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THE CONSPIRACY ;

OR,
THE CAPTIVE QUEEN OF SCOTS.

I.

QUEEN ELIZABETH paced the room with hurried, angry and impatient steps. Her thin and withered face wore, with intensified expression, that look of peevishness and malice which was so familiar to it of late. She clenched her long hands, and her pale gray eyes seemed to flash lurid flames; and she muttered more than one round oath—for this chaste virgin (whose illicit lovers had been so numerous) inherited her father's propensity to blasphemy.

The Secretary of State hung his head, bit his lip and played nervously with his sword-tassel.

"God's death!" cried Elizabeth, stopping in the middle of the room, "was ever queen so persecuted as I? Day or night no peace is given me. Conspiracy and treason spring up everywhere through the land; and I have nowhere around me arms long enough to reach this hydra. Oh! for the days of my father's iron rule, when conspiracy paled and withered before the glance of his royal eye."

Sir Francis Walsingham looked up with a remonstrant flush upon his cheek, as he ventured to say—

"Your Majesty is unjust to your poor servants. No queen was ever so faithfully or zealously served. And sure we have done all that men could do to root out the poison of treason from the land."

"Why, then, does it crop up perpetually, Sir Secretary?" asked Elizabeth sternly.

Walsingham looked at her an instant with a peculiar glance, sly but searching and then dropped his eyes again.

"Please your Majesty," he said in soft low tones, "it is impossible for us to eradicate the weed utterly while fresh seed is constantly sown."

"And who, Sir Francis," asked the Queen, "is the mysterious sower?"

"From Potheringay Castle," said the wily Secretary, "the seed is scattered which produces the successive crops of treason and conspiracy. One resides there who, while she lives, must be a fruitful source of trouble to this kingdom—and its gracious sovereign."

"God's death!" she exclaimed, "thou'rt right, Sir Secretary. That woman has ever been the plague of my existence. She lives in an atmosphere of intrigue, plotting and conspiracy. Would to God that I were rid of her in some way—I care not how."

The Secretary looked up with a gleam of mingled ferocity and cunning in his eye.

"Your Majesty has but to say the word," he answered, "and that one obstacle will be speedily removed from your royal path."

The "virgin" Queen started. She was not prepared for such plain speaking as that. To be sure, she had for years entertained the most malignant hatred of her beautiful but unfortunate rival; and she would give much to have her removed—no matter how, by poison or steel. But she had not yet been able to bring herself to brave the odium which would result from the public execution of the unhappy Queen of Scots. It was, therefore her cue now to pretend to be very indignant with her minister.

"God's death! man," she cried. "What dost mean? Would'st counsel us to imbue our hands in the blood of our royal cousin? Fie upon thee, Sir Francis Walsingham! Beshrew me, but meseems thou beest an evil adviser near our person. Albeit that she has done us grievous wrong, and wrought sore mischief and trouble in our kingdom; and we might be justified in exercising the power which is in our hands, and so restore peace and quiet to this disturbed realm. But we are tender of heart and merciful, forbearing—long forbearing."

The cunning Secretary's lip curled