

brought to her majesty; there is that in it which the boldest man in England dare not keep from Elizabeth an instant. As you value liberty and life, friend, do nothing to hinder me in the deliverance of my mission. The soul of my poor mistress will wrestle sorely with the body till I bring back tidings to her death-bed. I must see the queen."

"Be it so, then, as your business is so momentous," cried the yeoman. "I will lead you to the ante-room, and arouse some of the ladies—but remember, if evil comes of this, I will not hold myself responsible. The man should be bold, and the business weighty, that disturbs Elizabeth from her slumber at this hour."

"The business is weighty, and the scene that I have witnessed this night is enough to make a man brave any earthly peril without shrinking. What is it to ask an audience here, when my poor mistress is summoned before the King of Kings?"

"Have you a letter, or bring you only the message by word of mouth?" said the yeoman, still hesitating, though the agitation of his untimely visitor had made a strong impression upon him.

"Here is the letter!" cried the man, taking a large, square missive from his bosom, sealed with the Nottingham arms in black. "Hasten, good friend, hasten, I beseech you, and give it to the queen. Heaven only knows what torment my wretched mistress will know till the errand is done!"

The guard seemed greatly relieved by this timely and imposing excuse for disturbing the slumbers of his mistress. He took the letter, and passing through many a state chamber and richly-decorated gallery, paused in an ante-room, where half a dozen pages lay upon their couches asleep, some disrobed, and others muffled in mantles of azure velvet, and pillowed upon their own jeweled ringlets.

"What ho!" cried the guard, shaking one of these pages by the arm, and half lifting him from the couch. "Arouse yourself, good master George, and rub open those blue eyes, without loss of time. Here is a letter which you must give to one of the queen's bed-chamber women this very instant. Say it is a case of life or death. Do you hear, jackanapes?"

"Do I hear!" cried the lad, rubbing his eyes with a little hand, white as a lady's and sparkling with rings. "I should be deaf if it were otherwise. Why, man, your voice is like a trumpet. Do you guess what hour of the night it is? coming after this fashion to the very door of her majesty's chamber. This work will make you a head shorter, some fine day, master Yeoman!"

"Take the letter, and leave me to the care of my own head," replied the yeoman, sharply. "Give it to the first lady of the bed-chamber, and say that a messenger from the Countess of Nottingham awaits her majesty's pleasure here."

The lad took the letter, held it to the light of a large silver lamp that swung overhead, examined the seal minutely, and then turned his eyes with equal assurance upon the messenger, whose anxiety became each moment more apparent.

"It must be a pressing business; and, if one may judge by the white face of our friend there, full of peril! No matter, it shall not be said that the beloved of—the fairest and sweetest lady about the court—mind, master yeoman, I mention no names—ever allowed the peril of such an enterprise to count anything with him. Rest content, good friend," he added, turning to the messenger, "I will find a lady, whosoever she be, who will take upon herself greater danger than that of arousing the queen at midnight; fortunately, you have chanced upon the only courtier who could have managed the business for you."

"Well, jackanapes, get about the errand after your own fashion!" cried the yeoman, with an impatient laugh.

"Nay, you would not have me present myself before her without some preparation," said the youth, shaking the scented and glossy ringlets, with which his head was adorned, over his shoulders and arranging the folds of his cloak with an air of the most perfect self-coarct. "Tell me, master yeoman, for, lacking a mirror, I must even take counsel of your ignorance, think you not this garment falls a trifle too much over the right shoulder? Let me step beneath the lamp that you may judge."

"Tush, boy! this is no time for such foppery. Begone upon thy errand, or I could find it in my heart to knock a portion of the conceit from that little body. Go—go—

See you not our friend here is fast losing patience?"

This allusion to the messenger from Nottingham house was well authorized by the appearance of the man. Once or twice, as if bereft of all patience by the boy's foolish airs, he advanced a pace to take the letter from his hand, half determined to enter the queen's chamber, and at all peril present it himself. His cheek grew more and more pale and his eyes burned with anxiety "that nothing could restrain, as the page turned his head superciliously over one shoulder to look at him after the yeoman's remark, still holding the letter carelessly between his thumb and finger. His impatience broke all bounds. He strode forward, and grasping the youth by the arm, gave him a slight shake—"you trifle with a message from the dying," he said, sternly. "No more of this folly! Begone!"

The boy shook himself free, and with a petulant lift of the shoulder, muttered something about his cloak being forced away; but there was something in the deep passion with which he had been addressed that completely quelled his frivolous spirit, and without attempting any further excuse for delay, he left the chamber.

The queen had been ill in health, and becoming daily more infirm, it was necessary that some of her ladies should remain in attendance at night, ready at a moment's warning to answer her summons. Thus it was that the page on entering the small ante-room, or rather boudoir, which led to the royal bed-chamber, found a lovely woman in full dress, but with a rich brocade dressing gown thrown over her shoulders, sound asleep in a large easy chair heaped with crimson cushions, upon which her fair head had fallen, crushing a mass of beautiful hair, that had cost an artist much trouble that morning, beneath the warm roses of her cheek.

"Lady Arabella," whispered the page, stealing toward the fair slumberer, and sinking upon his knees while he touched the little hand that fell over an arm of the chair, timidly with his "Lady Arabella."

His voice was very low—for the boy could hardly breathe, his agitation was so great. With all his audacious beauty, he was timid as a child in the presence of purity and high-born loveliness like that. "Lady Arabella, I have a letter—I would speak with you!"

The lady started up in her chair, passed a hand over her eyes, as if to be quite sure that they were not deceiving her, and then bent them, full of sleepy wonder, upon the youth.

"Why, George, how is this! Here and after midnight!" she said, gently, but with evident surprise, and some displeasure.

"Lady, I have brought this for her majesty," said the boy, holding up the letter with its broad black seal. "A messenger has just arrived from Nottingham House. He says the countess is dying."

"Dying!" exclaimed Lady Arabella.

"Aye, dying; and the messenger says the lady, in her extremity, will have speech with the queen—that this letter must be given to her majesty even now."

"It cannot be," said the Lady Arabella, putting back the letter with her hand—"our royal mistress is ill at ease since—since her death, she gets but little sleep. I dare not disturb her."

"Shall I take the letter back?" said the page, rising. "The man is waiting without."

"Yet, if the poor countess is in such a strait—if she is in truth dying," said the gentle lady, reluctant to refuse that which she, nevertheless, had not the courage to undertake.

"Who speaks of dying?—what is it? Who speaks of dying?" cried a sharp voice from the royal bed-chamber. "Arabella—Arabella!"

"Hush! it is the queen. Give me the letter!" whispered the lady, and she entered an adjoining chamber.

Elizabeth had half risen, and leaned upon her elbow in the midst of her huge bed, her face looked haggard in the crimson shade cast downward from the crimson hangings, and her head shook with an almost imperceptible tremor that partook both of the infirmities of age and of the terror that sometimes follows unpleasant dreams. Locks of gray hair streamed down from her night-coiff, and she clutched the damask counterpane with a hand that shook like an aspen leaf as it crushed the glowing folds together.

"Did I dream? I did dream of the dead!" she exclaimed, bending her keen eyes upon the lady as she entered, and sinking slowly

back to her pillow. "Of the dead—the dying! The Countess of Nottingham—who told me the Countess of Nottingham was dying?"

"Your highness must have been disturbed by the messenger that just came up from Nottingham House with this letter," said the Lady Arabella, kneeling by the royal couch. "The hour was so untimely, that I was about to send him back again."

"Give me the letter," cried Elizabeth, starting up and seizing the folded parchment fiercely, as a bird of prey clutches its spoil—"I tell you, Arabella, I have dreamed things to-night that make the sounding of this seal terrible!" and with shaking hands the queen burst the black seal and tore it apart.

She cast her keen eyes over its contents, and dashing the letter aside sprang to the floor. "Yon garments, Arabella; bring yon garments and robe me," she cried in a voice that was low, but fearfully concentrated. "Quick, quick; no ruff—no farthingale, but a cloak and hood—one for yourself, too. Who walks in the anti-chamber?"

"The page, young George Pagot, one of your highness's yeomen, and the messenger from Nottingham House."

"It is enough! Let the boy go with us—the boy and yourself—that will be sufficient escort for Elizabeth on an errand like this."

"Shall I tell George to give orders that the royal barge be prepared?" said the Lady Arabella.

"Do not send hither the messenger," "Either!" questioned Arabella, mindful of the disarray which the royal person still exhibited.

"Yes—here, and thus!" replied Elizabeth, and a bitter smile swept over her face as she interpreted the look of her attendant.

Filled with wonder that almost amounted to consternation, Arabella went forth to summon the messenger. Elizabeth received him at the door of the chamber. She had folded a cloak around her person, but the hood was thrown back, and with nothing but the gray hair veiling the aged brow that had never been presented to the gaze of mortal man before, without the disguise of art and a blaze of jewels, she put a few brief questions to him:

"Come you to the palace by water?" "By water may it please your highness," replied the man.

"And your barge is here?"

"It is now in waiting, and the tide serves."

"Lead on, said the queen. "Arabella follow us with the boy; and you," she added, turning to the guard, "go attend us to the water, and then stir not from the gate till our return;" and the queen walked on with a degree of strength and energy which startled those who had witnessed the feebleness that had marked the last few months of her life. As they went forth into the open air, Arabella moved close to her royal mistress.

"Let me draw the hood somewhat over your majesty's head," she pleaded, for the wind was trifling with those snowy tresses, and it pained the young girl to see how careless the proud old queen seemed of an exposure to which she had always been so sensitive. "Mary—the cool wind does me good," reported Elizabeth, and with a firm step she descended to the barge, and took a seat upon one of the cushions. Midnight darkness lay upon the river; clouds, heavy and black, were heaped over the sky; and the shores, save here and there a solitary light from some residence, lay in profound night. Amid this wilderness of gloom, the barge swept rapidly downward with the tide. The flow of the waters, heavy and monotonous, was all the sound to be heard: no word was spoken, save when the old queen bade the rower make more speed.

At last the barge drew up by a flight of steps that led to a spacious garden half surrounded by the wings of a fine old mansion-house. Through one of the tall windows a light streamed forth upon the blackness, faint and dim, as if some lamp placed there were just expiring. "Go on to the sick room," said the queen, as her conductor would have taken her to another apartment, that her presence might be announced. "Stay you below, Arabella; we will see this dying countess alone," and with a firm step, Elizabeth mounted the stairs, and found herself in the chamber of death.

A large bed, canopied with masses of purple velvet, so deep-tinted that it seemed black in the gloom, stood at an extremity of the chamber; and upon it lay the pale form of a woman struggling in her death-agony. A group of persons stood around the bed, silent and awe-stricken. Toward

this group Elizabeth moved slow, upright and majestic.

"It is the queen!" cried the dying countess, lifting her thin hand. "God has had mercy! It is the queen—I can now die!"

"Leave us," said Elizabeth, waving her hand. The next moment she stood alone with the dying.

"Countess of Nottingham, you have sent for the queen—and she is here. What have you to say of Essex? And what can your death-bed confessions concern one whose fate is now sealed?"

The countess of Nottingham clasped her pale hands, and held them imploringly near the queen. Those hands were almost transparent, and, as the light fell upon them, upon one of the fingers it revealed a ruby, glowing like a spark of fire upon it. Elizabeth's eyes fell upon the gem, and instantly she became pale as the woman who lay prostrate before her, pleading, with mute eloquence, for mercy.

"Woman!" she said, grasping the pale hand of the dying countess, and bending her eyes close to the ruby, whose light made the heart tremble in her bosom: "Woman; how came you possessed of this ring?"

The countess of Nottingham closed her eyes, to shut out the terrible anger that convulsed the aged face bending over her death-pillow; her lips moved again and again, before they could utter a word. At length she spoke, but feebly and very low. The queen bent her ear close to those pale lips, that her thirsty ear might drink in every syllable of the confession they were whispering. She held her breath—and a wild fierce expression, like that of a wounded eagle, came to her eyes. When all was told—when the dying woman opened her eyes, and, with a look of most touching entreaty, besought mercy for the fraud which had brought the noble head of Essex to the block—then the volcano which her words had lighted in the old queen's heart blazed forth. Elizabeth stood upright; the infirmities of age were swallowed up in mighty wrath; her lips grew livid; her eyes burned as with fire; and every nerve in her body seemed hardening into iron. "Mercy!" she cried, in a voice shrill with anguish and wrath. "Woman; God may forgive you, but I never will!"

The wretched countess, terrified even in her death throes, lowered down, and groveled in her bed. "Oh, God! wilt thou too withhold mercy?" broke from her shivering lips.

"Mercy!" whispered the old queen—for wrath made her voice very low, and she spoke between her locked teeth—"mercy!" and, mad with anguish, she seized the dying woman, and shook her, till the huge couch, with its gloomy masses of velvet and its dusky plumes, trembled in every joint.

When the old monarch withdrew her hands from this unqueenly act, they dropped helplessly by her side, for she saw that her violence had done sacrilege to the dead.

Ten minutes went by, during which Elizabeth stood over that death-couch; then she turned away, and passing from the chamber, descended the stairs, waving a hand for her young attendants to follow. When Elizabeth entered the dwelling she wore no jewel of any kind; but, as the light fell upon her hand in going forth, Arabella saw that a ruby blazed upon one of her fingers.

It was night when the queen of England entered her own palace again—night upon the earth, night in her own heart. She could scarcely walk while passing through the palace grounds, and leaned heavily on the arm of Lady Arabella all the way to her own chamber. Within the solitude of her room she sat till morning—her face pale and rigid, her limbs bowed as with a heavy weight—gazing intently upon the ring, which burned like a blood spot on her finger—a blood spot—so it was. That ring she had given to Essex, when highest in her favor, with a promise that, let his fault be what it might, forgiveness should follow its presentation to her. He had sent the ring a few days before his execution, by the wretched countess of Nottingham, who withheld it in fraud—and, by this treachery, Elizabeth became the executrix of one whom she loved better than life.

And now that he was dead, the ring had reached her from the hand of death. Was it at that time that the old queen never smiled again—that henceforth she called for a staff to support her as she walked about the palace—or that in a few weeks she lay upon the cushions heaped in her chamber weary, heart sick, afraid to die, yet dying?

(THE END.)