

and punishment—relief, too, from the fear of being driven from the mercer in disgrace to get his bread how he could, it was succeeded by great lassitude and depression of spirits, which Paul could not shake off, but which he found, on the contrary, grow hourly stronger and stronger.

He was miserable at the sight of every face; for he fancied its owner might have got some inkling of his story, and might be speculating, in a kindly fashion, how long it would be before he was at the same game again.

He was miserable when he reflected on the mercer's daughter, Christina. Had she been told the whole of the sickening tale! If so, how could he ever face her again? And if she were still ignorant of it, he had no means of knowing, but would be always fancying, when there was the slightest peculiarity of look, or expression, or tone, or word, that she was thinking of the nocturnal thief.

He was miserable that Daniel Sterne, a man whom he so very much admired, should always have to think when he proposed to do anything to help Paul forward, could he do that particular thing with safety to the parties concerned, seeing what he had been once tempted to do against a kind master?

Above all, he was miserable at the thought of his misery and hopelessness. He seemed now utterly helpless, utterly hopeless! Indulgences be must expect no more; and yet he felt no moral power within able to lift him above the wish for indulgences.

Night after night he groaned in spirit as he thought over those things, and tried vainly to shape out some satisfying career.

The beautiful enchantress! He could not forget her! Again and again he speculated as to her feelings of mortification and most just anger at his shameful treatment of her on that memorable night.

He wondered whether she had seen him approaching. For if so, she must have guessed the terrible struggle going on within, when she also saw him turn and take to flight.

No; she might have seen nothing of the kind! She might only have seen a very shabby London pretence, whom she had unwisely favoured, who had ventured first to make love to her, then got frightened of his own temerity, of his own master, and taken to his heels to get out of temptation!

Thus did Paul torture himself. But let this much be said for him: he did not go to seek the lady, or venture on any explanations—not, certainly because he was afraid of her, for Paul believed in his heart she would have forgiven at once, after a brief explanation. No; he kept aloof because he believed he ought to do so. But he could not resist a certain hankering of his soul to see her again, now that he found himself shut out from every other gratification. Still he would—so he resolved—abide by his purpose, and wait and work and hope for some period of relief from his present anguish and abatement.

A miserable week had elapsed, when, one afternoon, as the shop was full and Paul at his busiest, he heard a voice that sent the blood to his face, and caused him to let a roll of delicate silk fall to the floor.

Sir Richard was in the shop, seated in an easy chair, laughing and chatting with a bevy of rouged and powdered dowagers, who found the mercer's shop a convenient place for collecting and circulating the latest fashionable scandal of the day. The younger ladies preferred being rated on by the 'prentices, some of whom they favoured with a sort of haughty insolent flirtation.

While Paul picked up the silk and began refolding it with moist, trembling hands, he heard behind him the peculiar wooden-sounding pat-pat of a lady's fashionable boot, with its enormously high heel, then, lifting his eyes, looked straight into Maria's. She returned his look with one which was at the same time inquisitive, amused, and yet reproachful.

Paul glanced fearfully at Sir Richard, Maria did so too, and, seeing that the mercer's eyes were on them, she threw herself in a chair, and,

taking hold of the silk, said to Paul, in a clear voice that rang through the shop so as to be heard by all in it—

"Come, come sir! if 'tis too much trouble to unfold, pray send me some one else less nice. You see this end is frayed, and I shall not buy if I see not the whole length."

Sir Richard heard this speech with a contemptuous smile, and still watched them as he talked to the chattering dowagers. Paul felt he was watching them, and felt sure he recognised Maria as his companion at the play, though she, not dreaming Sir Richard had seen her, felt safe.

"Oh, madam," murmured Paul, clumsily unfolding the silk, "why came you here? I did not deserve—I never thought—'tis too kind, but 'tis a kindness that may ruin me."

"There, sir, do you see that? I now perceive why you wished me to buy with my eyes shut," said Maria. Then, as she pretended to be showing him a fray, her fingers touched Paul's under the silk. The two clasped hands, and Paul, forgetting his master's eye, and everything in the world save that kind little hand and those tearful blue eyes he looked into, muttered—

"Maria, can it be possible? No, I have been too base—too contemptible. It could not be that you forgive me."

"And what, Paul, if I do forgive you?" she asked, with a deep sigh.

"Madam, I deserve it not—I desire it not. My folly and presumption in daring to think myself worthy of accepting your kindness, has already brought me well-nigh to ruin. Do not forgive me. Scorn me—I deserve your scorn. Let me see you no more—I deserve to see you no more."

"Paul—Paul," said Maria, lifting her eyebrows with a look of childish misery and protestation, "what you have done I know not; but what have I done that I should be made to— But heed not what I say. Let it be so; we will not again see each other. And yet, sir, some explanation is surely due to me."

"I am a scoundrel—'tis all the explanation I can give!" groaned Paul.

"Then that is—"

"Paul!" shouted Sir Richard. And then he came toward them.

CHAP. XXXVIII.—ONE OF UNPLEASANT QUESTIONS.

"Paul," said the mercer, the moment the door was closed, "who was that lady?"

"I cannot tell you, Sir Richard," was the respectful but unhesitating answer.

"You cannot tell me either her name, rank, or residence?"

"No, Sir Richard."

"Strange! We must ourselves see to those matters, I suppose, when she comes again."

"I trust not, Sir Richard. It is not my intention to see her again."

"Was it by any kind of appointment she came now?"

"No, Sir Richard; and I was greatly distressed when I saw her come in."

"Hem! Distress was not exactly the word I should have chosen to express your attitude and looks."

Paul was silent.

"Pray, is this the lady you were with on the night of the play?"

"It is, Sir Richard."

"And the lady to whom you were going on that other night?"

Paul trembled at this allusion to the night of his crime, but he answered, with the same quiet, dogged firmness as before—

"Yes, Sir Richard."

"Then permit me, Master Paul Arkdale, to express my belief that you are not dealing honestly with me. I do not believe that you can possibly be ignorant of this lady's name. You must know, sir, more than you choose to tell."

"Pardon me, Sir Richard; I did not say I did not know."

"Ha! What's that?"

"I said I could not possibly tell you."

"And why?" demanded the angry master.

"Because, as a gentleman—" Paul paused, coloured violently all over, then became deathly

pale, and felt he would have given worlds to be able to recall the foolish phrase.

"Because, as a gentleman—"?" maliciously repeated the mercer.

"Because, Sir Richard, as a man having the feelings of a man toward a woman, I could not possibly expose her to any pain or trouble that her brief connection with me might involve. If I am not now sufficiently punished, I am ready to bear whatever you please to inflict; but I ask you, Sir Richard, to let me alone bear it, and I promise you I will then see her no more."

"That won't do. She, it appears, follows you. I shall deal with this matter myself. Be wise. Tell me all you know, and I will guard all your reasonable susceptibilities to an extent greater than you deserve. Now, then, her name?"

"I decline to give it."

"Paul," said the mercer, growing for the first time really angry with him, "I warn you in good time. I have the power to exact obedience?"

"Not in this matter, Sir Richard."

"In any matter, sir, as I will take care to let you see. You are my apprentice, bound to obey all my reasonable orders; and is not this reasonable, that when I see some new Millwood at work, looking, I suppose, for some new George Barnwell—is it not reasonable that I should guard myself and you?"

Paul was silent, but his attitude showed the stubbornness of his determination. The mercer, seeing this, grew more and more irritable, and went about, while talking, as if engaged in half a dozen occupations—banging closet doors, pulling out drawers, and so on. Suddenly he paused opposite to Paul—

"Do you know that I can send you before the Mercer's Court of Assistants?"

"What for?"

"To have you severely flogged for disobedience."

"Oh no, Sir Richard!" said Paul, with a smile that perfectly infuriated his master.

"Can't I, though? You forget (one older than you was flogged to within an inch of his life not five years ago!)"

"I am sure they won't flog me!" said Paul Arkdale.

"Why are you sure?"

"Because, before they flogged me, I'd give them occasion at least for a more dignified punishment. I should murder the man who touched me!"

The mercer looked at Paul's faithful but most stern-looking face, and he saw there something that frightened him; and then, by a revulsion of feeling, he began to feel ashamed of his threats, and to perceive their uselessness. Paul Arkdale was certainly not of the stuff that can be dealt with by flogging, even though he is so young.

"Can't you understand," said the mercer, in a quieter tone, "that it is for your own good I speak?"

"I do believe that, with my heart and soul!"

"And yet you refuse to be helped?"

"I must refuse."

"And will fall, in consequence, most likely. I wash my hands of you! I will be no more responsible! Go back to your former labours at the counter! I will not be reminded, every hour in the day, of my foolish confidence in one who has not the sense to understand his own interests!"

"Do you really wish me to do that, Sir Richard?" asked Paul, a little wistfully.

"Yes!" said the mercer, though the moment he had said it he regretted the word.

"Then I beg very earnestly, Sir Richard, that instead of humiliating me thus, and for such a reason—I beg that you will cancel my indentures, and let me go?"

"Whither?"

"I don't know, and I don't care!" said Paul, his firmness beginning to give way a little.

"Pooh! pooh! It's not to be thought of! Your brother would have a right to challenge my behaviour, I think, if I were to do anything so weak. Proceed with those papers! think over what has passed. I shall hope you will yet give me a better answer. Stop! I will not receive an