

"If—if I understand you, Sir George," and the king's voice dropped perceptibly lower in tone, and became less loud, "you mean that something more than an insurrection—however well planned, and however well supported—is needed?"

"I do, your majesty," answered Sir George, in a manner that sounded very much like striking a blow with every word.

"And that is—?"

"Pardon me, sire—this is no child's play that I come about."

He rose, walked to the double doors, opened them, saw no listeners—or possible listeners—walked back, and standing before the king, said, in a very searching, sinister tone—

"Sire, may I now speak—assured that there are no eavesdroppers?"

"Assuredly," said the king, while a faint trace of colour fled across his cheek, and left it colourless as before.

"It is consideration for your majesty's honour and dignity that made me speak, no base fear for myself. What I have to say I think it possible your majesty would not choose to have any one, however near or trusted, be made acquainted with."

"Ha! Say you so? Sir George, one word with you. Do you object to the presence of my chief adviser, the Marquis of Burford?"

"Candidly, sire, I would much rather speak unheard by any but yourself. But permit me to ask—what is the marquis's policy? Does he favour bold measures or mild ones?"

"Candidly, Sir George, he is inclined to be too bold, too original, too daring for me!"

"Then let us have the marquis in, by all means, your majesty."

Overlooking the familiarity of this speech, the king smiled, retired behind the curtains that shut off the alcove at the end of the saloon, and then re-entered with the marquis, who, meeting Sir George's significant look, simply laughed, advanced, shook hands with him, and then whispered—

"If lack of boldness is your fear, trust to me to back you up, even if you lead the way to the very dominions of the Evil One himself! I am weary of this inaction!"

"And I too," responded Sir George.

The king has again seated himself; so has Sir George; while the marquis stands at the back of the king's chair, resting his arms on it, and holds an attitude of readiness to whisper into the royal ear as occasion may suggest.

"Sire," began Sir George, after clearing his throat with some difficulty of various interruptions to speech, "I am not going in any way to lessen to your majesty the value of Lord Langton's plans. I want to supplement them."

"Will he know?" demanded the king.

"No, sire."

There was a pause. But as the king did not, as he very well might, then and there stop Sir George, Sir George saw he was advancing—conquering his first obstacle—and he drew fresh courage from the fact.

"We have twice failed, your majesty, as insurrectionists—once in '15 once in '45. I venture to prophecy we shall again fail, unless—"

"Ay, unless," echoed the king, noticing the pause.

Sir George looked round, and the listeners did the same, wondering if he heard anything.

"Unless, your majesty, we can at the same time strike a blow that shall send terror into the hearts of our enemies, confusion into their councils, and, in a word, throw them into a kind of chaos and panic, and then let Lord Langton burst out at the head of our armed forces, and England is won!"

"And who will strike that blow?" asked the king, whose face became quite discoloured with the effect of his stifled excitement and emotion.

"I, sire—that is, if you think me worthy."

"No man more so! No man more so!" repeated the king, in a hollow, abstracted voice, as if thinking of quite another matter.

No doubt the king wanted to know what the bold stroke was, but had not the courage to ask.

Or, it might be, he did not think it policy to ask.

"At any rate, he was silent, and all the while Sir George waited for the serious question.

The marquis here interposed—

"Will your majesty permit me—as one deeply interested both in your majesty's welfare and in that of Sir George, one of our most able and valued friends and coadjutors—to ask what the measure is that he proposes, and from which he expects so much?"

The king graciously waved his assent—but did it so expressively that it seemed he was simply sitting there to listen to something that was to be said to the Marquis of Burford, and about which he (the king) saw no necessity to interest himself.

"I propose, sire," said Sir George, in accents so stern, and so direct, that the king was obliged to acknowledge them by his fixed gaze, "I propose, by the aid of a few faithful and devoted friends, to waylay the usurper—the so-called King George—hurry him off to a secret place of embarkation, where I will have a vessel ready; and, once in that vessel, trust me your majesty shall, ere many days, have him in your power, or in that of your ally, the King of the French."

The plot was divulged, then, at last!

But was this the whole of the plot?

That thought seemed very speedily to strike the premier's notice, who, in a charmingly serene kind of way, began to ask Sir George if he remembered the anecdote of the white elephant that an eastern prince gave to a favoured subject in gratitude, and ruined him by the gift.

Sir George and the marquis looked at this moment into each other's faces, and the marquis seemed, as he turned away, that he needed no further answer to his question.

The king began now to speak hurriedly and excitedly—

"The man, George, will be treated with respect? No kind of violence will be done him?"

"Assuredly not, your majesty: *unless he is so foolish as to resist.*" These last words were uttered by Sir George after he had turned his head away and in so low a tone that though it was just possible the king might have heard them, it is probable he did not.

And his first words obviously implied he had not heard them.

"I am glad, very glad, Sir George, to hear you speak so humanely—so thoughtfully. Besides, sir, it is policy. It will not do to have kings suspected of favouring assassins."

"And should I attempt this, and fail, shall I be esteemed in your majesty's inner thoughts an assassin?" asked Sir George, in a harsh voice.

It was a ticklish question. The king felt he had blundered somehow in his use of words. His unflinching friend came to the rescue.

"Suppose, Sir George, you put the question in a different shape. To anticipate failure is always a dissolving, deleterious sort of influence. Can't you ask what will be thought if you succeed?"

"True," said Sir George, gloomily. "If one fails in these things, one is a fool not to know beforehand that one loses everything, the friends as well as the cause. Yes, I am prepared for that. And I don't mean to fail. Suppose then, sire, I succeed?"

"Permit me, Sir George, to venture to answer you, even in the presence of our dear and honoured sovereign himself. You are a brave man, you are a skilful man; you are a man learned in the usage of the world, and especially in all that concerns the world of politics. Why not, then, be content to do the good work in your own time and manner, and in so chivalrous a spirit, that His Majesty here shall not be compromised—shall, in fact, know nothing about it till it is done; and then you come to him to be received with open arms and to enjoy whatever of reward—such as rank, office, fortune—a grateful friend and fellow servant can devise, or a grateful sovereign confirm?"

"I do not stir hand or foot," struck in Sir George, in a hard, dogged tone, "till I receive a written commission from the king justifying what I propose to do, not only in my own eyes, but in the eyes of the friends and comrades who

must embark with me, and who might think I was deceiving them."

"Let the council break up!" said the angry king, rising loftily.

"Nay, sire, have patience and confidence. I know and trust Sir George. Permit me to talk to him apart," remonstrated the marquis.

"Many thanks—but 'tis quite useless!" loudly exclaimed Sir George. "I am willing to risk life, honour, everything for His Majesty; but not in an unacknowledged cause. My lord marquis, farewell! Sire, I came to you with my heart full of devotion to the cause and to yourself; but I will never—that I swear!—so far compromise myself that men shall in after times say I was a hired or fanatic murderer. No, if I strike I strike as an act of war, not of private vengeance. But I see it is useless—my time and trouble have been wasted. I will be wiser in future."

He turned—not even observing the ordinary rule of respect as to the mode of quitting the presence—and strode slowly but determinedly away.

Then, in low but rapid sequence, occurred the following dialogue:—

"This may cost your majesty the crown."

"Ha! Do you think so?"

"I could draw up something that would satisfy him, and yet leave you a loophole."

"Do it."

Then aloud the king called to the still visible, but still retreating form, which was just crossing the threshold.

"Sir George!"

Sir George heard, stopped, turned, and rapidly and eagerly advanced.

"Be it as you wish," added the king, as they again met face to face. "Our friend here thinks he can satisfy us both."

The marquis sat down and began to write, while the king, in his usual fashion, when he wanted to be very cordial and impressive, took Sir George's shoulder to rest his hand on, and walked to the window that looked into a beautiful Italian garden decorated with rare antique sculptures.

The penman was quick at his work. He advanced to them within a very few minutes with the ink still wet on the paper, and read as follows:—

James II., by the Grace of God King of England and Defender of the Faith, hereby authorises the bearer to do from time to time such acts of hostility against the usurping Power that now occupies the Throne of England, and against that Prince's adherents, as shall most conduce to the service of His Majesty.

The king heard, looked satisfied, and was silent.

Sir George, after a few moments of deep thought, said to the minister—

"Read it again, if you please."

It was read again, and Sir George found the Premier had done his work so skilfully that it was really impossible to better it, even from Sir George's own view of the case. He did not himself want to see too plainly revealed in black and white what it was he meditated. He might have weak brethren to deal with, who would need to be hood-winked till the last moment.

Still he was considering his impetuous temper, wonderfully cautious in dealing with the matter in hand. He took the paper from the marquis and read it in silence to himself, thus having a third reading. Quite satisfied at last, he seemed to breathe more freely as he said—

"If your majesty is content, so am I."

"Give it me, my lord, and I will show my content by my signature," said the king.

"Pardon me, sire, I judge it best that the whole should be in your own handwriting."

"Why?" demanded the king, in fresh irritation.

"Because," replied Sir George, sturdily, "men might say I had forged the mere signature; but they could not think any one would be likely to attempt to forge the whole document, seeing that your majesty's caligraphy is at once very difficult, and yet well known!"

The king turned his glance on the marquis, who shrugged his shoulders, and seemed to intimate he saw no help for it—the king had better submit.