

"I must beg you ladies to stay here a few minutes, while I satisfy myself as to Lord Langton's safety."

"No need for that," said the warder; I took care of that before I brought the ladies away from him."

"All right! Pass!" said the petty officer, in a voice that implied perfect satisfaction, and showing, therefore, his caution had been essentially one of a merely mechanical kind, and not suggested by special doubts.

Oh, the secret pressure of those two hands one on another, as again the two weeping women moved on!

The second sentinel was met, faced, and passed in safety; the warder, whom Lady Langton now looked on as their best friend, still keeping with them.

"Yonder is the man I dread!" whispered Hermia, when they reached an archway which opened to what may be called the outermost circle of the Tower defences, and where they could already see in advance the last gateway—the one that, once passed, he would be free!

"STAND!" Such was the harsh summons from the man she so much dreaded. Lady Langton hardly knew which was the worst—the stern word, or the ill-omened look with which the man greeted her and her companion.

"My friend—Mrs Gascoigne," timidly said Lady Langton. "The warder—" Here she looked round for him, but he had gone, not caring, perhaps, to exchange amenities with this man, who was notorious for his evil temper.

"Let Mrs. Gascoigne show her face!" he said. "I had a good look at the lady when she came in!"

"So Seager said," whispered Lady Langton, in anguished tones.

"Make him come to me!" was the quick reply uttered under the breath.

"My friend is too much overwhelmed with grief, Mr. Sentinel, to understand your forms, but if you will kindly lift up her veil and satisfy yourself—"

No sooner suggested than done. The sentinel approached, shouldering his muske, and touched the weeping and abstracted lady.

A fatal touch for him! In an instant he was caught by the throat by two strong, muscular, wiry hands; and before he had a chance of calling forth his own superior strength, he was black in the face, his tongue protruding, and then, a few seconds more, and the tragedy was seemingly consummated.

Lord Langton loosed his hold, and the heavy form dropped to the ground, just as if it were composed but of so much clay.

"Steady, Hermia—steady! and we are safe. No one has seen! Quick!"

They reached the exterior gate; there was an inexplicable pause in the opening of it, but it was opened at last, and Hermia cried—

"Quick! To the king! To the king, my dear Mrs. Gascoigne. Conjure him to give me an audience to-morrow!"

Then, as she saw Christina's coach rapidly advancing to meet the fugitive, she turned and strove to calm herself, under the intense agitation of success, by speaking to the sentinel, when, lo! from the second gateway beyond there came a bright flash before her eyes—an explosion, a cloud of smoke—through which, as it cleared away, she saw the injured sentinel rising, as it were, from the grave to confront her, and she dropped, fainting and senseless to the ground.

CHAPTER CXXIII.—A STRANGE TOILET.

After the first rapturous welcome of her brother by Christina, she gave the signal to her driver, who instantly drove off at a great pace towards one of the most obscure routes within sight, and was soon quite beyond the range of eyes looking out from the Tower and its vicinity. Then she said, hurriedly—

"Quick, Stephen! off with your feminine garb. Do not mind me. See, this is Paul's suit—the gentleman in violet's suit. I shall look out at this window to watch—pray be quick!"

Lord Langton did not need a second invitation to resume a man's garb. In a wonderfully short time he touched Christina's arm, and she turned

and saw another "gentleman in violet," looking like a decayed man of family.

"What shall we do with this frippery?" he asked, kicking the loose heap away from his feet.

"Here is a string, and there is a heavy stone under the seat. We shall cross the bridge presently, and can drop it in."

"Excellent!" he responded: and he soon had the bundle ready.

"Keep back, Stephen," whispered Christina. "So many people here will see us, and some may know you. Now, then; on your side there's nobody looking, and there's a place where you can pass between the houses. Don't lose a moment!"

Lord Langton quietly stepped out with his bundle, and aided by the growing darkness of the evening, dropped it over the parapet into deep water, between the sterlings, noticing, at the same time, that he was close to the mercer's own place.

In returning to the carriage, he passed a man whose eyes struck him as particularly vivid and keen, and for the moment he could not but fancy they had exhibited a sudden intelligence as they lighted upon his face.

The man said nothing, made no hostile or suspicious movement, and seemed to be merely walking about to look at the shops and the picturesque buildings of the crazy bridge.

"All well, Christina!" he said, as he got into the carriage, and was once more rapidly driven off.

It so happened that, shortly after, the carriage had to pass, at the other end of the bridge, a place that would have been very dark but for a powerful light issuing from the side of the roadway, where some repairs were going on, and more than a dozen torches were flaring away, to enable the workmen to see what they were about.

"Don't look that way!" anxiously cried Christina.

Lord Langton turned his face to the darkness seen through the other window of the carriage, and there saw a something that wonderfully interested him, and for the moment, disturbed him.

In some agitation he whispered to his sister—"Christina, make the driver turn instantly. Remember, we have passed the bridge so as to show we were only going to the end, after a visit to the mercer's, in order to evade the difficulty of turning in the middle of the crowded bridge—remember that."

Full of wonder, Christina still did not for an instant hesitate. Putting her head out of the window on her side, she called to the coachman—

"That will do. Now turn."

"Louder, Christina! Somebody else is listening that you know not of," said Lord Langton.

"Driver, turn round. Don't you understand? I only want to turn easily round."

"Excellent, Christina! Now listen. I saw a man watching by the mercer's house, as if to pick up anything likely to affect Sir Richard or his friends politically. I noticed his keen eye, and thought he noticed me. Then I dismissed it. But just now, when you made me turn from the light, I saw the whole shadow of the coach projected on the wall of the opposite building, and there was a man hanging on underneath. I'll swear it's the same man; and if so, the event is critical. He will yet prevent my escape."

"What is to be done? Are we to fail even at this seemingly hopeful hour?" murmured Christina.

"Tell us what can we do, Stephen?"

"I will tell you, my sister. I am going to submit you to a new ordeal. Had my dear, devoted, noble wife consulted me in advance, I would never have consented thus to escape, and so leave Sir Richard—your true parent in love—to incur increased danger."

"Danger, Stephen! Why, that unhappy girl, Maria, with her dying breath exonerated him!"

"Ay, but they want a victim; and if they fail of me, he will assuredly die—and on this ground that he did shelter me, even after he knew of my errand. That was the deadly injury I did him. Shall I now leave him to take all the consequen-

ces?—, the protector of my own sweet sister—the true and brave man who has resisted all the blandishments of the officials, even at the scaffold's risk?"

"Stephen! Stephen!" exclaimed Christina, in anguished tones, and wringing her hands in utter abandonment.

"But heed me, Christina. At the very time I consented to escape, I formed the resolution to do what I am now doubly resolved upon. I determined, when once free, I would go direct to the king, and give myself up to him as the price of the safety of Sir Richard."

"And would they not then sacrifice you?"

"I cannot tell. I fancy not—I hope not. But I must risk all. Nay, turn not from me. Do not weep, my own darling sister. Ask your heart—ask your conscience, is it not the right thing to do? You told the mercer to bar his fate, when it seemed fixed, rather than become infamous. Come, now, be my comfort, too."

"You are right, Stephen. But give me time for second thought, or I shall fail you."

"Nobly said! It is now my turn to speak to the driver."

He put his head out of the window, and called out in loud, clear, penetrating tones—

"We shall be too late at the palace if you do not drive faster. Push on!" Then he whispered to Christina. "Our friend in the rear will, if I mistake not leave us as soon as he is satisfied we are going to the palace."

"Why?" wonderingly asked Christina.

"To go and inform his principal of this new and startling incident in the movements of the escaped Lord Langton, for I believe he knows me."

True enough, just before reaching St James's, where the king now was, Lord Langton saw the spy stealing away—saw him almost instantly meet another, his superior. That superior was the Chief of the Secret Service, who, on his part, hurried away to give the amazing news to the Duke of Bridgeminster, his patron.

"Shall you be able to obtain admittance?" asked Christina.

"I think so."

"What! In your own name?"

"Wail, dearest, wait, and you will see."

The coach now stopped in the quadrangle of the palace, and livery servants came out to see who were the visitors, and what they wanted.

"Tell the king that the gentleman in black, to whom he once promised to give an immediate audience, no matter at what time it should be asked, now demands, as a loyal subject, the fulfilment of His Majesty's promise."

The two servants who received this message stared at the speaker, noticed his shabby violet coat, then stared at each other, and seemed inclined to laugh at the message, or to neglect it.

"Fellows!" said Lord Langton, sternly, "do you know this?"

He held out to them a ring, sparkling in the torch-light with diamonds, and though they did not, of course, recognise it as the king's, they did not doubt that that was what the speaker meant, and that they had better be careful.

With great respect they bowed, and went away to deliver the strange message.

Two minutes had passed, and the servants had not returned. Lord Langton and his sister both fancied they saw signs of movement, changes of lights, and so on, at the different windows of the palace, but they could only wait anxiously in silence.

Other two minutes have gone, and still they remain unnoticed. Lord Langton begins almost to repent that one feeling he had had of faith in the king's ultimate generosity, when he noted, these seeming proofs that the king will not even keep his plighted faith.

Presently figures hurry past them. The Chief of the Secret Service is the first. He is followed a minute or two later by the Duke of Bridgeminster, who carefully avoids even a glance at the carriage.

The fresh clang of arms, and fresh movements of armed men, next strike the ear, and shake Christina's fast ebbing courage and faith.

"Is it too late for you to slip out and try to