

Clarence, fortunately, as he said to himself had no longer to fear his master's suspecting him to be other than he seemed. But as regards other persons he still wanted to be unknown. So he rather encouraged the idea that he was a scion of some noble family, at work for "the cause," while appearing to be anxiously cherishing his secret. There was one person, however, whom he had a great objection to be taken for—namely, Mistress Maria Clementina Preston. He bethought himself, as he stood considering, how likely that lady's long disappearance from her usual haunts would be to strengthen such a suspicion, had it once taken root.

He looked out of the window. It was a warm, unhealthy morning; a sluggish breeze blew from the river; the spring sunshine seemed to be dragging itself wearily and sleepily along from house to house; a warm, unfragrant steam rose from the miry streets. It was just such a day, Clarence thought to himself, as would bring the old fops of Pall Mall crawling out, like so many gay-coloured beetles from the earth. The sedan-chair bearers would be airing their splendid dresses in St. James's Street. The windows of White's would be crowded with fine gallants—in fact, all the world would be abroad. How convenient for Clarence Harvey if Mistress Maria Clementina Preston could only show herself among her gay friends on such a day!

When Lord Langton came down to breakfast, his young follower asked and obtained permission to visit a sick friend in the country, and soon set off on his charitable errand, with a tearful eye and a well-filled purse.

Clarence Harvey had his wish, for on the afternoon of the very day when he went to visit his ailing friend, Maria Clementina Preston rode slowly into Pall Mall, with Pompey on the steps of her carriage, and a crowd of gallants round her.

She wore a mantua petticoat, "tobine" and sack of ruby-coloured velvet, and the richness and extravagant style of her dress, and her own bright face—fresh, insolent, and beautiful as ever—caused as much envy and jealousy amongst the women as it caused admiration among the gentlemen, both old and young.

She was most gracious in recognising all her friends, and, indeed, many of those whom most persons in her place would have called enemies. She kissed her fingers to touchy old Lord Richborough, with whom she had once had dealings, and who had charged her with being double-faced, and had threatened her with his stick. She nodded and smiled sweetly to the termagant Duchess of Mountjoy-Llanover, who had once boxed her ears for having political business with the duke without first consulting her Grace. She even ventured to claim a curtsying acquaintance with Mr. Horace Walpole, having been told that her face and manner had been most flatteringly described by him in one of his beautiful letters.

The air of insolent graciousness and patronage with which she bowed to the most distinguished persons, attracted much attention.

"Who is she?" was asked on all sides, by those who had not seen her before; while such as knew her spread the news that the king's spy was again back from Rome, and looking richer and handsomer than ever.

She alighted from her coach in St. James's Street, where she had taken rooms opposite White's, and going up-stairs, followed by Pompey, seated herself at an open window directly facing a window of White's, at which a number of gentlemen were drinking wine. Maria did not recognise any friends among them, though she knew several by sight. There was a duke she had met once at Rome; a general and some young noblemen and officers who had danced with her at a masquerade at Vauxhall.

Maria went out on to the wide leads, fanning herself, and looking as if she had no consciousness of the admiring regard of her opposite neighbours, who had now gathered close to the window.

Touching the dingy evergreens with her exquisite fingers, choosing bits of the pale flickering sunshine to stand in, as she saw the gay ladies in the street shun them, Maria lingered on

the leads till a pleasurable flutter at her heart told her more than one handsome gallant had declared her to be "the prettiest woman in town, by George!"

And, indeed, Mistress Preston was a pleasant sight for a spring day, as she moved hither and thither on the dreary-coloured leads, whereon the deep, warm hue of her dress, and her fair, fresh face, showed to wondrous advantage—as she knew. The gouty dandies in the street below shook their ruffles over their withered hauds, gave their sticks a youthful whirl, tossed back their borrowed ringlets, and felt themselves growing young again.

"Well Pompey," said Maria, as she came in, "I have enjoyed myself to-day, if I die for it. What are you staring at, child?"

Following the direction of his eyes, she affected to see for the first time, and with much apparent confusion, the crowded window of the Chocolate House.

At that instant several gentlemen leaped forward, and raised their glasses.

Maria started—half turned as if to move away—then paused, turned back to the window, smiled, and curtsied low.

The interest of the distinguished group at the opposite window increased—more forms came to it. A passer-by, who had caught sight of Maria's bright blushing face, stood still by the door of the Chocolate House.

Presently one of the gentlemen—a young soldier—who had been writing in his pocket-book, tore out the leaf, and gave it, in Maria's sight, to a waiter, who soon came across with it and something wrapped in a napkin.

"Run down to the door, Pompey," said his mistress.

Pompey obeyed, and in a minute came running up, his face one broad grin, which it had caught from the waiter, and delivered to Maria a tiny note and a bottle of Burgundy.

She let him bring her the paper close to the window, took it with an air of childish surprise, and read the pencilled lines, laughingly—

"When beauty's eyes of heavenly light
Across our glasses shine,
The life, the fire, the colour bright
Deserts the rosy wine."

"Oh! dull as Lethe's tide 'twill stay,
Full beauty's self shall slip,
And all her eyes have stolen away
Yields back her balmy lip."

Maria pulled her laughing mouth straight, and shook her head with an air of sweet seriousness as if saying, "Tis too bad, gentlemen, to play with a poor little girl like me." Then she said to Pompey—

"Really, child, these gentlemen are so gallant, I suppose I ought to drink their healths as they have drank mine. Now fill me a glass and give it me very prettily on your knees; and then we'll close the blinds and shut them out."

Pompey came and went down on his small knees to give her the wine, and Maria drank to the gentlemen like a little queen pledging her courtiers.

As she rose from the most profound and charming curtsy, her eye fell, for the first time, on the person who had stopped in the street against the door of White's, and who had been intently observing her for some minutes.

Her bright smile changed to a look of exquisite pain; she turned from the window, burst into tears, and stamped her foot at Pompey, which so frightened him that he ran and hid himself behind a chair.

His mistress soon looked from the window again, and saw Paul crossing the road.

He had scarcely reached the door before the waiter from White's came skipping over the road with another dainty little note.

Maria turned from the window with burning cheeks.

"Run, Pompey, run!" cried she.

Pompey ran to the door.

"Stay, Pompey; what are you going to do sir?"

"Run, missis," answered Pompey, showing the whites of his eyes distractedly, as he got behind another chair.

"Little wretch! listen. Go and bring up the

gentleman who will ask for me, then down with you again and tell the waiter to take back what he has brought to him that sent it."

Pompey ran all round the table to get to the door without coming in reach of his mistress's impatient hand, and by the time he got to the stairs a step well known to Maria was heard on them.

She sank down on a chair by the table and covered her eyes with her hand.

She heard Paul enter and pause at the sight of her, and for once in her life felt too much of a coward to move.

It was so hard, Maria thought, after all she had gone through for Paul's sake, and to make herself more worthy of him—it was so hard that it should be her fate to meet him after their long separation under circumstances like these. She had thought of such a meeting with Paul as Paul had had, with his master and Christina that night at Blackheath; and now, to feel Paul standing there looking on her, she was sure, with bitter contempt!

"I bring you a note, Mistress Preston, from your friends over the way," said Paul.

Maria snatched it from him, tore it in pieces, burst into another fit of weeping, and hid her face.

"Maria," said Paul, gently.

She took her hand from her eyes, saying passionately—

"Do not mock me, Paul. You despise me—tell me so!"

Looking up at him, she saw his face was very pale, and his clothes travel-stained.

"Pardon me," said he, quietly, seeing her look of wonder, "Pardou me, madam, for coming to you here amongst your fine acquaintances in such a plight as this. My excuse must be that it is you I have been seeking the whole day."

"Seeking me! And why?"

"Because I have needed your presence this day, Maria, as I have never needed it before."

Maria rose, trembling with surprise and delight.

"Paul," she sobbed, standing before him with eyes cast down, "I must seem to you very worthless. I do seem very worthless to myself; I own it was my frivolous love of excitement, and nothing more or less to my discredit, made me allow such a scene as you have witnessed just now; but, Paul, if indeed I could believe—might dare to think you would seek me—would come to me as a refuge from any kind of grief or adversity, though you were too poor to buy me bread, too sick to work for me, I think, Paul, in receiving you I should receive a new heart, a new soul, all joy and love, and having no room for sin."

"Poverty or sickness, Maria, would be light in comparison with the grief that has fallen upon me, and that has made me come to you."

"Oh, Paul!" cried she, "believe me, 'tis none so heavy but Maria will think it happiness to share it with you. Confide in me. What is this sorrow? Come," she said, laying her hand on his shoulder, and resting her wet cheek on his arm. "I hunger for my share of it. Paul, give it me."

Paul looked down in the sweet face and loving eyes, and his chest heaved. He stooped, and whispered hoarsely—

"I will, Maria, Oh, trust me, I will share it with you; but not in this place—not here, midst this splendour and with yon brave gallants looking on."

"Pompey, my hood. Quick, quick!" said Maria. "Now, Paul, to what corner of the earth you will! Lead, and I follow!"

CHAPTER NOVI.—THE PASSING BELL.

Darkness thinly strewn with stars was over Spitalfields when Paul led Maria to the good weaver's door.

"It is the house of a friend, then, you take me to?" Maria had asked, during their hurried journey.

"It is."

"Ay, of yours; but shall I find a friend in him, think you?—for alack, Paul, owing to my unfortunate business, I know there are more than you would credit too ready to do me an ill turn."

"Maria, I believe, on my soul, that this man