

THE QUEEN'S SECRET.

CHAPTER XX.—Continued.

And now, as the clouds of fortune began to lower a little, another secret had come to his knowledge—the encounter at the gate with Leicester and the lady removing the infant under her cloak. He had taken both time and trouble to sift this strange affair to the bottom, and having ascertained that the Countess of Harrington was not to be found at a certain hour that night, when a messenger arrived at court to announce the death of her sister, the Lady Granby, and certain that the tall man wrapped in the cloak could be no other than the Earl of Leicester, his suspicions were excited; and once excited, he found circumstantial evidence enough to confirm them. But now the difficulty was, how to communicate his knowledge of this secret to the queen, without the necessity of an explanation; and on the other hand, might not his knowledge prove fatal to him as it did to Marak, the physician, whose imprisonment in the Tower had little trouble to account for? These reflections passed rapidly through his mind and left him doubtful and uneasy. Yet on the success of Murray his hopes of future advancement were as much dependent as on the favor of the queen; so that should Elizabeth withdraw her countenance and support from the arch rebel, the latter must inevitably fall, and his own hopes, from the ruin of Mary Stuart, fall with him. He resolved, therefore, to press the consideration of his friend's claim,—though at some hazard to himself,—and reserve any allusion he might make to the night adventure for some more favorable occasion. "And please your majesty," resumed Plimpton, "my Lord Murray hath doubtless fancied he could find no shelter so sure, and so welcome, with your grace's favor, as behind the throne for whose wail he risked his life." "Our throne, sir, requires no foreign arm to protect it," said the queen proudly, "and, by God's good help, it never shall; and if this Lord Murray turn his sword against his rightful sovereign, on pretence of his zeal for God's truth, and love for our royal person and throne, why, God's mercy, sir, he must not tarry in being, after his routing, and make our palace a sanctuary—ay, sir, a sanctuary for traitors and rebels!" "But your majesty's connection with—" "With what, sir?" "I fear me, gracious madam, that your Majesty's letters of encouragement to the Scottish lords—" "Letters of encouragement!" cried Elizabeth, rising, and pushing back the table before her, in a burst of anger. "Now, by our royal patience, Sir Fellow, thou must be demoted, or just come hither from the seclusion. What! speak to us of letters of encouragement—of completing with rebel subjects of our good sister and cousin! Away, sir—quit the presence." And she pointed to the door as she spoke. "Right well we deserve this reward," for having taken such a blundering, base-born, churl into our secret service. Begone, sir!" But Plimpton would not be demitted so easily. He had some matters of grave personal interest still to submit to her majesty, which could not well be postponed. "Pardon, most gracious madam," he said, clasping his hands and falling on his knee before her; "I humbly entreat your majesty to bear with me."

"Ay, that thou mayst have leisure to consult us, Sir Knave." "Nay, if I've been over-hold, madam, it cometh of my zeal for your majesty's honor." "Our honor, varlet! our honor! and our royal house to speak of, in a gallery and our royal house in the same breath!" "And how could it be otherwise, madam? Thy honor, and thy glory, which are ever safe in Heaven's good keeping, are the source of my breath and of my life!" "Ah, sir, wouldst say, said Elizabeth somewhat softened, "and tarry here despite our command?" "I beg but for my life," replied Plimpton, letting his long arms fall by his side, and his crooked, over-grown head upon his breast, in an attitude of abject abandonment. "Thy life! Why, sir, we grudge thee not thy life. I pray, man, thou wouldst make but poor quarry for our falcons. God's mercy, fellow, we fly not at crows and cormorants." "Nay, I fear not so much the death that cometh from the axe of the headsman, as that from the displeasure of my gracious and right royal mistress," replied Plimpton, in the accents of a slave before his sultan. Elizabeth smiled contemptuously at the crouching form before her, and turned away a step in disgust; and yet, strange to say, she felt her pride gratified by the fears and insouciant adulation of even so mean a sycophant. "If her gracious majesty frown upon her poor servant he dies," continued Plimpton, his hands still clasped before him in an attitude of supplication, "and his royal mistress loses a faithful and devoted servant,—but alas! alas! one whose blood and unnumbered speech are ill besuited to the etiquette of a royal palace." The queen relaxed her brows, and paced the room for a minute or two, deliberating whether she would send him out of the way, till she had exculpated herself before the foreign ambassadors of all shires in Murray's conspiracy, or still use him as a tool to help her in the difficulty. At length she stopped before him, and tapping him on the head with the end of her fan, said, in a still severe, but less angry tone,— "Hark thee, Master Plimpton; we fear us much thy memory is over-good for thy place at court."

"My memory, please your grace?" "Ay, verily, thy memory, man; it may lose thee thy head, mayhap. Court dependants should be like Popish priests, who betray not even to the penitents themselves the knowledge of their secrets told in the confessional. Didst not say, just now, something of letters and gold thou'st whilom conveyed to these Scotch insurgents?" "Letters, my liege?" repeated Plimpton, with well-affected embarrassment. "Ay, sir, letters and money, or something like—nay, perhaps thou didst—but fancy it." "Fear of your grace's displeasure hath doubtless confused my poor senses," responded Plimpton. "Ah, thou didst but fancy, then, or, as thou sayest, the fear of our sovereign displeasure hath made away with thy wits. Well, well, get thee up. We pardon thy indiscretion for this bout, but would have thee to know, nevertheless, that should report ever touch our ears of letters or encouragement to these ungracious lords, written by thee in our name, (ay, thou'st muttered it something, we think, thatwise,) if thou dost murmur such vagaries even in thy dreams, so that looting eyes might catch the meaning from the mumping, by our royal self, we shall send thee to bubble thy tales to stone walls for the rest of thy life. And hark thee, sir; as for my Lord Murray, we've thought better of it, and may prevail on our forbearance to receive him an hour hence in our council chamber, seeing he may come not so much to seek our protection (the which God forbid we should ever refuse to the truly repentant, or to the sufferer in a good cause) as to beg our intercession with our good sister, and to exonerate us before the French and Spanish ambassadors, of charges in respect to this wicked and traitorous brawl. These, peradventure, may be the purposes of this Scotchman journeying in such haste towards us; and if so, we must see to it that we require him accordingly. But we will have him know, Master Plimpton, that it suits not our pleasure to grant him a private audience, and shall see him only in our council chamber, before our faithful friends and right trusty councillors, so that no malicious tongue may have cause to slaver its suspicions on our royal house. And if thou'st concerned for his welfare, see to him presently, and caution him that he trip not—for an he trips, he falls. As to thyself, Sir Thomas, learn to shorten thy memory on occasion, or it may run away with thy head. So now get thee gone, master," she concluded, and waving him off resumed her seat and rang her bell. "Who waits?" she inquired, as Boyer, the gentleman of the black rod, made his appearance. "The noble Earl of Murray and the Abbot Killwilling, please your majesty." "What, sir, renegade traitors so bold as to crave a private audience! Send them to the council chamber, sir; we shall there deal with them presently—away with them!" When Boyer disappeared, Elizabeth's quick ear caught the sound of angry voices in the ante-chamber, and again ringing her bell, sharply demanded, who were so bold as thus to raise the voices in her hearing. "My Lord of Leicester, please your majesty," responded Boyer, his voice coming stout and thick, like one much excited. He would force an entrance against the royal order. "Ay, sir, my Lord of Leicester, bawling at our chamber doors!" "And I pray your grace's majesty to decide," continued Boyer, "whether the noble earl in master in your majesty's palace, and as he saith, can dismiss all court officers at his good pleasure." Elizabeth rose suddenly, ere Boyer had done speaking, and crossing the apartment, threw open the door, and confronted the dispartants. "The instant the queen appeared, every eye was bent and every voice hushed. The Duke of Sussex and Sir John Harrington, who stood at the recess of one of the windows, looking on and laughing at the fray, suddenly checked their mirth, and even Leicester himself seemed to quail before her angry frown, though he well knew he possessed a secret charm, by which he could obviate the consequences of her displeasure, did he but choose to employ it. Perhaps Elizabeth herself at this moment suspected there was some hidden mystery on which he relied for security, and the consciousness of which made him thus bold to set her orders at defiance. Ever since her recent illness his bearing and manner, even in her presence, had become less courteous and respectful; and she had learnt from report, that his behavior towards the members of her council, and especially to Cecil himself, was marked by greater hauteur than usual. As these reflections crossed her mind, she felt, or rather feared she was in the earl's power, and that he might use it to her hands and seal her lips in future, if she did not at once crush his efforts and his hopes. It seemed to her this attempt to force an entrance into her private cabinet, in direct opposition to her express order, was his first trial of strength between the secret and the sceptre. Had Elizabeth's blood been of a lower temperature, she would have promptly rebuked and dismissed the disputants, and then taken an early occasion to ascertain the cause of Leicester's extraordinary conduct, and adopt the best means to correct it. But she was a Tudor Plantagenet, and the blood in her veins had descended to her through fiery channels. "How now, my Lord of Leicester, she demanded; "hath our royal favor made thee so bold as to contravene our orders in our very hearing?" "Please your grace's majesty," began the earl, bowing profoundly, and then drawing himself up again to his full height, like one about to enter on a long explanation; but Elizabeth stopped him ere he had well begun. "Peace, my lord—peace with thy stale apologies, they're flat as small beer. We have willed thee well, Sir Earl, but our favor was not so locked up in thee that we care not for others. God's death, my lord, if thou think'st to rule here, we shall see thee forthcom."

"Most gracious mistress," persisted the earl, again bowing almost to his shoe buckles, and yet with little show of concern for her displeasure, "your grace's gentlemen ushers have become so malapert under your majesty's favor, that the nobles of the court must stand aside as they pass." "Nay, my lord, hadst thou been less confident of our forbearance, thou'd have thought our servants more courteous. Thy audacious pride, my lord, is a stumbling stone in thy way, and may one day break thy neck if thou cast it not aside." "I have already measured my steps, please your grace, and learnt to tread without danger 'tripping,'" responded Leicester, in a tone of such mock humility and assurance as to provoke the queen still more. "My lord, we shall repress thy presumption," she cried, stamping on the floor, and forgetting at once the modesty of the woman and the dignity of the queen. "We shall have but one mistress here, and no master; and look ye well that no ill happen to our trusty servant, lest it be severely requited at thy haunce." "I meant the good gentleman no ill, please your sacred majesty," replied Leicester, looking over at Boyer, and smiling as he would on a froward child who had just raised a staff to strike him, "but had merely thought of pulling his ears for his impertinence. Had I known, however, that your grace would resent the indiscretion so warmly—" "And what art thou, my Lord of Leicester?" interrupted the queen, cut to the quick by the significant sneer with which the earl accompanied the last sentence, "that we should fear to assert our authority against thy good pleasure?" "Verily, a man of small account," replied Leicester, again making a humble obeisance to the queen, ere he turned to leave; "but one, nevertheless, whose claim on your majesty's forbearance this disgrace cannot reach, and which must still survive were I sent to the Tower or the block."

As Leicester spoke, the queen gazed in his face, completely astonished at the bold, measured tones in which he addressed her; but when he had concluded, and his terrible words left her no room to doubt his meaning, she staggered back a step, and the blood rushed from her face to her ear, freezing it as it went. She stood there for an instant, pale and speechless, before a crowd of courtiers, each waiting with breathless anxiety to hear her order for the earl's arrest, for they attributed her sudden paleness to excessive rage at his bold language and haughty bearing; but no order came. The Countess of Harrington, who had entered the ante-chamber shortly after her majesty, and stood close to her person, took her hand as she staggered back, and squeezed her fingers hard to nerve her against a weakness that might defeat all her precautions. "I live," whispered Elizabeth in a voice only intended for the ear of the countess; "there's no longer doubt, and, therefore, I must submit to this indignity." "May it please your majesty," said the Duke of Sussex, approaching the queen, now that her color had returned, without bringing back to her features, however, any sign of anger or resentment, and speaking in his usual brusque manner—"may it please your majesty, I think it would be well if your grace appointed his lordship director at once of the black rod, the stools and the bed chamber."

"How so, my lord duke?" said the queen, turning an angry glance on the enemy of her favorite. "Why, under your majesty's favor," replied Sussex, "since the noble earl holds all offices of trust at home and abroad, he should, methinks, hold those also of your majesty's household." "My lord duke," responded Elizabeth, with strong irony, "we doubt not your grace would elevate my Lord of Leicester to a yet higher place than even our bonny could bestow, were he but in your grace's power." The earl, having made his last obeisance to her majesty with a peculiar smile on his lip, which she knew well the meaning, and waving his plumed hat in adieu to the courtiers present, turned to leave, when he found himself directly in front of the Duke of Sussex. Leicester halted on his step, and gazed insolently in his rival's face, whilst the latter uttered his biting sarcasm, and then, bowing low, touched the hilt of his rapier significantly with his fore-finger, again glanced at the duke, and strode from the room, the crowd falling back respectfully as he passed. The queen, whose eye though turned on Sussex, followed every motion of the earl, and detected the secret movement of his finger, and the duke's nod of acquiescence, said, as the door closed behind the former,— "Now, my lord duke, we would have thee see to it that no court broll grow out of this affair." "Nay, but the noble earl, please your majesty," laughed Sussex, "is willing to suffer chastisement for his insolence, and hath but signified his wish to receive it at my hands. By my certificate, it's a right charitable deed, and methinks your majesty should not bar it." "Gadzooks, man," said Sir John Harrington, taking advantage of the fool's privilege which her majesty always seemed to accord him—"gadzoork, man, let the earl be; what business is 't' thine? Let him who spoiled the broth sup the broth, an he like it; and taking the duke by the arm, led him to the door of the apartment. As it opened, however, the queen saw the Earl of Leicester standing in the passage without, awaiting the exit of Sussex, his arms crossed on his breast, and his face flushed with anger. "Hark thee, my lord duke," said Elizabeth, motioning his grace to return; "thou'it please us more to pass through this door on the right,—and she spoke in a voice of stern severity,—and confine thyself to thy apartment till our further pleasure be known."

CHAPTER XXI.

When the queen re-entered the privy chamber, followed by Lady Harrington, she clasped her hands in a paroxysm of despair, and throwing herself into her favorite's motioned the countess to a seat beside her. "O my God, it lives! it lives!" she ejaculated, in a voice broken and husky from the terror which the threat of the Earl of Leicester had inspired, and looking as pale as if she had just risen from the grave. "It lives! it lives! and the thought crushes my soul; it makes me cower like a child with fear." "Fear!" repeated the countess, drawing the chair closer, and taking the queen's trembling hand in hers. "I little thought the dauntless Elizabeth could thus experience fear. What fearest thou, madam?" "Leicester; didst not hear him?" "Nay, my lord, hadst thou been less noble a gentleman," affirmed the countess. "But it lives! it lives!" repeated Elizabeth, "and he will rule me as a slave. Woman, woman, thou knowest not the man. How sayest thou he is honest? Hath he not broken his promise? Did he not swear to me it should die. Ay, hath he not pledged his faith, knelt at my feet?" "And what proof hast thou, madam, that he broke it?" said the countess. "Proof?" repeated the queen—"proof? Ah, but I had forgotten thou hast not studied his words, his looks, as I have. Proof, alas! I've proof enough. I read it in his bearing—in his eyes—ere his lips avowed it. Did he not say his claim on our forbearance should survive the gallows or the block?" "Ay, truly, your majesty," said the countess; "but the noble lord referred, doubtless, to his great devotion to your majesty's person and throne. Nay, I dare be sworn my lord is right honest, and that fear under your grace's favor hath crazed thy wit. Nerve thyself, my royal mistress, and shake off this dread, so unbefitting a queen."

"Verily I was once a queen," she replied, covering her face with her hands. "Ay, but an hour gone, and I was a queen, and felt like a sovereign who had learnt to rule and obey; but now, my God, I've lost—lost my soul, my heart, my sceptre, and my crown, by a single cast! He hath robbed me, like a thief, of all that I valued most." "Hoot, tut! madam! and what boots it now to sorrow at the mischance?" interrupted the countess. "Thou'it not the first royal maiden who hath stumbled from momentary weakness." "Weakness! I pab! thou'it a fool," said Elizabeth, impatiently, jerking her head away. "I mean not that—I mean the consciousness of possessing a supreme will. It was that nerve my arm to fling princes and nobles at my feet. Now, I'm nothing, nothing—conquered—lost, lost, lost," she cried, letting her head fall on the table before her, in utter abandonment—"mastered—conquered—crushed—powerless as a broken reed." The countess never remembered to have seen Elizabeth so completely prostrated as she was now, under the threat which Leicester's words conveyed. She had been admitted to her confidence more than any other lady of the court; was privy to most of her intrigues since her coronation, and before; and often had cause to wonder at her recklessness of those dangers which more than once perilled her life and to admire the undaunted energy with which she rose up to meet them. But now she seemed to abandon herself to despair—to lose all her wonted self-possession, and to relinquish every hope of extricating herself from the toils in which Leicester had ensnared her. The countess well knew, from long experience of her royal mistress, it was no remorse for the past, nor dread of the future, nor the loss of honor, nor the sense of self-debasement, that bowed her head upon the table: it was the terrible consciousness that she was no longer supreme—that there was one in the state who could baffle her tongue and tie her hands. It was this harrowing thought that paralyzed every faculty of her being. Elizabeth remained thus motionless for a time, her face buried in her hands, when the countess, hardly knowing what she said, in her anxiety to console her, muttered in a tone between regret and reproach,— "By my good troth this is more than I expected—the great Elizabeth crushed thus by a misfortune so trifling."

"If a single doubt remained on the queen's mind as to Plimpton's possession of her secret, this reply completely removed it; she felt, the instant he pronounced the words, that he knew nothing beyond the bare fact of the infant's removal from the court; otherwise, he was too prudent a man to allude to it. Plimpton himself felt he must play a bold game for his life, a life which he now held on a precarious tenure. Did he betray but a suspicion of the infant's true mother, either by look or word, he knew well his head would fall ere the sun had gone down. And therefore it was that, completely to deceive and blindfold Elizabeth, he trounced so closely on the very subject of her apprehension. Indeed, so closely did he shave the truth (if one may venture to speak so) that the mispronunciation of a single letter had cost him his life. "Well, well," she replied, resuming her seat, "we must not take cognizance of those matters, since we cannot prevent them; and we'd have thee, Master Plimpton, to guard thy slippery tongue from babbling on such delicate themes, lest thou dost scandal, mayhap, to our royal palace. And now, sir, what of this boon thou'd beg of us? Hast caught the flying dromedary yet? and what hath become of the hero of the tartan bonnet and the green doublet?" And the queen turned a smile upon the countess as she spoke. "It's on this very matter I have made bold to avail your majesty's leisure and crave your royal commands. This Scot, it seems, hath more weighty business on hand than the rescue of a silly wench from your majesty's pursuivants." And he drew forth a pocket from his pocket, and respectfully presented it to the queen. "Ah, what may this be?" she said, running her eye down to the signature: "from our good cousin of Scotland; no less! and accrediting her faithful servant, Master Rodger O'Brien, to Sir Geoffrey Wentworth, of Brocton, counselling him to send his daughter Alice to Holyrood, forthwith, under the bearer's honorable escort, and himself to fly to France and escape the impending danger." "So this is thy lady love, our good sister would fain thee of. Ah, by our royal honor, we shall take good care the silly wench cross not the borders in such company; it would but ill become us, the sovereign and guardian of our subjects, to suffer this errand lady to fly our protection under a single escort of such a sprig; and an Irishman too, if we can judge by the name. Ah, but what is this man?" she ejaculated, as she opened a small packet carefully enclosed in the other, and read a few lines—"To her right trusty friends, DeFoyes and the Marquis of Quadra, French and Spanish ambassadors at our court; hath the complaisance of our plotting with her enemies in Scotland, and prays the interference of Charles and Philip to save her from our machinations; excellent well, good sister and cousin! and let's see; ay, and so thou hast sent a right trusty messenger, Master Rodger O'Brien; ah, by the mass, this is too serious a joke. How earnest thou by these letters, Sir Thomas?" she demanded. "My sergeant of the troop, please your majesty, found them lying on the road between an almshouse called the 'White Hart' and Brocton Hall, whether this O'Brien was journeying, when we came up with him."

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