

The Face Behind the Mask.

A ROMANCE.

CHAPTER I.

The plague raged in the city of London. The destroying angel had gone forth, and kindled with its fiery breath the awful pestilence, until all London became one mighty lazaretto. Thousands were swept away daily; grass grew in the streets, and the living were scarce able to bury the dead. Business of all kinds was at an end, except that of the coffin-makers and drivers of the pest-carts. Whole streets were shut up, and almost every other house in the city bore the fatal red cross and the ominous inscription, "Lord, have mercy on us." Few people save the watchmen, armed with halberds, keeping guard over the stricken houses, appeared in the streets; those who ventured there shrank from each other and passed rapidly on with averted faces. Many even fell dead on the sidewalks, and lay with their ghastly, discolored faces upturned to the mocking sunlight, until the dead-cart came rattling along, and the drivers hoisted the body with their pitchforks on the top of their dreadful load. Few other vehicles besides these dead-carts appeared in the city now; and they plied their trade busily, day and night, and the cry of the drivers echoed dimly through the deserted streets. "Bring out your dead! Bring out your dead!" All who could do so had long ago fled from the devoted city, and London lay under the burning heat of the sun, sunshine, stricken for its sins by the hand of God. The pest-houses were full, so were the plague-pits, where the dead were buried in cartfuls, and no one knew who rose up in health in the morning but that they might be lying back dead in a few hours. The very churches were forsaken; their pastors dead or lying in the plague-pits; and it was even resolved to convert the great cathedral of St. Paul into a vast plague-hospital. Cries and lamentations echoed from one end of the city to the other and Death and Charles reigned over London together.

Yet in the midst of all this, many scenes of wild orgies and debauchery still went on within its gates—nay, in our own day, when the cholera ravaged Paris, the inhabitants of that famous city made it a carnival, so now, in London, there were many who, feeling that they had but a few days to live at the most, resolved to defy death and indulge in the revelry while they yet existed. "Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow you die," was their motto; and in the midst of the frantic dance or revelling, many of them dropped dead, the others only shrieked with laughter, hurled the livid body out to the street, and the demoniac mirth grew twice as fast and furious as before. Robbers and cut-purses patrolled the streets, as noon-day entered boldly closed and deserted houses, and bore off with impunity whatever they pleased. Highwaymen infested Hounslow Heath, and all the roads leading from the city, leaving a toll on all who passed and plundering fearfully the flying citizens. In fact, far-famed London town, in the year of grace 1665, would have given one a good idea of a demonium broken loose.

It was drawing to the close of an almost tropical June day that the crowd who had thronged the precincts of St. Paul's since early morning began to disperse. The sun, that had throbbled the livelong day like a great heart of fire in a sea of brass, was sinking from sight in clouds of crimson, purple and gold; yet Paul's Walk was crowded. There were court gallants in ruffles and plumes; ballad-singers chanting the not over-didit of the Earl of Rochester; up and down the gold for France, worth three times what they gave for them; quick doctors reading in doctored tones the bills of mortality of the preceding day, and selling plague-waters and anti-pestilential abominations, whose merit they boldly extolled; ladies, too, richly dressed, and many of them masked; and bookkeepers who always made St. Paul's a favorite haunt, and even to this day patronize its precincts, and flourish in the regions of Paternoster Row and Ave Maria Lane, court pages in rich liveries, pert and flippant, serving-men out of place, and pick-pockets with a keen eye to business; all clashed and jostled together, raising a din to which the wail of Shinar, with its confusion of tongues and Babylonian workmen, were as nothing.

Moving serenely through this discordant sea of his fellow-creatures came a young man booted and spurred, whose rich doublet of cherry-colored velvet, edged and spangled with gold and jewelry that set slightly on one side of his head, with its long black plume and diamond clasp, proclaimed him to be somebody. A protuberant arched shirt rushed impudently out of his doublet; a black velvet cloak, lined with amber satin, fell picturesquely from his shoulders, a sword with a jeweled hilt clanked on the pavement as he walked. One hand was covered with a gauntlet of canary-colored kid, perfumed to a degree that would shame any belle of to-day, the other, which rested lightly on his sword hilt, flashed with a handsome fellow, too, with fair waving hair (for he had the good taste to discard the ugly wig then in vogue), dark, bright, handsome eyes, a thick blonde mustache, a tall and remarkably graceful figure.

As an expression of substance wherein easy good nature and fiery impetuosity had a hard struggle for mastery. That he was a courtier of rank was apparent from his rich attire and rather aristocratic bearing, and a crowd of hangers-on followed him as he went, loudly demanding spur money. A group of trimbelled girls, singing shrilly the songs of the day, called boldly to him as he passed; and one of them, more free and easy than the rest, danced up to him, striking her trimbel and shouting rather than singing the chorus of the then popular ditty:

"What care I for pest or plague?
We can die but once, God wot,
Kiss me, darling—stay with me;
Love me—love me, leave me not!"

The darling in question turned his bright blue eyes on that dashing trimbel singer with a cool glance of recognition.

"Very sorry, Nell," he said, in a nonchalant tone, "but I'm afraid I must. How long have you been here, may I ask?"

A full hour by St. Paul's, and where has Sir Norman Kingsley been, may I ask? I thought you were dead of the plague."

"Not exactly. Have you seen—ah! there he is. The very man I want."

Which Sir Norman Kingsley dropped a gold piece into the girl's extended palm, and pushed on through the crowd up Paul's Walk. A tall, dark figure was leaning moodily with folded arms, looking fixedly at the ground, and taking no notice of the busy scene around him until Sir Norman laid his ungloved and jeweled hand lightly on his shoulder.

"Good morning, Ormiston. I had an idea I would find you here, and what a splendid meeting with you, may I say? Have you got the plague? or has your mysterious amnesia jilted you? or what other annoyance has happened to make you look as woe-begone or old King Lear, and send your tender daughters to take care of you?"

The individual addressed lifted his head, disclosing a dark and rather handsome face, settled now into a look of gloomy discontent. He slightly raised his head when he saw who his questioner was.

"Ah, it's you, Sir Norman! I had given up all notion of your coming, and was about to quit this confounded what has detained you?"

"I was on duty at the hospital. Are you in time to keep our appointment?"

"Oh, certainly. La Masque is at home to visitors at all hours, day and night. I believe in my soul she doesn't know what sleep means."

"And you are still as much in love with her as ever, I dare swear. I have no doubt, now, it was of her you were thinking when I came up. Nothing else could ever have made you look so dismally woe-begone as that, when Providence sent me to your relief."

"I was thinking of her," said the young man moodily, and with a darkening brow.

Sir Norman favored him with a half-amused, half-contemptuous stare for a moment, then stopped at a huckster's stall to purchase some cigarettes; lit one, and after smoking for a few minutes, pleasantly remarked, as if the fact had just struck him:

"Ormiston, you're a fool!"

"I know it," said Ormiston, sentimentally.

"The idea," said Sir Norman, knocking the ashes daintily off the end of his cigarette with the tip of his little finger: "the idea of falling in love with a woman whose face you have never seen! I can understand a man's going to any absurd extreme when he falls in love in proper Christian fashion, with a proper Christian face; but to go stark, staring mad, as you have done, my dear fellow, about a black loo mask, why—I consider that a little too much of a good thing! Come, let us go."

As they walked, Sir Norman Kingsley sauntered leisurely down Paul's Walk, and out through the great door of the cathedral, followed by his melancholy friend. Pausing for a moment to gaze at the gorgeous sunset with a look of languid admiration, Sir Norman passed his arm through that of his friend, and they walked on at rather a rapid pace in the direction of Old London Bridge. There were few people abroad, except the watchmen walking slowly up and down before the plague-stricken houses; but in every street they passed through they noticed huge piles of wood and coal heaped down the centre. Smoking zealously they went on for a season in silence, when Ormiston ceased puffing for a moment to inquire:

"What are all these for? This is a strange time, I should imagine, for bonfires."

"They're not bonfires," said Sir Norman; "at least they are not intended for that; and if your head was not fuller of that masked Witch of Endor than common sense (for I believe she is nothing better than a pestilence), you could not have helped knowing. The Lord Mayor of London has been inspired suddenly with a notion that if several thousand fires are kindled at once in the street, it will purify the air and check the pestilence; so, when St. Paul's tolls the hour of midnight, all these piles are to be fired. It will be a glorious illumination, no doubt; but as to its stopping the progress of the plague,

I am afraid that it is altogether too good to be true."

"Why should you doubt it? The plague cannot last forever."

"No. But Lilly, the astrologer, who predicted its coming, also foretold that it would last for many months yet; and since one prophecy has come true, I see no reason why the other should not."

"Except the simple one that there would be nobody left alive to take it. All London will be lying in the plague-pits by that time."

"A pleasant prospect, but a true one, I have no doubt. And as I have no ambition to be hurried headlong into one of those horrible holes, I shall leave town altogether in a few days. And, Ormiston, I would strongly recommend you to follow my example."

"Not I," said Ormiston, in a tone of gloomy resolution. "While La Masque stays, so will I."

"And perhaps die of the plague in a week."

"So be it. I don't fear the plague half so much as I do the thought of losing her."

"Again Sir Norman stared. 'Oh, I see! It's a hopeless case. Faith, I begin to feel curious to see this enchantress, who has managed so effectively to turn your brain. When did you see her last?'"

"Yesterday," said Ormiston, with a deep sigh. "And if she were made of granite she could not be harder to me than she is."

"So she doesn't care about you, then?"

"Not she. She has a little Blenheim lapdog that she loves a thousand times more than she ever will me."

"Then what an idiot you are to keep haunting her like her shadow! Why don't you be a man, and tear out from your heart such a goddess?"

"Ah! that's easily said; but if you were in my place, you'd act exactly as I do."

"I don't believe it. It's not in me to go mad about anything with a masked face and a marble heart. If I loved any woman—"

"Which, I thank Fortune! at the present time I do not—and she had the bad taste not to return it, I should take my hat and make her a bow, and go directly and make love to somebody else made of flesh and blood instead of of stone! You know the old song, Ormiston:

"If she be not fair to me,
What care I how fair she be."

"Kingsley, you know nothing about it!" said Ormiston, impatiently. "So stop talking nonsense. If you are cold-blooded, I am not, and—I love her."

Sir Norman slightly shrugged his shoulders, and flung his smoked-out weed into a heap of firewood.

"Are we near her house?" he asked. "Yonder is the bridge."

"And yonder is the house," replied Ormiston, pointing to a large, ancient building, as ancient, even for those times—with three stories, each projecting over the other. "See! while the houses on either side are marked as pest-stricken, hers alone bears no cross. So it is that she clings to life as a cat to its tail; and those who, like me, are desperate, even death shuns."

"Why, my dear Ormiston, you surely are not so far gone as that? Upon my honor, I had no idea you were in such a bad way."

"I am nothing but a miserable wretch, and I wish to heaven I was in yonder dead-cart, with the rest of them—and she too, if she never intends to love me!"

Ormiston spoke with such fierce earnestness that there was no doubting his sincerity; and Sir Norman became profoundly shocked—so much so, that he did not speak again until they were almost at the door. Then he opened his lips to ask, in a subdued tone:

"She has predicted the future for you—what did she foretell?"

"Nothing good; no fear of there being anything in store for such an unlucky dog as I am."

"Where did she learn this wonderful black art of hers?"

"In the east, I believe. She has been there and all over the world, and now she visits England for the first time."

"For the reception-room of a sorcerer," remarked Sir Norman, with an air of disappointed criticism, "there is nothing very wonderful about all this. How it is she spaces fortunes, anyway? As Lilly does, by maps and charts; or 'tis those old eastern muffs do it, by magic mirrors and all such fooleries."

"Neither," said Ormiston; "her style is more like that of the Indian alchemists, who show you your destiny in a well. She has a sort of magic lake in her room, and—but you will see all for yourself presently."

"I have always heard," said Sir Norman, in the same meditative way, "that truth lies at the bottom of a well, and I am glad some one has turned up at last who is able to fish it out. Ah! here comes our ancient Mercury to show us to the presence of your goddess."

The door opened, and the "old bag of bones," as Ormiston irreverently styled his lady-love's ancient domestic, made a sign for them to follow him. Leading the way down along a corridor, he flung open a pair of shining folding doors at the end, and ushered them into the majestic presence of the sorceress and her magic room. But gentle as she seemed, her plumed hair, Ormiston stepped forward at once; but Sir Norman directly paused in the doorway to contemplate the scene of action. As he slowly did so, a look of deep displeasure settled on his features, on finding it not half so awful as he had supposed.

In some ways it was very like the room they had left, being low, large and square, and having floors, walls and ceilings paneled with glossy black oak. But it had no windows—a large bronze lamp, suspended from the center of the ceiling, shed a flickering, ghostly light. There were no paintings—so grim carvings of skulls, skeletons and serpents, pleasantly wreathing the room—neither were there seats nor tables nothing but a huge ebony caldron at the upper end of the apartment, over which a grinning skeleton on wires with a scythe in one hand of her, and an hour-glass in the other, kept watch and ward. Opposite this cheerful-looking guardian, was a tall figure in black, standing motionless, as if it, too, was carved in ebony. It was a female figure, very tall and thin, with long, dark, wavy hair, and a Venus Cerealis. Her dress was of black velvet, that swept the polished floor, spangled all over with stars of gold and rich rubies. A profusion of shining black hair in waves fell almost to her feet; but her face, from forehead to chin, was completely hidden by a black velvet mask. In one hand, an exquisitely small and white, she held a gold-casket, blazing (like her dress) with rubies and diamonds; the other she toyed with a tame viper, that had twined itself round her waist. This was doubtless La Masque, and, becoming conscious of that fact, Sir Norman made her a low and slight bow, and she returned it with a slight nod of the head, and turning toward his companion, spoke:

"You here again, Mr. Ormiston! To what am I indebted for the honor of two visits in two days?"

Her voice, Sir Norman thought, was the sweetest he had ever heard, musical as a chime of silver bells, soft as the tones of an aeolian harp through which the west wind plays.

"Madam, I am aware my visit is unwelcome, and I am sure you will be glad to see me no more."

"But I have merely come with my friend, Sir Norman Kingsley, who wishes to know what the future has in store for him."

Thus invoked, Sir Norman Kingsley stepped forward with another low bow to the masked lady.

"Yes, madam, I have long heard that those fair fingers can withdraw the curtain of the future, and I have come to see what Dame Destiny is going to do for me."

"Sir Norman Kingsley is welcome," said the sweet voice, "and shall see what he desires. There is but one condition; for if he speaks, the scene he beholds will vanish. Come forward."

Sir Norman compressed his lips as closely as if they were forever hermetically sealed, and came forward accordingly. Leaning over the edge of the ebony caldron, he found that a portion of red powder, with which it was filled. Casting it into the caldron, she murmured an invocation in Sanscrit or Coptic, or some other unknown tongue, and slowly there came a dark cloud of dark red smoke, that nearly filled the room. Had Sir Norman ever read the story of Aladdin, he would probably have thought of it then; but the young courtier did not greatly care for the nature of any kind, and thought of nothing now but of seeing something when the smoke cleared away. It was rather long in doing so, and when it did, he saw nothing at first but his own handsome, half-seen, half-merged face; but gradually a picture, distinct and clear, formed itself at the bottom, and Sir Norman gazed with bewildered eyes. He saw a large room filled with a sparkling crowd, many of them ladies, splendidly attired, and sparkling in jewels, and foremost among them stood one whose beauty surpassed anything he had ever before dreamed of. She wore the robes of a queen, purple and ermine—diamonds blazed on the beautiful neck, arms and fingers, and a tiara of the same brilliant crown adorned her regal head. In one hand she held a scepter; what seemed to be a throne was behind her, but something which surprised Sir Norman most of all was to find her standing beside her, the cynosure of all eyes. While he yet gazed in mingled astonishment and incredulity, the scene faded away and another took its place. This time a dunce-looking fellow, with a long nose and a floor and ceiling covered with green and hideous lichen. A small lamp stood on the floor, and by its dim, watery gleam, he saw himself

again standing, pale and dejected, near the wall. But he was not alone; the same glittering vision in purple and diamonds stood before him, and suddenly he drew his sword and plunged it up to the hilt in her heart! The beautiful vision fell like a stone at his feet, and the sword was drawn out reeking with her life blood. This was a little too much for the real Sir Norman, and with an expression of indignant consternation he sprang upright. Instantly it all faded away, and the reflection of his own excited face looked up at him from the caldron.

"I told you not to speak," said La Masque, quietly; "but you must look on still another scene."

Again she threw a portion of the contents of the casket into the caldron, and "spoke aloud the words of power."

Another cloud of smoke arose and filled the room, and when it cleared away Sir Norman beheld a third and less startling sight. The scene and place he could not discover, but it seemed to him like night in a storm. Two men were lying on the ground and bound fast together; it appeared to him, as he looked it faded away, and once more his own face seemed to mock him in the clear water.

"No," said Sir Norman, promptly; "it was Ormiston and myself."

"Right! and one of them was dead!" exclaimed Sir Norman, with a perceptible start. "Which one, madam?"

"If you cannot tell that, neither can I. If there is anything further you wish to see, I am quite willing to show it to you."

"I'm obliged to you," said Sir Norman, stepping back; "but no more at present, thank you. Do me some day to murder a lady, especially one so beautiful as she I just now saw?"

"I have said nothing—all you've seen will come to pass, and whether your destiny be for good or evil, I have no business to do with it, except, said the sweet voice, earnestly, "that if La Masque could strew Sir Norman Kingsley's pathway with roses, she would most assuredly do so."

"Madam, you are too kind," said the young gentleman, laying his hand on his heart, while Ormiston scowled darkly—"more especially as I have the misfortune to be a perfect stranger to you."

"Not so, Sir Norman. I have known you this many a day; and before long we shall be better acquainted. Permit me to wish you good evening!"

At this gentle hint both gentlemen bowed themselves out, and soon found themselves in the street, with very different expressions of countenance. Sir Norman looked considerably pleased and decidedly puzzled, and Mr. Ormiston looked savagely and uncompromisingly jealous. The animated skeleton who had admitted them closed the door after them; and the two friends stood in the twilight on London Bridge.

CHAPTER II.

"Well, said Ormiston, drawing a long breath, "What do you think of the?"

"Think? Don't ask me yet," said Sir Norman, looking rather bewildered. "I'm in such a state of mystification that I don't rightly know whether I'm standing on my head or feet. For one thing, I have come to the conclusion that your masked lady-love must be enchantingly beautiful."

"Have I not told you that a thousand times, O thou of little faith? But, why have you come to such a conclusion?"

"Because no woman with such a figure, such a voice and such hands could be otherwise."

"I know you would own it some day. Do you wonder now that I love her?"

"Oh, as to loving her," said Sir Norman, coolly, "that's quite another thing. I could no more love her for her hands, voice and shape than I could a figure in wood or wax; but I admire her vastly, and think her extremely clever. I will never forget that face in the caldron. It was the most exquisitely beautiful I ever saw."

"In love with the shadow of a face! Why, you are a thousandfold more absurd than I."

"No," said Sir Norman thoughtfully. "I don't know that I'm in love with it; but if ever I see a living face like it, I certainly shall be. How did La Masque do it, I wonder?"

"You had better ask her," said Ormiston, bitterly. "She seems to have taken an unusual interest in you at first sight. She would tell you your past with roses, for sooth! Nothing earthly, I believe, would make her say anything half so tender to me."

Sir Norman laughed and stroked his moustache complacently.

"All a matter of taste, my dear fellow; and these women are noted for their perfection in this line. I begin to admire La Masque more and more, and I think you had better give up the chase, and let me take your place. I don't believe you have the ghost of a chance, Ormiston."

"I don't believe it myself," said Ormiston, with a desperate face; "but until the plague carries me off I can't give her up, and the sooner that happens the better. Hal! what is that?"

To be continued.

THEY HADN'T GOT IT.

The visitor to London was seated at a table in one of the expensive restaurants in the West End thinking of various things, as he read over the bill of fare, and observed the prices.

"Hello!" he exclaimed to the waiter, "haven't you got any conscience at all in this place?"

"Gordon?" returned the haughty waiter.

"Haven't you got any conscience—conscience—conscience! Don't you understand?"

The waiter plucked up the bill of fare, and began looking it over.

"I don't know if we have or not," he said, "if we have, it's on the bill; if we ain't, it's a extra. Them's the rules, sir."

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