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The Face Behind the Mask.

A ROMANCE.

"To his," replied Ormiston, looking at her curiously; for he had seen that rosy glow, and was extremely puzzled thereby; "from whence, allow me to add, you look your departure rather unconcernedly."

"Did I?" she said in a bewildered sort of way. "It is all like a dream to me. I remember Prudence screaming, and telling me I had the plague; and the unutterable horror that filled me when I heard it, and then the next thing I recollect is being at the plague-pit, and seeing your face and his bending over me. All the horror came back with that awakening, and between it and this, I think I must have been unconscious."

"You have saved my life; and, though you may think that a valueless trifle, not worth speaking of, I assure you I view it in a very different light," she said, with a half-smile.

"Lady, your life is invaluable, but as to our saving it, why, you would not have us throw you alive into the plague-pit, would you?"

"It would have been rather barbarous, I confess, but were a few who would risk infection for the sake of mere strangers. Instead of doing as you did, you might have sent me to the pest-house, you know."

"Oh, as to that, all your gratitude is due to Sir Norman. He managed the whole affair, and what is more, fell—but I will leave that for himself to disclose. Meantime, may I ask the name of the lady I have been so fortunate as to serve?"

"Undoubtedly, sir—my name is Leoline."

"Leoline is only half my name. Then I am so unfortunate as to possess only half a name, for I never had any other."

Ormiston opened his eyes very wide indeed.

"Oh, other! You must have had a father some time in your life; most people have," said the young man, reflectively.

She shook her head a little sadly. "I never had, that I know, either father or mother, or anyone but Prudence. And, by the way," she said, half-starting up, "the first thing to be done is, to see about this same Prudence; she must be somewhere in the house."

"Prudence is nowhere in the house," said Ormiston, quietly, "and will not be, she says, for a month to come. She is afraid of the plague."

"Is she?" said Leoline, fixing her eyes on him with a powerful glance.

"How do you know that?"

"I heard her say so not half an hour ago, to a young lady a few doors distant. Perhaps you know her—La Masque."

"That singular being! I don't know her; but I have seen her often. Why was Prudence talking of me to her?"

"That I do not know; but talking of you she was, and she said she was coming back here no more. Perhaps you will be afraid to stay here alone?"

"I think you may safely trust me this time. Are you going?"

"By way of reply, Ormiston took his hat and started for the door. There he paused, with his hand upon it."

"How long have you known Sir Norman Kingsley?" was his careless, artful question.

But Leoline, tapping one little foot on the floor, and looking down at it with hot cheeks and humid eyes, answered not a word.

CHAPTER VIII.

When Sir Norman Kingsley entered the ancient ruin, his head was full of Leoline—when he knelt down to look through the aperture in the flagged floor, heart and head were full of her still.

Right below him he beheld an immense room, of which the flag he had seen seemed to form part of the ceiling in a remote corner. Evidently it was one of a range of lower vaults, and as he was at least four hundred feet above it, and his corner somewhat in shadow, there was little danger of his being seen.

Leoline far down to look at his leisure, he took the goods the gods provided him, and stared to his heart's content.

Sir Norman had seen some queer sights during the four-and-twenty years he had spent in this queer world, but never anything quite equal to this.

The apartment below, though so exceedingly large, was lighted with the brilliancy of noon-day, and every object it contained, from one end to the other, was distinctly revealed.

The floor, from glimpses he had of it in obscure corners, was of stone, but from end to end it was covered with richest rugs and mats, and squares of velvet, of many colors as Joseph's coat. The walls were hung with splendid tapestry, gorgeous in silk and coloring, representing the wars of Troy, the exploits of Coeur de Lion among the Saracens, the feats of Hercules, all more modern representation, the Field of the Cloth of Gold.

The illumination proceeded from a range of wax tapers in silver candelabra, that encircled the whole room, and cast a glittering throne. It stood on a raised dais, covered with crimson velvet, reached by two or three steps carpeted with the same; the throne was as magnificent as gold and satin and ornamentation could make it.

A great velvet canopy, of the same deep, rich color, cut in antique points, and heavily hung with gold fringe, was above the seat of honor. Besides it, to the right, but a little lower down, was a similar throne, somewhat less superb, and minus a canopy. From the door to the throne was a long strip of crimson velvet, edged and embroidered with gold, and arranged in a sweeping semi-circle, on either side, was a row of gilded, cushioned chairs, brilliant, too, with crimson and gold, and each, for everyday Christians, a throne in itself.

Between the flashing of gilding and gold, the tropical flush of crimson velvet, the rainbow dyes on floor and walls, the intoxicating gushes of perfume, and the delicious strains of unseen music, it is no wonder Sir Norman Kingsley's head was spinning like a bewildered teetotum.

Was he sane—was he sleeping? Had he drunk too much wine at the Golden Crown, and had it gone to his head? Was it a scene of earnest enchantment, or were fairy tales, like Aboob Hassan, when he awakes in the palace of the facetious Caliph of Bagdad, he had no notion of believing his own eyes and ears, and quietly concluded it was all an optical illusion, as ghosts are said to be, but he quietly resolved to stay here, nevertheless, and see how the dazzling phantasmagoria would end. The music was certainly ravishing, and it seemed to him, as he listened with enchanted ears, that he never wanted to wake up from so heavenly a dream.

One thing struck him as rather odd; strange and bewildered as everything was, it did not seem as if anything was going on, on the contrary, a vague idea was floating mistily through his mind that he had beheld precisely the

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same thing somewhere before. Probably at some past period of his life he had beheld a similar vision, or had seen a picture somewhere like this in a tale of magic, and satisfying himself with this conclusion, he began wondering if the geni of the place were going to make their appearance at all, or if the knowledge that human eyes were upon them had scared them back to Erebus.

While still ruminating on this important question, a portion of the tapestry, almost beneath him, shrank up and up, and out flocked a glittering throng, with a musical mingling of laughter and voices. Still they came, more and more, until the great room was almost filled, and a dazzling throng they were. Sir Norman had mingled in many a brilliant scene of Whitehall, with the "merry monarch" at their head, but all he had ever witnessed at the king's court fell far short of this pageant. Half the brilliant flock were ladies, superb in satins, silks, velvets and shoes. And such jewels! every gem that ever flashed back the sunlight sparkled and blazed in blinding array—diamonds, pearls, opals, emeralds, rubies, garnets, sapphires, amethysts—every gem that ever gleamed. But neither dresses nor gems were half so superb as the peerless forms they adorned; and such an array of perfectly faces, from purest blonde to brightest brunette, had never met and mingled together before.

Each lovely face was unmasked, but Sir Norman's dazzled eyes in vain sought among them for one he knew. All that "rosy-bud garden of girls" were perfect strangers to him, but not so the gallants who fluttered among them like moths around meteors. They, too, were in gorgeous array, in purple and fine lines, which being interpreted, signified in silk hose of every color, and powdered wigs of every color.

The sun, spangled and embroidered slippers radiated with diamond buckles, doublets of all very different shades as their tights, slashed with satin and embroidered with gold. Most of them wore huge powdered wigs according to the bid-dens of the times, and under those same ugly scalps laughed richly-robed gallants were strangers to him, but not so the ladies, but whoever they were, whether mortal men or "spirits from the vasty deep," they were in the tallest sort of clover just then. Evidently they knew it, too, and seemed to be of the best of terms with themselves and all the world, and laughed and flirted and flattered, with as much perfection as so many ball-room Apollo of the present day.

To be Continued.



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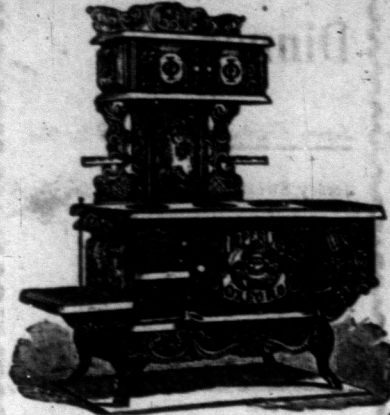
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