

with a sardonic smile. He had penetrated to the lowest depths of her wicked heart, and knew every evil thought that stirred it; he knew her most earnest wish was the hapless Mary's death.

"May it please my gracious liege," he said in the same soft, insinuating voice he had used before, "great sovereigns cannot afford to indulge their private feelings, or their natural tenderness of heart where the interests of the state are at stake. The welfare of the country has its claims upon you, and private feeling must give place to public duty."

Elizabeth darted on him a look more cunning than his own.

"Methinks," she said, thou talkest wisely and shrewdly, Sir Francis."

"So please you," continued the minister, following up his point, "if this unfortunate lady repays all your kindness by such ingratitude that she is constantly hatching plots and conspiracies against your royal throne and person, she is doubly, trebly a traitor, and well deserveth, methinks, to die a traitor's death. And that all this be so, we are furnished with abundant proof."

"God's death! dost say so?"

"We have abundant evidence—would your Majesty please to peruse the documents. They are many and voluminous."

"No, no," said Elizabeth recoiling—"I will have naught to say to it. God's death! man, have I not ministers and servants enough to do the work of justice without the royal name being dragged into it?"

The Secretary was silent; but looked at the Queen slyly from under his overhanging brows. He read her every thought and desire.

"If so please your Majesty," he said, "to give us authority."

"I will give you authority for nothing," cried the Queen peevishly.

There was a long silent pause, during which Elizabeth regained a calmer temper, and the old sly cunning look returned to her cold gray eye.

"Good St. Francis," she said, "what would you counsel me to do in this sorely perplexing business?"

"An it please your majesty," said Walsingham, scarcely able to keep his sense of triumph under control, "if you will graciously take your poor servants advice, I would recommend that

a commission be appointed to interrogate the prisoner and find out the connection with these conspiracies."

The Queen paused a moment in deep thought.

"Be it so then," she presently said, "be it as you think best. *Do what you believe to be your duty to me*; but let me hear no more about it till this work be done."

If she could (as she turned away) have seen the cold sneering smile that curled the lip of the unscrupulous minister, she would hardly have been gratified.

"But here," she said as the door opened, "here comes my Lord of Burleigh. You had better advise with him."

Cecil approached, bent his knee, and kissed the royal hand.

"My lord," said Walsingham in his usual sly, suave tones, "her Majesty has been most graciously pleased to order that a commission be appointed forthwith to inquire what connection the lady Mary of Scotland, so long the guest of England (and who so ill repays the protection of England), has with the conspiracies and plots that do fret and agitate the land."

"And, by my troth, an order worthy of the royal wisdom," replied Burleigh with his serpentine nod. "But as for these same plots against her Majesty's life, sure that restless lady in the tower is the author of them all."

Well, well, said Elizabeth, with nervous uneasiness, "be it as ye list—be it as ye list. I wash my hands of it."

So saying she hurried from the cabinet; and as she crossed a secret passage to her own private apartments, she struck against the ground the ebony staff upon which she leant (for the "virgin" was now old and in need of support), as through her clenched teeth she muttered:

"If they rid me of this hatred rival I care not how they do it."

Walsingham and Burleigh looked at one another and smiled grimly.

"She dies the death," said the Secretary of State with a chuckle worthy of the foul fiend himself.

"Hast got more evidence, worthy Sir Francis?" asked the crafty Cecil with a peculiar smile.

"Of a verity yes, my good lord," replied the Secretary. "Four of my faith-