

"Well, my masters," he said, looking around, as he took his seat, "what sport is afloat? Gramercy! but you all look as gloomy as the boatman as Acherow."

A faint artificial laugh was the answer to this pleasantry.

"We have been engaged in serious business to-night, Hugh," replied Anthony Babington with an air of importance "and you must know well what business I mean."

Hugh Huntley looked uneasily round ere he spoke.

"If you have business," he said, "which is linked with danger, business," he added, lowering his voice, "which may bring your heads to the block—surely the common room of a public tavern is not the place in which to discuss it."

"Pshaw!" replied Babington, "there is no one here who minds us—no one who dreams what our purpose is. But list ye, Hugh! Our project ripens rapidly; our friends are rapid in every part of the kingdom. As soon as the blow is struck the whole country will rise in our favor, and your lady of Scotland will be free to return home to claim the crown of her ancestors, with many a stout English arm to help her, and she list. Say, Hugh, will you join us now, at the last hour, and share our triumph?"

"No, Master Babington," said Huntley resolutely, laying his hand firmly but not noisily on the table. "No! I will fight for the good cause in the open field as becomes a soldier—I will shed my blood for it if need be; but I will not soil my hand with the assassin's dagger."

As he spoke thus with subdued vehemence of tone, a murmur ran around the board, and there was a dark frown on every face. "My friends," continued Hugh in gentler accents, "I had hoped you had given up this mad project. But it is not yet too late—oh! dear friends, I implore you, desist from it or (I warn you) the path on which you are treading will surely lead to the scaffold and the headsman's block."

"It pleaseth me well," said the keen-eyed little gentleman sneeringly, to find that Master Huntley still possesses all the proverbial prudence and caution of

his country. He is wise not to risk his precious life oven to save a nation."

"Yet beshrew me," said a rougher, sterner voice, "me seems it becometh a cavalier who boasts of his loyalty to his native queen to desert the royal lady in this crisis of her faith."

"Look, ye, sirs," Hugh replied in tones that betrayed the anger and indignation he struggled to subdue, "if any man says that I am false to the royal but unfortunate lady to whom I have pledged my faith, I tell him to his teeth he lies, and I will prove it on his body with my good sword. I will fight for my queen if opportunity offers: if need be, I will readily lay down my life to-morrow to see her walk forth a free woman from that castle of Fotheringay and again ascend the throne of her ancestors. But even for her I will not play the assassin. Nay, my masters, ye need not darken your brows with frowns nor lay your hands upon your swords; it would take more than that to intimidate a Huntley. But believe me it is in the true spirit of friendship that I warn you of the danger on which you are rushing blindfold. Ye think ye are venturing a great and noble enterprise. I tell ye, friends, you are stumbling amid traps and pitfalls. I believe, I know, ye are the dupes of the emissaries of Cecil and Walsingham; and, woe's me! ye will bring destruction, not only on your own heads, but also on the head of the dear but most unfortunate lady whom you profess to befriend. Be warned then in time: give up this mad and wicked enterprise, or, if you do not, I prophecy to you (and the day is not far off) that the hour will come when you will repent that you did not take my advice—the hour when the rack will stretch your aching limbs and the flash of the headsman's axe will dazzle your weary eyes. For my part, I quit you here, bitterly mourning the fatal lot you have chosen for yourselves. I would save you if I could; but you are wilful in your purpose. Gentlemen, I bid you a good-night."

The next moment he was gone. The conspirators, who had half drawn their swords, followed his departing figure with eyes that expressed nearly as much of vague fear as of anger. Then they fell back in their seats, staring at one