

ing your hands of me, and preparing for a short and speedy settlement."

They did not share his laugh; and, as to Christina, her eyes were full of tears when the earl came close to her to wish her good night, and said—

"My sweet friend, do not let these gloomy things affect you. They will not long trouble you or your friends. *They shall not!*"

So saying, he kissed her hand, and strode out of the room, as if careless of what else his two friends might be inclined to think, say, or do.

CHAPTER XLVI. A GLIMPSE OF THE SECRET DEPARTMENT.

In a certain small, dark, insignificant-looking room, the way to which—or, at least, one of the ways to which—strangely enough, lay through noble halls and corridors, sat the chief of the Secret Department.

Little light came into that room, and what light there was looked dingy, discoloured, impure, and highly suggestive of the doings that in this room found their chief agent and record.

A thin, lantern-jawed man was this chief, with hollow, sleepless-looking eyes, and a sort of unquiet, suspicious, expectant, hungry look ever visible on his face.

What a revelation would that man's brain have been, if it could suddenly have been made visible, in all its trickeries, its experiences of human nature in its more infamous aspects, its faith in secrecy, in plotting, and in plotting against plotters, and in the juggleries of statecraft in which that brain and those hands had borne a part!

How many wives had been widowed by an unseen mandate from this almost invisible director! How many patriots had come into this den, and went out of it traitors to their cause! What great men in worldly rank, and what little men—rascals of both classes—had met, as it were, here, unknown to themselves, through the links of association binding them together, which this secret worker had contrived!

At this very moment he is handling, in thought just such a chain, having at one end the Right Honourable the Earl of Bridgeminster, and at the other a spy—*Mistress Maria Clementina Preston.*

He rings a bell sharply. A man in official livery answered it, and with looks, tones, and attitude of the deepest respect.

"Has she come yet?"

"No, sir."

"If the Earl of Bridgeminster comes while she is here, say I am particularly engaged."

"Yes, sir."

"Mind! I am, and mean to be engaged!"

"I think I hear her step, sir."

"Away with you! Stop! Take that chair away with you. If I want it, I'll fetch it. Leave it outside."

The attendant removed the chair; then the chief heard a sort of sparkling, bubbling laughter, and lo! enters *Mistress Maria Clementina.*

The chief rose, bowed, and stood gravely, waiting to hear what she had got to say.

Seeing his stern face, she faltered; then turned to look for the usual chair, but, not seeing it, was obliged to stand and confront her angry chief.

"I—I am sorry to say I bring you no news yet.

"What does it matter, my pretty one? Raneleigh, I am told, is more charming than ever. You certainly grow more beautiful, and, doubtless, the gentlemen more embarrassing. But I am fain to ask you, *Mistress Preston*, one short, simple question. *Is this business?*"

"I—I assure you, sir, I have sought him everywhere."

"Excuse me, I want to draw your attention to a few facts. When you first fell into my way, you were, I think, in danger of destitution, or worse; was it not so?"

"Yes," said the poor maiden, every bit of her ordinary courage and audacity having deserted her, as she saw her dismissal and ruin impending.

"I clothed you, had you taught by the best masters, established you as a young lady of for-

tune in handsome lodgings, gave you whatever you needed to play the fine lady—your sedan-chair, jewels, money—and asked you only, when I had done all this, to reward me by making for yourself a good future income. Wasn't it so?"

"Y—yes," faltered *Mistress Preston.* "But I hope you don't forget that I did do something, when I gave you the first intelligence from Rome of his intentions."

"Bless the foolish child! that's so many weeks ago that the thing's clean forgotten in this office. Gratitude with us, my dear, is really, as the Frenchman says, a lively consciousness of future favours. Why do you forget that? In a word, *Mistress Preston*, I find we have advanced you altogether, beyond what may be considered your salary, nearly five hundred pounds. Can you now pay that?"

"I—I!" said the spy. Looks of horror and astonishment formed the only answer she could give.

"What's to be done, then? This money is not the Government's, but mine. I want my money, *Mistress Preston*—must have my money, *Mistress Preston*—or you will go to gaol, *Mistress Preston.* And that's what I wanted to say to you."

In a passionate outburst of sobs and tears, the hapless spy threw herself at his feet, called him her only friend, and conjured him to give her yet a chance.

And then the remorseless chief relaxed a little, and let out, by degrees, what his victim had all along suspected and hoped—that he was merely frightening her, after his usual wont. After a few less important remarks, he said—

"Well, come, mistress, do let us have plain speaking. Play me no tricks, and I may again try to open the path for you. Else I was about to discharge you! To begin, then. I haven't known you, *Miss Preston*, all this time for nothing. In that silly brain of yours there is always a sort of hankering after admiration. Is that business? You know it is not. And if you don't stick to business, not all your pretty face or your pretty way will save from the inside of the gaol. Answer me—haven't you been getting foolish fancies into your very foolish head about this man?"

"No—no. I hate him!"

"Aha! Is it so? Say that again."

"I HATE HIM? Will that do?"

"Perfectly. Now, then, listen. If you have been idling, or blind, we haven't. An agent of mine believes he has seen the very man hanging about the Foundling Hospital—what for, the fellow can't conceive; neither can I. He thinks he saw him purchase a ticket for the forthcoming *Handel Festival.* If it's him, we have him, for my rascal is sure to know him again."

"Ah, but was the ticket for himself?"

"Not likely a man in his position would be buying for anybody else."

"Very well. You want me?"

"Yes."

"I am ready."

"Now, then, mark. Be careful. Business now, not pleasure. The pleasure shall come after as much as you like of it, only get this job through. Some members of the Royal Family will be at the Festival, therefore I shall see that a military detachment is present. Besides that, I shall have several trustworthy, active, powerful men in plain clothes, dressed as gentlemen, tradesmen, and blackguards, ready to assist and hold him fast, while the soldiers are giving warning."

"And my duty is—"

"Nothing more than this: To find him, talk to him, interest him, get him to make love to you, if you can; and so luring him, gently and unsuspectingly, out from the place into the street, where we can seize him and make sure of him. Don't you be afraid for yourself—we'll take care of you."

"But if you saw me with him inside the place, couldn't you then give me a signal, to let me get away, and then seize him where escape would be impossible among a crowd so dense, and yet so orderly arranged in seats?"

"Well, child, there's sense in what you say;

but, for reasons which don't concern you, it isn't to be so. Say we are merciful, if you like, and don't mind indulging our prey with the chance of a run for his life!"

"Yes, and then you'll shoot him?"

"Child! I run along—this isn't business. Want any money?"

"If you please."

"Here's five guineas. When the job's done, come for fifty more."

CHAPTER XLVII.—THE FOUNDLING HOSPITAL.

It is one of London's greatest days of spectacle, interest, enjoyment—the *Handel Festival* at the Foundling Hospital. Eight hundred coaches and chairs are congregated round the building; and almost every man and woman of distinction you think of are here—the very quintessence of English society.

Captain Coram, the founder, moves about among the throngs inside, his benevolent face and white hair helping the vast auditory to recognise him, and making him the "observed among all observers."

Hogarth, too—another great benefactor—is there, enjoying, no doubt, in popularity what compensates to him for many disappointments; and among them this one—that his artistic brethren will not recognise him as a great historical painter.

But the special circumstance that gives this festival such extraordinary attraction is the fact, that *Handel*, though blind, is to be here in person, and preside at the organ, probably for the last time in life, as his health and spirits are known to be greatly affected.

Earliest among the crowds comes *Lord Langton*, drawn not so much by the idea of the festival itself, as by his secret hope that in frequenting the place he may gradually get some clue to his long-lost sister.

He has been to the directors; they have been most kind, most unwearied in their exertions, and this was the result of their inquiries:—

One *John Forbes* had brought a female child at the time indicated, and had left with it this motto—

The higher you look, the nearer the truth.

This child had been carefully trained, had proved extraordinarily clever, but had given the directors a good deal of trouble when, at fourteen, they put her out apprentice to a dress-maker. She was very tall and womanly for her age, and of such extraordinary beauty, that special care had been used to get her a religious and trust-worthy mistress. She had not been long in service before she disappeared, and the directors had never set eyes on her since.

They had, however, learned thus much of her: she had been living disreputably, it was said, though they were not sure of the fact, with some gentleman; and yet, at the same time, had been busily learning languages, the French and Italian. Beyond that, they knew no more.

This was the dreadful story given to *Lord Langton.*

"And what was the name given to her?" he had asked.

"I will write it down for you," said the official.

He did so, and handed it to the inquirer, who read it, evidently knowing nothing about it.

What was the earl to do? Give up the search for one so truly disreputable, or continue it in the hope of finding and reclaiming her?

He could not answer the question to himself otherwise than as he did, practically, by hunting the precincts of the hospital on all occasions when he fancied the misguided woman might be there. Though, of course, he knew well that, even if she were by his side, he had no means of knowing the fact, unless accident helped him.

However, here he is to-day, at the *Handel Festival*; and, forgetting his own secret anxieties, he listens to the sublime music, and remembers that the musician himself, the inspired author of all these glorious strains, is presiding at the organ, unable to see the vast crowds of his eager worshippers, and feeling himself, probably, that this may be the last earthly mani-