

SELF-WILLED.

"But I had not," said Carrie. "I am looking forward to seeing her most anxiously. I wonder whether she will be as beautiful as Lord Kenworth evidently considers her. We shall see."

"That we shall not," retorts Lord Cecil. "You little goose, you forget that we shall all be masked."

Carrie laughs.

"Yes, I had forgotten that."

"You had better put your mask on," he says, as the footman opens the carriage door, and he takes the filmy morsel of black satin and lace and fastens it on.

"Do you think you will know me?" she asks, her eyes sparkling like diamonds in a setting of eyes.

"I am not sure," he retorts. "Perhaps I shall find myself making love to the wrong person before the evening is out."

She laughs.

"Well, it may be a change," she says; "but you must allow me the same latitude."

Then they alight and enter the hall, brilliantly lit, and crowded with a motley mob in a variety of costumes.

The lights, the music floating to them from the ball-room, the footman passing, and the fire of gorgeously liveried servants, confuse Carrie for a moment, and her little hand closes with a sudden tightness on Lord Cecil's arm.

He returns the little pressure reassuringly, and looks down at her with his calm, loving glance, like a hand that has been laid on a forehead, and she feels that the sudden stings that sweep over her have their distinct charm for him.

"What a wonderful scene, Cecil," she whispers, looking round eagerly. "It is like fairy-land, like a wild dream of all sorts of historic personages, places, and periods revived. Where are we going now?" for he leads her towards a doorway at the end of the hall, through which the guests are passing in and out.

The Harwood party has become separated and broken up in a minute, and they two are left behind.

"We must go and make our respects to Lady Ferndale, she will be in the ante-room," he says.

"What a crowd it is!" and she smiles good-humoredly as a red-cross knight accidentally pushes against him. "Keep close to me!"

As he speaks, some one near recognizes his voice and whispers his name; instantly he runs through the crowd, and friends and acquaintances stop and gather round to exchange greetings.

Of course there are no introductions, but it is well known that the lady on Lord Cecil's arm is the future Countess of Fitz-Harwood, and Carrie has to run the gauntlet of a score of curious eyes peeping through the holes of the black masks.

At last Lord Cecil manages to make their way into the ante-room, and Carrie sees a lady, who is still beautiful even in her silver years, standing in ordinary evening dress, and unaccompanied, as Lord Cecil comes up with Carrie on his arm, she holds out her hand, with a smile singularly sweet, and says a few peculiarly distinct and musical words.

"I am very glad to see you, my dear!" she says, looking at Carrie with a smile that is not to be questioned, she checks herself, smiles, and they are forced to move on.

From the ante-room, a magnificent saloon, which—though there are a couple of hundred guests—still looks vast and uncrowded.

Before her is a scene of a scene which will remain in the future will haunt her in the bright moonlight and in the silent night; for it is a scene in which is to be played an act of her life's drama.

But no shadow of a cloud rests on her as yet, as she stands a little apart from the crowd that is in every way, with a smile that looks like the ever-shifting colors of a kaleidoscope.

Glimpses at Lord Cecil's arm, she gazes round, dazzled and bewildered for a moment, as if she had been turned back to the white-hot sun, crimson-skirted Neapolitan girls, and Andalusian dancers, pass before her in every way, with a smile that looks like the ever-shifting colors of a kaleidoscope.

"It is—there are any word in the dictionary which will describe it," she says, with a little pause. "Am I awake or dreaming, Cecil?"

"If you are so unfortunate as to have your feet trodden on by a gigantic Templar, you will have little doubt as to the reality of the scene," he says, with a smile.

"Oh, this! This! If you know how I have been looking forward to this dance—"

"Which we positively must dance together," she says, with mock gravity.

He laughs.

"Etiquette!" he says. "If it were the greatest breach of etiquette the master of the ceremony has on his list, and death were the penalty, I'd break it!" And he puts his arm round her.

Once again it is unlike the dear old Maltby ball, or there is plenty of room in the vast saloon, and Lord Cecil steers her clear of even the chance of an accident, though so many a couple are sitting the wait out.

Half unconsciously, Carrie sees one and another of the Harwood party, as she whirls round in her lover's arms.

The gorgeous pageant floats about her, and when the music dies away, she lets her arm drop from his shoulder with a long sigh of perfect happiness.

"The first," he says. "How many more do you think we can get? Quick! I have come some one with his eye fixed on you. Give me your card, and I will add it in a hurried whisper, and he fills in three of the lines, longing justly to fill in all.

He is only just in time, for as they stand, sheltered from the brilliant storm, cue after cue comes up, and, claiming the privilege of the evening, implores her to give them a dance.

Carrie fills her card—all saving one line, which she retains in the fond hope that Lord Cecil may have it—and then again for a few fleeting moments they are left alone.

"It is my turn to point out the celebrities," he says, and from their coigne of vantage he points out those friends he recognizes.

"Kenworth is looking at his best in that Spanish bull-fighter's dress," he says, and he beckons to him as he passes near.

Lord Kenworth comes up and stands with his hand on his hip and his foot thrown out in the well-known attitude.

"Well!" he says. "What wouldst thou with me, troubadour? Fair lady, wouldst thou be the null alain? What are thy commands?"

Carrie laughs, then she beckons her.

"Commands? Why, of course, Lord Kenworth! The Princess! Where is she?"

"Hush!" he exclaims, in a stage whisper. "Mention not my name, fair lady."

"A thousand pardons!" says Carrie. "But, Senior Matador, I'd rather see your dancing mystery than your waltz ball."

"Yes, come, Ken," says Lord Cecil, "we all in patience!"

Lord Kenworth nods mysteriously.

"All in good time, troubadour. Her highness has not arrived yet."

"Or you have failed to recognize her!" says Carrie, banteringly. "Is not that the truth, Senior Matador?"

Lord Kenworth throws as much scornful indignation into his face as is possible under his mask, and turns away with an affectation of being deeply wounded.

"You discredit my discernment!" he says.

"As if she could conceal her identity from these eyes! No, she is not here yet. When she comes you will not need me to point her out; there will be plenty near you to declare her presence! Fair lady, farewell!" and with an exaggerated air he swings his Spanish hat off and turns on his heel.

Carrie looks after him with a smile.

"What splendid fun it is!" she exclaims.

"Why do not people give fancy balls oftener?"

"You shall have a costume ball every week, if you like," he says in a low voice. "Ah! our short respite has come to an end! When shall we meet again?"

"The third week from this," and then he resigns her to her partner.

He has to find one for himself, and wanders round the room with that intention, but most of the programmes are filled, and not unwillingly he goes back to his old place in the recess, and seats himself.

After all, Carrie's enthusiasm is excusable; it is a wonderful scene. But from the present he drifts back to the past, to that ball in the country town, that first waltz with the willful girl who had mocked and defied him, and whom he had grown to love.

He thought of that first dance, of the homeward drive, the quiet country lane, and her reluctant confession of love for him, and a sense of perfect happiness fell upon him and isolated him from the gay and brilliant throng amongst which he sat.

It was strange and wonderful that his thoughts did not carry him back further; to that wonderful night at Lucerne, to that brief but furious madness which while it lasted burnt as a devastating fire; but to that too sweet, too bitter time. Every now and again his girl, the willful maiden, whose every willingness was dear and precious to him, floated past him and never without a nod and a smile, a half-breathed, half-forgotten kiss upon her lips, and the present and her love blotted out that cruel past.

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