

"Indeed!" said the black mask, inquiringly.

"You see the distance!" continued the earl.

"Very well. If you and your kin are prepared to let them know or risk their knowing such portions of my story as might, when heard by any one of their number, enable him to warn all the other conspirators—"

"The other conspirators!" exclaimed the king, angrily. "Do you intend to reflect on the loyalty of my guards?"

The black mask leaned a little over the red cord, and whispered, in accents that easily penetrated to the ear alike of the king and minister, the startling words—

"There is one man among those guards who has been in constant communication with his fellows of the Blues, and that man may now be in yonder gallery!"

If a bomb-shell had fallen in the presence-chamber, it could hardly have produced more alarm than did these words.

The king, with a white face, turned to the earl, who strove to seem impassive, and to smile off the fear, but could not.

The earl and the king went again into close conversation, and presently the former walked over to the stranger and said—

"You have now given us an unanswerable reason for our taking care that no one shall overhear. When I am satisfied, will you be so too?"

"Yes, only I warn you, I will take care to say things that will cause your treachery, if—"

"Treachery!"

"Nay—I only suppose against you what you suppose against me; so we are equal."

"I think we do not love each other, said the earl, in a voice too low for the king to hear.

"Could you see my face, I should not need to answer other than by a smile. As it is, I own you are right."

The stranger turned his back on the earl, and the latter walked away.

Did the earl, in thus speaking to the stranger, forget himself, and, while needing all his statesman-craft, play the boy—the mere irritable, angry, vengeful boy?

Hardly. The astute earl knew perfectly well what he was about. By that sort of experimental shot or thrust he had (so he believed) made his enemy reveal himself beyond all chances of mistake: he felt sure, now, the mask concealed the face of Lord Langton, his hated son-in-law.

He had also done some little towards creating the antagonistic feeling that even he, the most cold-blooded of statesmen, felt to be necessary before murdering him.

A minute or two passed in mute suspense; then the earl was seen to enter the gallery. At the moment of his appearance there, the king, as if by pre-arrangement, spoke to Lord Langton a sentence or two of little importance, and in a noticeably louder voice than he had used before. The earl chatted for a few seconds with Mr. Cavendish; said he had done right to give the soldiers rest for their guns, and to relieve them from their duty while he (the earl) was away from his post; then warned him once more to keep his own eyes and theirs fixed and ready for the signal to fire; smiled towards the soldiers, as if he in thought patted them on the backs, and said, "Well done my good fellows! the king and I trust you;" then descended once more to the saloon, and joined the king, after a glance at the gallery, which showed him the muzzles all pointing as before.

"Did your majesty speak in a lower tone?" was his first remark.

"No; higher!"

"Then we are quite safe. The voices of both came but as a confused buzz: plain enough as mere voice—unintelligible as words."

"Tell him so," said the king, "and let us see if the sphinx will now unride."

The earl again advanced towards the silent, stately, funereal-looking figure, and said—

"I could distinguish nothing."

"Very well. The king spoke more loudly. Suppose we now all speak less loudly; then we shall have double security. If I speak too low, remind me."

And then began Lord Langton to speak to the weighty matter in hand:—

"I have first to demand the renewal to myself personally of the pledges given to the Lady Hermia, and which alone brought me here. The first point—personal to myself—I will speak of last. I yield the second point, and will give up the names of the parties concerned, on the pledge that, if they do not after all let their plot break out into any overt act, they shall not then be molested or punished on account of this plot which I now denounce. Is that granted?"

"It is," said the earl, after a brief consultation with the king. "You pledge yourself that, neither directly nor indirectly, you will give them the least inkling of this plot being known to the Government."

"To that I solemnly pledge myself, if my demand be granted."

"I repeat, it is granted," said the earl.

"Let your king, then, say so," observed the black mask.

"We grant it," said the king.

"And I, on my part, fully acknowledge that to warn them of what I am doing is simply to put it into their power to modify their plans, and so ultimately to proceed with them to the same end."

The king bowed.

"The third, and only remaining condition, is that, as I came hither unknown, so I go away unknown; that I shall not be watched, or followed, or obstructed in any way, under any circumstances whatever, now or hereafter."

"You mean, provided—" interposed the earl.

"Yes, thank you, provided I now give, to the best of my power, a true and faithful account of the plot formed against the present occupant of the English throne. Is that clearly understood, beyond possibility of mistake, and is the pledge ready to be given to me?"

"Suppose you were to take it into your head to threaten the king, and say you would yourself go from this very place to raise the standard of civil war?" asked the earl.

"Then he and you will have to stomach the statement as well as you both can. I go free—rebel or no rebel!"

As to the king, he tried to put on a smile, and so smooth the matter over, but his face only looked ghastly instead of pleasant or genial.

"And you ask immunity beforehand, do you, for that?" demanded the earl, in a tone of scorn that almost amounted to laughter.

"No; I ask for nothing of the kind. 'Fall back—fall edge!' as an ancestor of mine said, in the civil wars of the last century, when his good faith was in question, and he had to face the possibility of the scaffold, the executioner, and the axe."

"What, then, was your demand?"

"Simply in coming here, to do you and your master a great service, that I might at least be assured that the service itself should not endanger me now or hereafter."

The quiet scorn of his reply cut deeper than the bitter scorn of the previous speech.

Unconsciously the earl found himself facing the gallery, and with arms nervously twitching to rise and give the signal, if only he could see how.

Ah! yes, the how was not at all clear; seemed, indeed, to be moving farther and farther off.

The king was the first to speak:

"I know not what you may be to the prince whom you call king, but I do not flatter you when I say that, if you served me as you seem prepared to him, I should feel myself a proud monarch to have so brave and so devoted a servant!"

"Is my condition accepted?" demanded the black mask, in a tone of unusual gentleness.

"It is," said the king.

"In the plain, literal meaning of the words, and not as words may be spoken and twisted and understood by the craft of juggling statesmen!—no disrespect to the earl of Bridgminster."

"In that sense your conditions are accepted, and our royal word sacredly and irrevocably pledged never to harm you, or allow you to be

harmed now or hereafter, on account of this interview."

"And I, having intentionally thus far desired to preclude myself from misconception, even if esteemed guilty of discourtesy, may now speak more at my ease, and protesting, once for all, against any claim of loyalty from me, under present circumstances—"

The king and earl exchanged glances, as if speculating on the hidden meaning of these last words, while the stranger went on—

"I shall, simply as a matter of courtesy and of personal and profound individual respect, not henceforward debar myself from acknowledging the fact that the prince I now address is, de facto, King of England!"

The king's face cleared considerably as he listened to this, which was said with manly dignity.

Nor was the effect diminished when the black mask added—

"Pardon me, your majesty, if I seem to remember too keenly the constant necessity for self assertion of my loyalty, for, alas! while you are great, rich, fortunate, my unhappy master sits low on the floor of adversity, dust and ashes upon his sacred head, with only a few faithful ones to comfort him. Can your majesty wonder if I desire, while it is possible, to be one of the few?"

"No," said the king, with some warmth; "but I must beg you to proceed, or I may, under the stress of your eloquence and character, turn Jacobite myself, which I suppose you don't expect or require?"

"No, indeed, your majesty," responded the stranger, with a tone that almost expressed the hidden smile.

The earl had listened to all this with extreme irritation. The king was obviously going the way that was exactly, opposite to the road he wanted him to take. So he tried a diversion.

"The gentleman," said he, aloud, "will, of course, be prepared to testify in open court what he is going to—"

"The gentleman will be prepared for nothing of the kind," was the instantaneous rejoinder. "Neither is the gentleman prepared to have any the least thing expected from him other than he has offered."

"A wilful man must have his way," ejaculated the king. "Remember the proverb, Bridgminster, and, in heaven's name, let us proceed."

In a low, monotonous tone, as if he desired to veil whatever emotion the tale he had to tell was calculated to excite, the black mask then began.

He spoke slowly, carefully choosing his words, so as to use very few of them.

And thus he spoke—

"On a certain Saturday, your majesty's hunt day, forty men, well armed—all picked men, brave, desperate, and, for the most part, honestly fanatical, therefore the more dangerous—will waylay your majesty at a convenient place, which is already fixed; will then, so the idea goes, make your majesty a prisoner, after overthrowing all opposition, and carry you off to France."

"Unless his majesty should happen to be too troublesome," said the earl, seeing his royal master too much shaken for the moment to speak.

"Exactly," responded the black mask. "They expect that trouble, and will be disappointed if they don't get it."

"And if they do get it?" queried the earl.

"They will murder him. In fact, I do not disguise from your majesty they mean murder and nothing else, or I should not have been here."

"Which Saturday?" asked the king, as soon as he could command his voice.

"The next; but they are prepared to postpone from Saturday to Saturday, week after week, if they will see occasion. They are under a man who will not let them strike till he feels sure of the blow, and who will strike then, if God and man alike challenge the deed."

"And who is this new hero of assassinations?" demanded the king.

"Sir George Charter."