

For the Favorite

## THE MASKED BRIDAL.

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CHAPTER IX.

LAURETTA.

"I was much struck by this confession," the Italian went on, "and knew not what to advise; little as I had seen of Count Varlo, that little was enough to convince me that he would never consent to his son, his only son, forming a mésalliance, and Lucio himself was too well aware of this fact. I went with my cousin to visit the young girl who had won his noble heart. I found her a lovely, gentle girl, but alas! she was the daughter of a goldsmith, and of course not to be thought of as the bride of Signor Lucio Varlo, the only son of the Austrian Governor."

"I only remained five days in Milan, and hastened home, for my marriage day drew near. What was my horror on arriving at Senzale to hear that two days before my intended bride had eloped with a stranger, an Austrian? In despair I left my home and returned to Milan. I was too proud to go to my uncle, in this altered state of affairs. I could no longer go as a wealthy noble, and his equal in rank, and go I would not as a recipient of his charity, so I determined to see my cousin secretly, and endeavor to form some plan for the future."

"With this view, I took my station one wet evening, just outside the entrance of the Palazzo, wrapped in my long black cloak, and with my wide hat well pulled over my eyes, I stood patiently waiting for Lucio."

"The great clock on the distant steeple had just chimed midnight, when I saw my cousin's tall form come out of the huge stone porch, and descend the massive stone steps with his light elastic tread. I stepped forward in the bar of light that streamed down on the wet shining pavement, and spoke. Lucio started violently, and exclaimed in astonishment,

"Why, Antonio, is it yourself or your spirit?" "Myself," I replied, and linking my arm in that of my cousin, I led him away. Having briefly related all that had occurred I asked my cousin's advice. What was my surprise to hear his reply?

"Antonio, I am a beggar. You saw me leave the home of my father to-night. Yes, it is forever."

"Not much now remains to be told. Lucio's father after making one more effort to separate his son from Lauretta, discarded him forever, and resigning his post in Milan, left Italy for Austria, and we saw him no more."

"You know the rest, my cousin went far away to the New World, with the young wife for whom he had given up everything, and I stayed in Milan, and earned a pittance by teaching. There you met me, and now I have left Italy, because I belong to a society that has just been broken up by the Austrian government, and should I stay there I might chance to lose my head. Now Sidney, *mon ami*, you know all."

CHAPTER X.

MONA THE ZINGARI.

It was evening at Heilsbourne Hall, evening in its gayest phase; the grand old mansion was lit up from turret to basement, and mirth and joy, seemed to fill every heart to overflowing.

We will not linger in the dining parlor, however, but pass down the broad stone steps to the servants' hall. It is a large, and comfortable one, although the evening is warm, for it is the month of June, a huge fire is burning on the hearth, the flames leaping and dancing merrily, and the logs, big enough for yule, only kept back on the white hearth by shining brass tongs.

The walls are of polished oak, and the sanded floor is white as the aprons of the pretty maids. It is a scene of rare old English comfort; and the group gathered around the cheery fire do simple justice to the good cheer of Heilsbourne.

Stout John the coachman, who has driven Sir Claude for thirty years, presides over a capacious jug of brown home brewed, and ranged on a long bench sit seven other servant men, each holding a shining and foaming tankard in his hand. On the other side of the fire, is Mistress Noalks, the stout comely housekeeper, whose rosy cheeks, and bright black eyes, still make her a prime favorite at merry Christmas, and many is the kiss she gets under the mistletoe, year by year, and from under it too.

The fair sex have many other representatives, on this occasion, for the house is full of company, and many of the ladies bring their own maids with them; in the corner sits Lady Eva Seymour's own serving woman, French Celeste, a small, bright, and withal coquettish demurelle, who is flirting away to her heart's content below stairs, as her mistress is doing above them.

The other maids are mostly fair, rosy, round-faced English girls, and to-night, one and all are on the *qui vive*, for is not Mona, the fortune-teller, expected every moment?

Even honest John is slightly excited, though he stoutly denies the accusation when it is distinctly brought against him by Mademoiselle; and Mistress Noalks also makes a feeble protest, declaring herself too old to have her fortune

told, besides, casting down her fine black eyes and twisting up the frill of her apron, regardless of the starch and snowy purity thereof, and besides, it's all nonsense, and fool's, wicked nonsense, and she really did not know whether she ought to encourage it.

"Mistress Noalks,"—it was John who spoke, and took his long clay church-warden from his lips to do so.—"Mistress Noalks, I say, you 'av just made a statement, han' however it goes agin my heart for to contradict a lady, han' a sensible 'oman like you to the back, I must contradict that 'ere statement; an' you must hobble me by considering that 'ere statement contradicted."

John brought his hand down on the table with a smack that made the tankards ring, and Celeste give an affected start, in order that his speech might produce a proper impression.

"Why, Monsieur, you will startle me to death one day; why for do you so hit ze table *le pauvre*; it has you not enjair? I am shudder still."

John regarded the French woman with as much contempt as his light blue eyes were capable of expressing, and replied in a sarcastic tone,

"Oh there haint no call for you to jump or screech; no call whatsoever, my dear. We haint in the 'abit of 'itting vemen in Hugland; whatever is the 'abit in France; it is not our 'abit. I was remarkin' ven you 'ad the politeness to hinterrupt, for vich I am very much hobbliged to you, my dear, tho' it warn't the fashion 'mong young people ven I was young to snap the vord's hout of hold people's 'ods, still not 'ud times is h'improving, han' I haint a keeplin' hup with them. Vell I vos agoin' to say, as 'ou my friend Mistress Noalks 'adn't no call to believe 'erself, begging 'or pardon for makin' use of such a vord to a lady, but she 'adn't no call to say as she was too hold to 'av her fortune told, as it's hall 'o'other way. She is has pretty a 'oman has I wishes to see, han' no nonsense 'about 'er hat hall."

This was the longest speech on record for John, and great wonder it caused in the servants' hall, but was generally supposed to be a "set-down" to that French mix and serve her right too.

"May I come in?" inquired a soft voice. Glances were exchanged, and slight shudders ran round the group, for this could be no other than Mona.

"Yes, Mona, come in." Mistress Noalks was the first to recover her voice; and the gipsy was an old acquaintance, so she did not feel at all nervous about her visit.

Mona came slowly forward to the fire, and when close to the expectant group, threw back the long cloak in which she was enveloped and stood revealed a tall, weird-looking woman, with snow white hair, dark brown face, wrinkled and weather-stained, and bright unearthly eyes.

"What can I do for you?" she asked, turning from one to another.

Now no one wanted to be first, still they did feel great anxiety to know their fates, to ascertain what fortune had in store for them of good or ill.

Celeste rose from her seat and came forward, holding out her small brown hand and regarding the gipsy with a half-concealed smile. "I will have ze first fortune. You mus give me ze *bon mari*."

Mona took the outstretched hand in hers and gazed intently on its lines. She muttered to herself for a few minutes, and then raised her bright, piercing eyes to the mocking face of the French girl and said slowly,

"I see no good husband for you; you will have many lovers, but never be a wife."

"Ah, *ball sorcière*, you tell ze black lie, all lie," screamed Celeste indignantly, and she returned to her seat with flushing eyes and angry face.

The rest of the company could not repress a smile as they rather enjoyed this "take down" to the forward foreigner.

Mona now went through with the usual routine of mystical warnings and obscure allusions to past and future events in the lives of each and all of her hearers, including the housekeeper and old John, both of whom she put in high good humour by bestowing on them handsome partners for life.

As Mona very often gave warnings that were necessary, and made predictions that were verified, the servants all placed the most implicit faith in her words.

"Now, my friends, I have told all your fortunes, and I would like you to do something for me. Go up and tell Lady Alicia Pagot that I have a word to say to her. Take a quiet chance, for it is private business. Who will go?"

Glances of surprise went round the circle; such an unheard-of request as a private interview with one of the ladies of the household by a gipsy! What could she mean?

"Will you tell Lady Alicia?" inquired Mona, rather impatiently, turning to Phillis, Lady Alicia's maid.

The girl looked down shyly and blushed. She did not care to go up and wait a chance to slip into the great hall among the lords and ladies to deliver the message, and she feared to anger the gipsy by refusing to obey her, so she stood trying to make up her mind.

"Will you go?" again asked Mona.

"Yes, what shall I say?"

"Say I have a message from a friend," said the gipsy.

When Phillis left the room Mona followed her along the hall, and up the stairs, the lofty corridor was deserted, for all the servants were assembled down stairs, and the gipsy sat down on the long oaken bench that ran along the stone wall of the great court. It was dimly

lighted by huge wax candles, held by statues of men in armor, who looked down from their lofty pedestals, with scowling dignity, a candle in one gauntleted hand, and the other on their swords, as if ready to defend the place at a moment's notice.

Mona sat down and waited patiently. It seemed to her that she was under the full gaze of the men-at-arms; but the gipsy was by no means timid, and she was determined to accomplish her errand come what may.

Phillis in the meantime had found her mistress, but had as yet found no opportunity of speaking to her. The Lady Alicia being engaged in earnest conversation with her cousin Stanley. They withdrew from the crowd to a little anti-chamber, and judging by their faces, their subject was not an agreeable one. Stanley looked haggard and anxious, and Alicia pale and nervous.

"It is no use, Alicia, if you will not help me no one else can." The girl's face grew still whiter when she heard the desperate words, but she did not reply, though he paused as if for answer.

"You pretend to love me—you do not love me."

"Stanley, you know I do, I love you—God help me, better than you can understand, better than you deserve." She said this passionately, and bit her lip, to keep back still stronger words of reproach.

Stanley saw that he had gone too far. "Alicia my love," he said softly, and stole his arm around the slender waist; her head sank on his shoulder, for she could not resist kind words from his lips, and her heart had been wrung and tortured by jealousy, for Eva Seymour still lingered at Heilsbourne, though a month had passed since the birth-night ball, and Stanley Heilsbourne was devoted to her.

Not a word or look did he bestow on his affianced wife, except on rare occasions, though the time that intervened between the present hour and his bridal day, could now be counted by hours.

No wonder Stanley was desperate; his whole heart was full of passionate love for Eva, and she allowed him to think that love was returned. What was the broken vow compared to joy like this? His mind was made up. He would act at once.

"Alicia, my love, I do love you beyond all the world."

"Better than you love her?" asked the now happy girl.

"Yes, a thousand times. Will you do me a favor, will you see Ruthven? You know he will do anything you ask him, he loves you also."

"But Stanley I dare not, you don't know all; a month ago he sent me a letter by an old gipsy woman, begging me to meet him in the fir copse. I promised to go, but did not, and I have not seen him since."

"No matter, Alicia; give me your word that you will see him now." He bent eagerly over her and gazed beseechingly down at the fair face; Alicia looked at him, and all her firm resolves melted away. She could not resist him, and he knew it.

"Will you, Alicia, my love, my own?"

"Yes, Stanley."

"When?"

"When you will."

He clasped her in his arms and pressed his lips to her cheek rapturously, for now he saw a way out of his difficulties; now he knew all obstacles could be cleared away, that kept him from his darling Eva.

In a moment he had formed a scheme, dark enough to startle one possessed of a particle of right feeling; but Stanley Riverdale was not startled. No! his hard heart rejoiced, and he felt that this was his hour of triumph.

The silence that had fallen on the cousins was now interrupted by the entrance of Phillis. She approached her mistress and whispered a few words in her ear. Alicia turned to Stanley saying, "Phillis has just told me that the gipsy is waiting outside. Will you remain here till I speak with her?"

"Yes, go at once my darling." The girl obeyed, a glad smile on her face as she did so, for Stanley drew her close to him, and kissed her lips as she passed out, and little did she think it was a kiss of treachery, given but to betray.

CHAPTER XI.

THE ABDUCTION.

A carriage stood at the cross-road on a wet night in the month of June. A travelling coach with four post-horses, and the post-boys had dismounted and were stamping up and down the muddy road impatiently.

"I say, Dick, I wish they would hurry up; we will look pretty queer if Roving Roger should happen along and us standing here like fools awaiting for them all night."

"I say so too. It's a run-off match, an' I should not wonder if they ain't catch, an' that would be a jolly lark, for we would stand here till daylight an' be none the wiser. Putty lookin' gappys we would look oh? a drivin' back to Lunnon without 'em."

Just as the post-boy had come to this melancholy conclusion, footsteps were heard approaching, and the post-boys sprang forward to open the coach door, and endeavor to obtain a glimpse of the lady.

In this gallant attempt, however, they failed miserably, the lady's face being concealed by a thick veil. She was led along by two men, the taller one wore a black dress and large hat

slouched over his eyes, the other, a gay evening dress of blue velvet, slashed with amber satin, and a cavalier hat, with white plume, set on his head jauntily.

The lady was placed in the carriage without a word; she seemed faint and weak, and the two men lifted her into the coach, and laid her on the seat, then shook hands, the taller jumped in, and the gentleman in the blue dress, ordered the boys to their places.

In a few moments the coach was on its way to London, and Stanley Riverdale, for he is the hero of blue and amber, is left standing on the muddy road alone.

It is the wedding day of Stanley Riverdale, and the inmates of Heilsbourne Hall are early astir, all the servants are busy in hall and larder, indeed, in the language of comely Mistress Noalks, they "had not time to sit down" for a fortnight. Order is growing out of confusion. The table is set, it is a massive oaken one, but needs all its strength to-day to support the massive silver plate, the flocks of turkeys, capons and other fowls, not to mention the peacock at the head of the board, in all his regal plumage, a perfect triumph of culinary art that has cost good Mistress Noalks restless days and sleepless nights.

The previous day was wet, and dismal forebodings had been entertained lest the wedding lay should prove the same; but this will not be, for, early as it is, faint glimpses of golden light are making rainbows among the crystal with which the table is loaded, showing that old Sol is coming to grace the joyous occasion with his presence.

All in hurry and bustle, for the wedding is to take place in the private chapel at ten o'clock, and the whole county is to be feasted all day, and all night too, for the matter of that.

"If I only live through it all," said Mrs. Noalks, wiping the perspiration from her brow, as she sank for a moment on a seat.

"Oh! no fear of you not livin' thro' it, ay, an' the christnin' feast, too, what we will be 'avin' in a twalv'month," said old John.

"For shame," laughed the lady; "but I am glad the day has come, for I declare I did think that Lady Eva was getting around the young master with her nasty French ways; but, thank God, we are to have one of our own to rule over us; but here, I must be off."

Eight o'clock struck, and Phillis softly tapped at her mistress' door, thinking as she did so it was the last morning that she would be Alicia Pagot.

There was no answer; but the girl gently opened the door and softly entered the chamber of the bride.

It was a large room, and furnished with every comfort that wealth and good taste could devise. The bed was large and old-fashioned, having steps up to it; the thick white curtains were drawn closely around it, so the sleeping inmate was concealed.

Phillis moved softly about preparing her mistress' bath, and arranging the bridal robes. Lovingly did the girl lift the spotless satin, seeming in its snowy purity, fit dress for the girl who was so soon to wear it; the rich soft lace and rare grand pearls, every gem as large as a pigeon's egg, were laid side by side.

Phillis could not repress a sigh as she reverentially handled them. After all, there is something solemn in the pure white dress, something touching in the rich simplicity of bridal robes.

"Now, I must wake her; it would not do for her to be late. She drew close to the bed and pulled back the curtains. The bed was empty! Where was the bride?"

CHAPTER XII.

RUTHVEN.

In a street in London, near the Thames, stood a lofty old house, that was owned and occupied by a mysterious personage who had long puzzled the neighbors by his strange, unaccountable ways.

Many had vainly tried to form his acquaintance, but their efforts had been fruitless, and now they had given him up in despair. Who was he? What was he?

No one could tell.

He was quiet, pursuing the even tenor of his way, and interfering with no one; but that very fact rendered the man all the more worthy of remark.

So few people mind their own business, that any one who does is sure of attracting public attention.

His going out, his coming in, what he wore and how he looked was always a matter of discussion to his more every-day neighbors.

His house was an old one, but passers-by declared that they had peeped in at the windows, and that it was well-furnished and comfortable. His household consisted of an aged woman and two men. The master was often absent, sometimes for days and nights; but the house was never shut up, and smoke always ascended from the chimneys, proving that however unlike other people the good folks at No. 20 were in all other respects, they ate and drank and cooked like ordinary mortals.

Great was the surprise felt, and also expressed, when one night a carriage drove up to the door and a lady and gentleman alighted and entered the door of the remarkable house; and the gentleman was no other than the remarkable man himself. The whole street trembled. What if the man should turn out to be just like other people?

In a room on the ground floor sat the pair, who were the subject of so much fruitless discussion. The lady half sat, half reclined, in a