

—perhaps, oh, ecstasy! of snatching away the cruel mask, surprising the lovely face looking kindly on me, and then of stopping the reproaches of the little mouth with—

"Sir," interrupted Paul, in a tone of withering contempt, "your *extreme* youth alone protects you from the chastisement your insolence deserves. If you do not again remove your mask, I am not obliged to recognise you here. Allow me to suggest that it will be as well for you if I do not recognise you."

Paul turned and strode back to his friends.

Clarence Harvey went into a little curtained alcove, and threw himself on the cushions, with a burst of hysteric laughter.

"Jealous, jealous! Oh, Paul, Paul! Is this your love for poor Maria? Jealous, madly jealous, for that little moon struck-fool!"

The hysterical laughter subsided at last, and when it did so the unmasked, tear-stained face darkened like a stormy sky, a hand drew back the curtain, and a pair of eyes misty with passion gazed out towards the dancers.

The benevolent-looking Mr. George Faithful was at that moment leading the timid foundling to her place among them. Perhaps he would scarcely have thought young Harvey's love so boyish and absurd if he could have seen his face watching them just then.

"Dance on, my Paul! Forget who taught you that step, and when and where. Dance on; enjoy your partner. It may be, I will provide you with your next."

A few minutes later, either Clarence Harvey had forgotten his kind intentions towards Paul, or was seeking assistance in carrying them out; at all events, he was seen in earnest conversation with the Venetian grandee, whose walk Paul and his friends had laughed at on his entrance into the ball-room.

In the meantime, Christina's heart was throbbing with a strange mixture of joy and pain as she danced with Paul, who for the last half hour seemed to have had but one desire—that of pleasing her. He made her cheek burn by recalling, with tender minuteness, little incidents which Christina supposed were remembered by her alone. In fact, Paul went to work with a passion of jealousy that surprised himself, with what he thought a vain hope of awakening some kind feeling towards himself in a heart that was already brimful of love for him—a heart to which every word that fell from his lips gave a great pain or a great joy; while the sweet, hidden face was so constantly suffused by tears or blushes, as to make its owner thankful for the mask which Paul, in his new fit of tender, respectful gallantry, so often wished away.

Could Christina have forgotten for a time that she was dancing with Maria's lover, and remembered only that her partner was Sir Richard's truant but brave 'prentice, Paul, she would have been happier than ever she had been in her life; but this she could not forget, even for one instant, and therefore her agitation became only more and more cruelly painful.

They were returning to the sofa where they had left Sir Richard, when they saw the Knight Templar coming towards the dancers.

"He looks every inch a soldier," whispered Paul, admiringly.

"And a gentleman," said Christina.

Paul was so much inclined to jealousy tonight as to be almost ready to feel annoyed at the tone in which this was said; nor was he put in a better temper when he saw the red cross pause an instant in front of Christina in passing.

Christina's hand trembled in Paul's.

"Impudent fellow!" muttered Paul.

"Nay," said Christina; "perhaps he thought he knew us."

"Yes, certainly. Every saucy fellow can make that excuse here, I suppose."

They heard a heavy, firm step following them. Paul looked round.

It was the Knight Templar.

While Paul stared at him in angry inquiry, the knight stepped in front of Christina.

"Gentle maiden," said he, in a kind but melancholy voice, "as a token of the honour in which I hold your patrons, may I beg you to accept this little toy from Palestine?"

To Paul's amazement, Christina not only took the quaint bracelet of coins held out to her, but clasped the hand that gave it in both of hers.

The Knight drew back hastily.

"Nay," said Christina, holding his hand fast; "this is Paul. Do not fear. He knows as much as I know of you. I have been so anxious. I came here in hopes of meeting you. I am so frightened by all we have seen. Are you safe here? Oh, Stephen! Stephen!"

"My sister!"

"I will leave her with you, Mr. Sterne," said Paul, "and let Sir Richard know where she is."

"So, Paul, you have made yourself a hero since I saw you last," said Lord Langton, grasping Paul's hand. "I shall indeed be proud to hear such a noble sequel to the story you once told me in our garret on the bridge. Let me have a few words with Christina, then come for her. Tell King James not to fear; I will not recognise him."

Paul left them with strange feelings in his heart for both brother and sister, and hurried towards the spot where he had left Sir Richard. But again he was to be interrupted on his way.

This time it was the Venetian with the princely dress and awkward walk who stopped him. Paul, as he watched him coming, felt sorry he had laughed at what was evidently a great affliction, for the gentleman now limped painfully, and supported himself by putting his hand to the wall as he came along.

As he and Paul met, the Venetian stopped, panted, and said, in a high-pitched voice, querulous and beseeching—

"Would it be asking too great a favour, sir, to beg for your arm to the seat in the alcove there?"

"Nay," answered Paul, bowing with deep respect to the splendid but afflicted gentleman; "the favour is entirely on my side, sir."

"Thank you," said the Venetian, in a shrill grateful voice. "You're very kind; I thought I should have dropped," and he grasped Paul's arm convulsively, as if still half afraid his limbs would fail him, and hobbled at a rapid pace towards the nearest alcove.

"Stop a minute," he piped out, dolorously, as they stood under the lamp, hanging between the curtains. "Help me to the sofa. Oh, dear! oh, dear!"

Paul placed him on the sofa, and was drawing his arm away gently, when two pairs of strong hands seized him from behind, his mask was torn away, and the Venetian, also unmasked, stood erect, showing Paul a face that made his blood turn cold from the roots of his hair to the soles of his feet.

"So, Mr. George Faithful!" said the deep voice of Mr. Richard Coombe, of Coombe Valley. "Well met, sir! well met. You scoundrel! have I got you at last?"

CHAPTER LXXIX.—THE KNIGHT TEMPLAR AND THE ABBESS.

In a little hall or passage which led from the dancing saloon to the coffee-room, and which was lined with evergreens, and decorated with statues and coloured lamps, and cooled by gusts of fresh winter wind entering freely at three small windows—here, waiting for Paul to come for her, Christina walked up and down with her brother, who grew more and more impatient every moment at Paul's delay.

"I would go with you to Sir Richard," said he, "but I know he would rather that I should not be seen either with him, or any of his party."

"Surely Paul will not be long," answered Christina. "But, Stephen, you have not told me yet when and how we may see or hear of you."

"Sooner, perhaps, than you think for, my little sister," muttered Lord Langton, rather to himself than to her. "But fear not, I will find some safe means of sending to you."

"Ay, but I shall be away for a whole week, or more. I am going into Yorkshire."

"To Yorkshire?"

"Yes, to Bridgeminster Castle."

"On a visit?"

"Yes; Lady Hermia—I showed you Lady

Hermia at the play—she thought me looking ill, and has asked me to go back with her to-morrow."

Lord Langton sat down on one of the rustic seats among the evergreens, and leaned his head on his hands as his sister seated herself beside him.

Should he tell her all? Should he trust her, and leave her to do him all the good she could with Hermia?

"Christina."

"Stephen, dear Stephen—what is it?"

Lord Langton drew his sister close to him, took off his mask, and leaned his head on her shoulder.

"Christina, I am going to trust you as I have trusted no one in this world. Can you keep a secret, little sister?"

Christina stole her arms round his neck, and whispered, in a voice choked with sobs—

"Oh, Stephen, can I not? Oh, if you knew! if you knew!"

"My poor little Teena, what is this? But hush—did you hear a step?"

It was a step, and the intruder, as Lord Langton lifted his head, looked straight into his unmasked face.

He hastily replaced his mask, and the intruder—the stately lady abbess—passed them with a rapid, haughty step.

"I am sorry she has seen you," said Christina, tremblingly. "She is one of those who could not give the words. Who knows but she is a spy?"

At that moment King James appeared at the door, and, as a crowd of hot dancers poured in at the same time, fanning themselves and rushing to the windows, he tucked the foundling under his arm, and without noticing the Knight Templar's salutation, made a hasty exit.

Lord Langton stood with his elbow on a window-sill, looking at a weather-stained wall on which the moonlight fell brightly. He stood there till the little hall was again almost empty. Indeed, he thought himself alone there, till a voice behind him said—

"Is it not a good omen for us, my lord, that the heavens should smile upon us this night?"

"Take it as such, sir, by all means," answered the Knight Templar, "if you need omens to keep up your courage; but I trust most of us here can do without them."

"Tis a goodly assemblage," said the samet voice, "I take it we have most of our best men here, my lord."

"We need them, sir."

"We do indeed. The usurper would quake, my lord, if he had an idea of the list of names we could make up here to-night. He could scarcely show a nobler, I think. Charter, surely, is now scarcely less great than—than—Langton—than Bridgeminster."

"Nay, sir," answered the Knight Templar, "you flatter the unfortunate family of the Langtons too much in comparing them with so great a name as that you last mentioned."

"No flattery, my lord; for surely if our cause is won the Langtons will be as great as the Bridgeminsters."

"Never, sir, never," replied the Knight Templar, turning upon his companion sternly. "The poor Langtons can only win fame by conquering their foes; the Bridgeminsters keep their escutcheons bright with the blood of their friends."

The defender of the Langtons did not answer. The Knight Templar remained lost in thought for some moments before he noticed that he had risen and was leaving the hall. When he did turn his head and look after him he started; for the enthusiastic Jacobite, he now perceived for the first time, was one of the visitors pointed out to him by Clarence Harvey as not having known the passwords. It was the young Roman.

While Lord Langton remained looking at the door by which he had gone out, and wondering how he could have been off his guard for a moment on such a night, he heard a rustling among the evergreens at his side, and in another instant the lady abbess stood before him.

"Sir knight," said she, "can you tell me how my Lord Langton may be found and spoken with?"