

other word now. You can't want to ruin yourself; but if you do, you may as well think over how to do that magnificently. Do everything well, boy, even if it's to destroy yourself!

"Paul! Paul! Do for heaven's sake cease all this folly! What do you think my daughter will say to hear of such mad doings?"

CHAPTER XXXIX. PAUL AND MISTRESS PRESTON.

Towards evening, when Paul was assisting with the closing of the shop, a shrill voice said behind him—

"Paul Arkdale!" and when Paul turned, a little black boy, dressed as a page, gave a letter into his hand, then, setting his back against the wall, folded his arms and grinned, saying—

"Pompey wait answer."

"Go a little further, then," said Paul, looking round in dismay, and hiding his delicate little note in his cuff.

The shop was too full of curious 'prentice eyes for him to read it there, so he ran down to the packing room, tore his note open, and read it by the light at a hanging oil-lamp.

Kensington, October—.

PAUL.—I should not write or breathe this name after what has passed, but that, since morning, a new thought has troubled me. Paul, you spoke of having suffered; was it through me? Oh, how can I forgive myself if it is so? and how patient my dear friend was when I offered him forgiveness! Have I indeed brought you woe with my friendship? Then, Paul, put it from you. Think no more of it, but let me have one consolation. Let me know that you have forgiven me. Come and tell me so. Let me hear from your own lips you do not and will not always hate your
MARRIA.

Paul tore off the blank sheet, and, kneeling down by a bale, wrote with the packer's pen and ink—

SWEET MADAM, DEAREST AND KINDEST. Your poor servant comes to-night to thank you for your wondrous goodness to him, and to bid you farewell for ever.

PAUL.

He folded it and went out, and busied himself with the window bars and bolts till he could, unseen, thrust it into Pompey's hand, together with his last sixpence.

Paul had by him an old suit of violet velvet, which he had bought at a theatrical wardrobe. It was so much worn and faded, that he had rolled it up and hidden it in his garret, in the receptacle we have before spoken of, betwixt a beam and the ceiling, as being unfit to put on again.

To-night he got it down, and spread it on his bed.

"'Twere little vanity to put it on in this state," thought he, as he looked at it. "Heaven knows, I now desire to bear myself but as I am. Yet it would not do to disgrace her by going to her house as a poor pauper 'prentice."

So he put it on, and had a melancholy pleasure in knowing that, in spite of his lace ruffles being limp and old yellow, and his hair unpowdered and tied with a piece of black ribbon, he did not look at all amiss for such an interview.

The dead violet colour was very becoming to his fair complexion and light curls. His incessant anxiety had taken all the fresh colour out of his cheeks, and cast a dark shadow under his eyes that seemed to make their colour and feverish light more intense.

As he went hurrying through the streets, many a lady on her way to play or rout looked after him admiringly, taking him for the son of some noble house whose chief was exiled or ruined.

It was dark before Paul reached Kensington, and when he came to the house Maria had described to him, it was some minutes ere he made up his mind to knock.

He paced up and down the street, asking himself with much doubt and agitation if he really had courage to go through the ordeal he knew awaited him behind that little stone terrace of bright flowers flooded with light. He remembered how he had sworn to himself never to see Maria again of his own will, and how such a course had appeared the only thing to save him from being ridiculous in her eyes and base in the eyes of his master. But everything was changed since Sir Richard had spoken of her in such terms.

Paul's cheeks had burnt with anger to hear her so spoken of. Now it was she who must first be considered. Who was he, he asked himself, that he should hurt her pride, for the sake of saving his character? He—Paul Arkdale—a poor 'prentice, to insult a lady, by breaking an appointment so generously made, and then to shun her because he was too cowardly to offer such explanations as he could, ask her forgiveness, and tell her the honest truth. Now, without placing himself in a false and base position, he could never see her more.

"No," said Paul, going up the steps, "she may despise me for my coldness and blindness if she will, but not for my cowardice."

Pompey opened the door, and, showing his teeth in a broad grin, bade Paul wait in the lobby whilst he informed his mistress of his arrival.

Presently Paul heard the creak of a boot on the stairs, and, turning his head, saw a gentleman, whose face and form he instantly remembered to have seen, both at his master's shop and at his house at Blackheath. It was the earl of Bridgeminster. Paul hung his head, and drew close to the wall. Would the earl recognise him? No, scarcely, in such a place, and in a dress so different from that he usually wore.

Nearly at the bottom of the staircase the steps paused. Paul's breath seemed to stop at the same time. He glanced fearfully towards the stairs. The earl was standing still and looking at Paul, with his small, frowning eyes, from head to foot.

Paul's heart beat at a fearful rate at that moment, for he knew as well that he was recognised as if the earl had called him by name. The earl, however, did not speak, but turned abruptly, and went up-stairs again.

What had he gone to do? Tell Maria he had seen him—to ask her why he came? Then was Paul's heart filled with trouble for her—the embarrassment, the disgrace she must feel at his being discovered there by the earl, who was probably her friend, perhaps her guardian. What could Paul do? The only thing that occurred to him, in his agitation, was to save her from having to answer the earl's questions about him—to go up while the earl was there, and pretend he had come about some purchase she had made at the shop that morning.

So Paul leaped up three stairs at a time, feeling bold in his generous anxiety for Maria, and prepared to act the rude, unmannerly 'prentice, and burst into the room with his message.

A door stood open, and Paul, ere he had found courage to make any noise, saw a room divided by a large folding screen. While he hesitated an instant he heard Maria speaking in tones and words that seemed to fall like ice on his heart.

"Leave him to me, my lord!" said that sweet voice in cold, business-like tone. "You are right, it would be most hazardous in you to question him. What I told you about, sir Richard, I drew from him with some difficulty."

"I know! I know!" answered the earl; "'tis an arduous task you undertake, but a noble one. Perhaps, madam, another twenty pounds—"

"Nay, my lord," interrupted Maria, a little wearily, "I was saying that this Paul, though a simple fellow, is too faithful to his master to let us know another word concerning his affairs should he once discover our purpose."

"What! not for money?" said the earl. "Then Paul is a rare 'prentice indeed!"

"Nay, not even for money would Paul betray his master!"

"For love, then, charming Mistress Maria?"

Maria laughed, a clear ringing laugh, that made Paul's cheeks burn, then said—

"No, not knowingly for love, my lord!"

"For love unknowingly then, 'tis all the same. You are a clever woman, madam; I do not wonder that His Majesty at Rome prizes his fair spy—"

"I trust His Majesty at England does not prize her less, my lord," said Maria, a little sarcastically.

"Well, madam, if I mistake not, that pretty bauble on your neck scarcely came from your friends at Rome."

"Would it be treason to say that they are only less generous than my friends in England because less wealthy? Besides, they honour me in a way you do not—they trust me. Yes, you smile, my lord, but positively they trust me."

"And we—"

"And you, my lord, knowing how I use that trust, are wiser, for I doubt if the Chevalier St. George himself is more closely watched by Maria Clementina Preston than Maria Clementina Preston by her generous friends in England. Farewell, my lord! and trust me to get all that is to be got out of Sir Richard's truant 'prentice."

Paul, without hearing the opening or shutting of any door behind the screen, knew in an instant that the earl was gone.

"Now, Pompey," cried Maria, in a fresh, joyous voice.

She ran to a glass, and Paul, who had come from behind the screen, saw her putting two pink moss roses in her powdered hair and smiling to herself. Then she swept away, looking over her shoulder into the glass, and singing deliciously,

In this manner she came close to Paul, who moved on one side and bowed low. Maria, seeing him, started, blushed, and shrank back in girlish confusion. Then she recovered herself, and advanced with extended hand and eyes full of bashful but frank pleasure.

Paul looked at her, and neither spoke nor moved. Maria looked surprised and hurt, then, glancing up tearfully, said, with pouting lips—

"What, Paul, are you going to be angry with me for a little vanity? Was it a great sin in your eyes that I looked in the glass when you were coming? Was it a great sin to be anxious to look well? And then, when my glass, which I begin to fancy must have told me untruths—when my glass, I say, showed me at my poor best, was it sinful to laugh and sing for pleasure?"

"Nay, madam," said Paul, "rather ask yourself, is it worth being at such pains and anxiety to subdue so simple a fellow?"

Maria started back and stared at him.

"Even for another twenty pounds," said he looking at her with a pale face, and eyes that gleamed almost cruelly.

Maria ran to him, raising her arms and crying—

"Ah, is it so? Eavesdropping! eavesdropping! Then I am ruined indeed!"

"Ruined!" echoed Paul, throwing off the hand she had laid on his arm—"ruined, madam! What! because a 'truant 'prentice' chances to overhear the little honour he has left being bargained for by you and your employer?"

"Paul, Paul, listen to me!" cried Maria clinging to his arm.

"Ruined!" went on Paul, raising his other hand above her, as if he would strike her—"ruined, because your plotting has been overheard by a poor fool like me, from whom you undertake to get all that is to be got? Well, madam, triumph that you have already got from me the two things most precious, even to a simple fellow—a fool!"

Maria, rudely pushed off by his arm, stood and gazed at him with eyes full of fear and astonishment.

"I had honesty," said Paul, "I had my master's confidence. I saw you: I lost both. I see plainly enough now that, from the day I first beheld you, you intended me to lose both. What more is it you want of me? My master's secrets? Let me tell you one, then, that may perchance concern you. Know that he hath a few stout 'prentices, sweet Mistress Preston, who would deal but roughly with spies found near his place, though they be fair even as yourself, or rejoice in the pay of two royal masters."

"Paul, Paul! This to a woman!"

Paul closed his lips, white with passion, and, almost leaning against the wall by which he stood, looked at her as she turned half towards him, her hands clasped, her cheeks nearly as white as her pyramid of powdered hair, her brows raised with amazement and horror.

Even thus she was lovely, and, looking on her, Paul felt the sting of his own words run in-