

The Face Behind the Mask.

A ROMANCE.

and mount him and ride as if the demon were after you back to London.

"Back to London? Is the man crazy? I shall do no such thing. Let me tell you, to-night."

"Oh, just as you please," said Ormiston, with a great deal of indifference, considering the urgent nature of his former request. "You can do as you like, you know, and so can I—which translated means, I will go and tell her you have declined to come."

"Tell her? Tell whom? What are you talking about? Hang it man!" exclaimed Sir Norman, getting somewhat excited and profane. "What are you driving at? Can't you speak out and tell me at once?"

"I have told you," said Ormiston, testily, "and I will tell you again, she sent me in search of you, and if you don't choose to come, that's your own affair, not mine."

"This was a little too much for Sir Norman's overwrought feelings, and in the last degree of exasperation he laid violent hands on the collar of Ormiston's doublet and shook him as if he would have shaken the name out with a jerk."

"I tell you what it is, Ormiston, you had better not aggravate me! I can stand a good deal, but I am not exactly Moses or Job, and you had better mind what you are at. If you don't come to the point at once and tell me who 'she' is, I'll throttle you where you stand, and so I give you warning!"

Half indignant and wholly laughing, Ormiston stepped back out of the way of his excited friend.

"I try my mercy! In one word, then, I have been dispatched by a lady in search of you, and that lady is—Leoline."

It has always been one of the inscrutable mysteries in natural philosophy that I never could fathom, why men do not faint. Certain it is that I never yet heard of a man swooning from excess of surprise or joy, and perhaps that may account for Sir Norman not doing so on the present occasion. But he came to an abrupt standstill in their rapid career; and if it had not been quite so excessively dark his friend would have beheld a countenance wonderful to look on, in its mixture of utter astonishment and sublime consternation.

"Leoline!" he faintly gasped. "Just stop a moment, Ormiston, and say that again—will you?"

"No," said Ormiston, hurrying unconcernedly on. "I shall do no such thing, for there is no time to lose, and if there were I have no fancy for standing in this dismal road. Come on, man, and I'll tell you as we go."

Thus abjured, and seeing there was no help for it, Sir Norman, in a dazed and bewildered state, complied; and Ormiston promptly and briskly relaxed into business.

"You see, my dear fellow, to begin at the beginning, after you left, as I stood at ease at La Masque's door, awaiting that lady's return, and was presently rewarded by seeing her come up with an old woman called Prudence. Do you recollect the woman who rushed screaming out of the house of the dead bride?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Well, that was Prudence. She and La Masque were talking so earnestly they did not perceive me, and I—well, the fact is, Kingsley, I stayed and listened. Not a very handsome thing, perhaps, but I couldn't resist it. They were talking of some one they called Leoline, and I, in a moment, knew that it was your flame, and that neither of them knew any more of her whereabouts than we did."

"And yet La Masque told me to come here in search of her," interrupted Sir Norman.

"Very true! That was odd—wasn't it? This Prudence, it appears, was Leoline's nurse, and La Masque, too, seemed to have a certain authority over her; and between them, I learned she was to have been married this very night, and died—or, at least, Prudence thought so—an hour or two before the time."

"Then she was not married?" cried Sir Norman, in an ecstasy of delight.

"Not a bit of it, and what is more, didn't want to be; and judging from the remarks of Prudence, I should say, of the two, rather preferred the plague."

"Then why was she going to do it? You don't mean to say she was forced?"

"Ah, but I do, though! Prudence owned it with the most charming candor in the world."

"Did you hear the name of the person she was to have married?" asked Sir Norman, with kindling eyes.

"I think not; they called him the count, if my memory serves me, and Prudence intimated that he knew nothing of the melancholy fate of Mistress Leoline. Most likely it was the person in the cloak and slouched hat we saw talking to the watchman."

"Sir Norman said nothing, but he thought a good deal, and the burden of his thoughts was an ardent and heartfelt wish that the Count L'Esprance was once more under the swords of the three robbers, and waiting for him to ride to the rescue—that was all."

"La Masque urged Prudence to go back," continued Ormiston; "but Prudence respectfully declined, and went her way bemoaning the fate of her darling. When she was gone."

I've a private notion she is as deeply affected by you as you are by her; for, when I mentioned your name she blushed, you verily to the roots of her hair; and when she spoke of you, couldn't so much as look me in the face—which is, you must own, a very bad symptom."

"Nonsense," said Sir Norman, energetically. "And had it been daylight his friend would have seen that he blushed almost as extensively as the lady. 'She doesn't know me.' 'Ah, doesn't she, though?' That shows all you know about it! She has seen you go past the window many and many a time; and to see you," said Ormiston, making a grimace under cover of the darkness. "Is to love! She told me so herself!"

"What! That she loved me!" said Sir Norman, his notion of propriety to the last degree shocked by such a revelation.

"Not altogether, she only looked that; but she said she knew you well by sight, and by heart, too, as I inferred from her countenance when she said it. There, now, don't make me talk any more for I have told you everything I know, and am all out of breath with my exertions."

"One thing only—did she tell you who she was?"

"No, except that her name was Leoline, and nothing else—which struck me as being slightly strange. Doubtless, she will tell you everything, and one piece of advice I may venture to give you is, you may propose as soon as you like without fear of rejection. Here we are at the Golden Crown, so go in and get your horse and let us be off."

All this time Ormiston had been leading his own horse by the bridle, and as Sir Norman silently complied with this suggestion, in five minutes they were in their saddles, and galloping at breakneck speed toward the city. To tell the truth, one was not more inclined for silence than the other, and the profoundest and thoughtfulness silence was maintained till they reached it. One was thinking of Leoline, one of La Masque, and both were badly in love and just at that particular moment very happy. Of course the happiness of people in that state never lasts long, and then half an hour at a stretch, and then they are plunged back into misery and distraction; but while it does last it is very intense and delightful indeed.

Our two friends having drained the bitter had got to the bottom of the cup, and neither knew that no sooner were the sweets swallowed than they were replenished with a doubly bitter dose. Neither of them had reached the house until they had reached the house of Leoline, and there Sir Norman secured his horse, and looked up at it with beating heart. Not that it was very unusual for his heart to beat, seeing that it never did anything else; but on that occasion its motion was so much accelerated that they were very much down as a bad case of heart disease. A small bright ray of light streamed like a beacon of hope from an upper window, and the lover looked at it like a beleaguered man at the sight of the north star.

"Are you coming in, Ormiston?" he inquired, for the first time in his life almost bashful. "It seems to me it would only be right, you know."

"I don't mind going in and introducing you," said Ormiston; but after you have been delivered over you may fight your own battles and take care of yourself. Come on."

The door was unlocked, and Ormiston sprang up the stairs with the air of a man—quite at home, followed more decorously by Sir Norman. The door of the lady's room stood ajar, as he had left it, and in answer to his "tapping on the chamber" a sweet feminine voice called "Come in."

Ormiston promptly obeyed, and the next instant they were in the room, and in the presence of the dead bride. Certainly, it did not look dead, but in an easy chair drawn up before the dressing table, on which stood the solitary lamp that had illumined the chamber, sat a woman who held a small mirror, or, as it was then called, a "sprinkling glass," in which she was contemplating her own beauty, with as much satisfaction as any other girl might justly do. She had changed, and her dress now sat arrayed in a swelling amplitude of rose-colored satin, her dark hair clasped and bound by a circle of milk white pearls, and the ten degrees more beautiful she ever, in contrast with the bright rose silk, shining dark hair and rich white jewels. She rose up as they entered, and came forward with the same look in her eyes that one of them had seen before, and stood with drooping eyelids, and a sweet, feminine voice called "Come in."

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"You see, I have lost no time in obeying your ladyship's commands," began Ormiston, bowing low. "Mistress Leoline, allow me to present Sir Norman Kingsley."

Sir Norman Kingsley bent almost as profoundly before the lady as the lord high chancellor had done before Queen Miranda; and the lady courted in return, until her pink satin skirt ballooned all over the floor. It was quite an affecting tableau. And so Ormiston felt, as he stood eyeing it with preter-natural gravity.

"I owe my life to Sir Norman Kingsley," murmured the faint, sweet voice of the lady, "and could not rest until I thanked him. I have no words to say how deeply thankful and grateful I am."

"Fairest Leoline, a word from such lips would be enough to repay me, had I done a thousandfold more," responded Norman, laying his hand on his heart with another deep bow.

To be Continued.

USELESS TO LINGER.

"I am waiting," said the old codger, "to find a friend without fault."

"Take my advice, then," said the fellow who tells unpleasant truths, "and cease waiting. Move on. You'll never find him."

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