

husband. But be brief, for I expect his hasty approach.

'Briefly, then, madam,' replied Varney, 'and boldly, for my argument requires both haste and courage—You have this day seen Tressilian?'

'I have, sir; and what of that?' answered the lady somewhat sharply.

'Nothing that concerns me, lady,' Varney replied, with humility. 'But think you, honoured madam, that your lord will hear it with equal equanimity?'

'And wherefore should he not?—to me alone was Tressilian's visit embarrassing and painful, for he brought news of my good father's illness.'

'Of your father's illness, madam!' answered Varney. 'It must have been sudden, then—very sudden; for the messenger whom I despatched, at my lord's instance, found the good knight on the hunting-field, cheering his beagles with his wonted jovial field-cry. I trust Tressilian has but forged this news—He hath his reasons, madam, as you well know, for disquieting your present happiness.'

'You do him injustice, Master Varney,' replied the countess, with animation, '—you do him much injustice. He is the freest, the most open, the most gentle heart that breathes—My honourable lord ever excepted, I know not one to whom falsehood is more odious than to Tressilian.'

'I crave your pardon, madam,' said Varney; 'I meant the gentleman no injustice—I knew not how nearly his cause affected you. A man may, in some circumstances, disguise the truth for fair and honest purpose; for were it to be always spoken, and upon all occasions, this were no world to live in.'

'You have a courtly conscience, Master Varney,' said the countess, 'and your veracity will not, I think, interrupt your preferment in the world, such as it is.—But touching Tressilian—I must do him justice, for I have done him wrong, as none know better than thou.—Tressilian's conscience is of other mould—the world thou speakest of has not that which could bribe him from the way of truth and honour; and for living in it with a soiled fame, the ermine would as soon seek to lodge in the den of the foul polecat. For this my father loved him—For this I would have loved him—if I could—And yet in this case he had what seemed to him, unknowing alike of my marriage, and to whom I was united, such powerful reasons to withdraw me from this place, that I well trust he exaggerated much of my father's indisposition, and that thy better news may be the truer.'

'Believe me they are, madam,' answered Varney; 'I pretend not to be a champion of that same naked virtue called truth, to the very entrance. I can consent that her charms be hidden with a veil, were it but for decency's sake. But you must think lower of my head and heart, than is due to one whom my noble lord deigns to call his friend, if you suppose I could wilfully and unnecessarily palm upon your ladyship a falsehood, so soon to be detected, in a matter which concerns your happiness.'

'Master Varney,' said the countess, 'I know that my lord esteems you, and holds you a

faithful and a good pilot in those seas in which he has spread so high and so venturous a sail. Do not suppose, therefore, I meant hardly by you, when I spoke the truth in Tressilian's vindication—I am, as you well know, country-bred, and like plain rustic truth better than courtly compliment; but I must change my fashions with my sphere, I presume.'

'True, madam,' said Varney, smiling; 'and though you speak now in jest, it will not be amiss that in earnest your present speech had some connection with your real purpose.—A court-dame—take the most noble—the most virtuous—the most unimpeachable, that stands around our Queen's throne—would, for example, have shunned to speak the truth, or what she thought such, in praise of a discarded suitor, before the dependent and confidant of her noble husband.'

'And wherefore,' said the countess, colouring impatiently, 'should I not do justice to Tressilian's worth, before my husband's friend—before my husband himself—before the whole world?'

'And with the same openness,' said Varney, 'your ladyship will this night tell my noble lord your husband, that Tressilian has discovered your place of residence, so anxiously concealed from the world, and that he has had an interview with you.'

'Unquestionably,' said the countess. 'It will be the first thing I tell him, together with every word that Tressilian said, and that I answered. I shall speak my own shame in this, for Tressilian's reproaches, less just than he esteemed them, were not altogether unmerited—I will speak, therefore, with pain, but I will speak, and speak all.'

'Your ladyship will do your pleasure,' answered Varney; 'but methinks it were as well, since nothing calls for so frank a disclosure, to spare yourself this pain, and my noble lord the disquiet, and Master Tressilian, since belike he must be thought of in the matter, the danger which is like to ensue.'

'I can see nought of all these terrible consequences,' said the lady composedly, 'unless by imputing to my noble lord unworthy thoughts which I am sure never harboured in his generous heart.'

'Far be it from me to do so,' said Varney.—And then, after a moment's silence, he added, with a real or affected plainness of manner, very different from his usual smooth courtesy—'Come, madam, I will show you that a courtier dare speak truth as well as another, when it concerns the weal of those whom he honours and regards, ay, and although it may infer his own danger.'—He waited as if to receive commands, or at least permission, to go on, but, as the lady remained silent, he proceeded, but obviously with caution.—'Look around you,' he said, 'noble lady, and observe the barriers with which this place is surrounded, the studious mystery with which the brightest jewel that England possesses is secluded from the admiring gaze—See with what rigour your walks are circumscribed, and your movements restrained, at the beek of yonder churlish Foster. Consider all this, and judge for yourself what can be the cause.'