

Scarcely giving a moment's consideration to his own implication in the plot, Tichbourne, in the first hours of discovery and flight, was necessarily absorbed in his friend's danger, and in the excitement of escaping; while lurking in St. John's Wood, the frustration of their hopes filled him with a sense of the bitter disappointment that awaited the hapless Queen of Scots, doomed to see her prison bars drawn closer, by every attempt to rescue her; and the few words that the fugitives had dared to exchange, were chiefly expressions of sorrow for her sake. It was not till he had entered the Tower, and heard the fatal doors close behind him, that the image of Agnes, desolate and deserted, rushed upon his soul. Then, with the greater vividness for having been awhile repressed, came the sense of all the misery these tidings were bringing to her. She must have heard at once of their discovery and consequent flight: what days of torturing suspense had she already endured! How had she sustained what had passed? How could she sustain that which might be to come? Terrible fancies crowded upon him; too terrible to be endured. Crushed beneath his thronging emotions, he sat down on the side of his pallet, and buried his face in his hands. For himself he could meet death fearlessly, but for Agnes' sake he must, he would be free. Suddenly he roused himself, and putting resolutely away every thought that might shake his self-control, he began to plan the means of communicating to his wife the hope which he could not feel; and to consider all arrangements of his affairs which might be necessary in case of the worst issue. Resolved not to throw away the life which the memory of his wife's love made so precious, he reviewed his circumstances, seizing with the intense mental energy which suffering gives, on every point which might aid his defence. Absorbed in these reflections, hours passed over him unheeded, when he was roused by the sound of the opening door, and Agnes stood before him. For a few brief minutes she could not control her agitation, but when she heard her husband's passionate self-reproaches, that he had won her from her father's halls to share in sorrow and a prison, she dashed away her tears, and threw a smile like a sunbeam around the desolate walls, as she said,

"Not so, dearest, this is no prison to me; my prison was the wide world where you were not; to be here with you is a freedom which I have prayed earnestly to obtain; and which I gained at last only through the intercession of my father and other noble friends."

"Bless you for those words! But why was the Queen so merciless? she could hardly fear that you should steal away her prisoner through these ponderous doors."

"Something she said of disguises and escapes, but I ventured to reply, that her majesty little knew Chidioc Tichbourne, if she supposed that he would steal forth as a felon unjustified, and that I looked rather to see those who have closed these doors set them open, and call him to go forth in the fair light of day."

"That might they truly do, so far as there is any sin on my conscience in this matter," said Tichbourne; "but not all that are innocent go free, and appearances are against me. Heard you aught of what has been discovered?"

"There are many uncertain rumours—absurd, and far beyond the truth, as rumours always are," replied the lady. "Some say that the Lady Stuart was to have been rescued, not to flee to France, as you told me, but to become Queen of England; that there were those among her friends whose hands were lifted against their sovereign's life. Some men have said that Chidioc Tichbourne was one of these."

As Agnes uttered these last words, with a slight smile of scorn for the falsehood, she laid her hand in his, and looked upon him with an unclouded brow. That his eye could meet lovingly and unshrinkingly that look of perfect confidence, might have been to his accuser, sufficient proof of his integrity.

"If," he said, after a pause, "the treachery of him who betrayed this cause, has been as complete as I fear it has, Lord Walsingham will not believe this part of the story."

"He cannot, I am sure he does not," cried Agnes, eagerly. "It was Lord Walsingham who moved her majesty to grant my coming to you. He said to her, though he knew not that I heard it, that clemency would add to the lustre of her name, without diminishing her security. And more, he said to me at parting, 'Be of good cheer, for it may be that not all implicated are guilty.'"

"Be not too confident, my beloved," said Tichbourne, gazing fondly yet sadly on her animated face, "Lord Walsingham is ever crafty, and it will doubtless be his policy to win some by the promise of going unscathed, to testify against those who are more deeply involved. You cannot hope—nay I wrong you—you would not endure that I should go free on such terms."

"Oh, no! no! but surely you who opposed that criminal project when it was suggested—