But I also know they did object at first."

"Note all that, Bridgeminster. Pity if any good points should be lost in their favour!" said the king, with bitter sarcasm. "True nobles and gentlemen, are they not—shrinking from horror at thought of firing the murderous pistol, not buying, no doubt the weapon themselves, and taking care of its temper and quality! The king thanks them! Will you, sir, proceed?"

"The Jesuit—Marney!"

"Of course! of course!" said the king. "Trust a Jesuit to find out the scent of blood, even if he does not originate the whole business. Put down the Jesuit, Bridgeminster. Who next?"

"Keyes—one of your majesty's own guards—a trumpeter!"

It was startling to see the commotion this name produced. The king and the earl again whispered together for more than a minute.

Well might the mention of that name excite the greatest dread. If one were false—one among the men to whom the king at all times confided the question of his personal safety—if one such were in the ranks, how many more

might there not be? And possibly the taint might be spreading to other of the household regiments. It was indeed an appalling incident, slight as it looked when merely introduced as "Keyes—one of your majesty's own guards—a trumpeter."

"Do you know his regiment? Can he be upstairs in the gallery now? Have you ever heard anything about him?" Such were the hurried questions put by the sovereign to the minister.

The minister, in reply, was constrained to say he knew nothing about him, but would take care to seek information the moment the king set him at liberty. The earl then asked for the rest of the names.

"There are only two others known to me of sufficient importance to mention now; but I beg herewith to hand you a list of the whole. It was difficult to obtain, and had I been less determined to free myself and my cause from the slightest danger of contamination, I should not have ventured the effort. But there it is."

The earl approached the cord, took the paper from the stranger's hand, went with it to the king, and there, forgetting etiquette in the absorbing interest of the moment, he looked over the shoulder of the king while he read.

Apparently the king saw nothing in the list to strike him, so he gave it to the earl and began to walk about, evidently absorbed in the thought of his household troops being thus tampered with. Seeing that the king, in these short paces to and fro, occasionally ventured too near the cord, the earl became doubly alarmed at his secret project—alarmed lest the sight of the king, if the soldiers should once see him, should paralyse their actions at the critical moment; alarmed, also, lest, if they did fire to his signal, the king might really get into danger.

The stranger now spoke:—

"There are two names in the list about which I wish to say a word. Scum Goodman is one of those wretches whom it were a charity to sweep from the world, with, I mean, legitimate cause. He is the only man among those who are likely to be prominent, who deserves the opinions of the Earl of Bridgeminster—cut-throat and thief. But he is no coward, and will probably, like a wild cat, endeavour, even in exposure or death, to give the last scratch. Beware of him!"

"Note him carefully, Bridgeminster," again said the king.

"The last man of whom I have to speak—Noel—" Here the stranger paused, as if meditating his words with extreme care.

"Ah! yes," said the earl. "I'm glad to have him. Does your majesty know the man?"

"No," said the king.

"Permit me, then, to congratulate your majesty on the knowledge that this Noel is the man who has printed all the libels on your majesty and your majesty's government!"

"He!" echoed the king.

"Yes, your majesty. With really extraordinary skill and daring, he has for years kept at work a secret press; and this we only discovered and broke up quite lately, when, unluckily, the man himself escaped."

"Note him, Bridgeminster."

"Ay, my lord," said the stranger, "and please also to note against the name that, while I demand that he be left absolutely free and untroubled—"

"Absurd!" almost shouted the earl, interruptingly.

"Absolutely free and untroubled!" repeated the stranger, in deep, clear, bell-like tones. "While I demand this, let it be added that I also venture to express a hope that he will not, on the contrary, be admitted to favour!"

"Favour! What does the man mean?" angrily asked the king.

"I mean, your majesty, that, but for this man's treachery to his associates, you might have gone next Saturday to your fate!"

"Is that possible?" asked the king, open-mouthed.

"It is so. I call him treacherous, because it was no scruple of honour or remorse, no awakening instinct of humanity, that caused him to

expose them. No; it was the old, eternal story—love of a woman! He told her, and through her the story reached my servant, who told me. There my story ends."

Not so, however. Details were asked for and given; the arrangements for the attack were explained; and the same topics were repeatedly gone over again, in the feverish anxiety of the king that no single fact of any importance should remain unknown.

To every question the stranger gave a frank though brief answer; so long, at least, as the questions did not seem wide of the mark.

But he soon perceived that, while the king's thoughts were exclusively fixed on the horrible plot just made known, the earl, on the contrary, seemed to be striving to penetrate the veil that covered the other plot—of the insurrection.

Then the black mask stopped abruptly, saying—

"I have answered every question that can possibly be necessary to your king's safety; I now decline to submit any longer to interrogation."

"Then let me tell you, sir," said the earl, carefully modulating his voice to the tone of greatest possible offence without show of violence, "that you thus expose yourself to terrible suspicion."

"What suspicion?" demanded the stranger, who carefully watched all the earl's movements, and whose eye had more than once followed the earl's eye to the gallery.

"The suspicion that you cannot be dealing in good faith, or you could have nothing to conceal."

"My lord, I have nothing more to say to you. We may meet under other circumstances, and then pursue such discussions on more equal terms. Were I in this presence to quarrel with you, who knows what mistakes might be made? What a calamity, for instance, were it not, to a man like your lordship, so distinguished in the rolls of honour and of *fidelity to friends*—"

The earl started, as if stung by an adder that he had accidentally trodden upon. But he kept silence, even while a dark spot appeared on his cheek, and grew larger and larger as he listened.

"What a calamity, if a gentleman of such nice honour should happen to fancy that the king was struck at instead of himself!"

"Sire," interposed the earl, white with rage to see his hidden secret discovered, and probably made valueless—"sire, the whole of the conditions promised to this gentleman were based, I believe, on the antecedent condition that he dealt truly with us—told us all that we needed to know!"

"Undoubtedly," said the king, looking, however, very uncomfortable at the prospect before him.

"And I have done so," said the stranger.

"It is false," deliberately said the earl.

"False!" echoed the stranger, and for a moment he seemed as if he would leap the barrier and— But he checked himself, and, with studied and remarkable calmness, said—

"Is it your majesty's pleasure that I go hence with insult as my sole reward?"

"Bridgeminster—" doubtfully began the king.

"Sire, I will now prove the untrustworthiness of this man. All the parties whose names he has written on this list were at the masquerade; the object of the masquerade is now happily made known to us; but, unhappily for this gentleman's credit, there were also other parties at the masquerade whose names he has carefully concealed from us. My son ventured, in your majesty's behalf, into that nest of Jacobites, and he has given me information which this stranger, if honest, would also have given.

Here the earl came nearer, and whispered to the king the name of Sir Richard Constable as one of the most dangerous of men—because popular in the city, about to become Lord Mayor, and enjoying at the confidence of the loyal party and of the Jacobites—the former, because they supposed him to have quite outgrown his early political predilections; the latter, because they knew he was secretly devoted to their cause, and waiting to serve them.