

"George Faithful."

"Will you walk this way?" asked the mercer, wondering greatly over so odd an introduction, and thinking to himself—

"Ah! I know what it means; he wants to frighten me at the outset as to his knowledge of the value, if he really has got the secret. Yes, a swingeing price, I suppose, is the explanation."

The mercer went into the inner room with Mr. Faithful, who, however, did not leave the shop till he had given one unfortunate shopman a commission to find him something that would require him a full hour's search and unpling of innumerable dusty bales.

"Well now, Mr. Faithful, if there is anything in what you say, I am ready to hear more about it."

Mr. Faithful drew a paper from his pocket, opened it out, and laid it on the mercer's table, covering it, however, with his hand, as he said—

"Are you familiar with the part of your own machines where the improvement of Coombe Brothers comes in?"

"Yes, I think so," said the mercer.

"Then, pray study that!" said Mr. Faithful, and he sat down opposite the mercer, with both his elbows on the table, supporting his head, and thus he stared impudently at the mercer.

"By the—, it's done!" ejaculated the mercer, after a pause of full ten minutes. "And what price do you demand for this?"

No price at all; don't want to sell. If you are satisfied that the thing can be done, that's enough. Good day, Sir Richard."

"Mr. Faithful! Mr. Faithful! I pray you do not run away thus. Let me offer you my hospitality."

"What! in this miserable place!"

"Well, then, at Blackheath. Will you go and spend a night there with me?"

"Don't think I can, really?"

"Pray do."

"Well, if I do, I won't be taken an advantage of, Sir Richard, mind that!"

"Then, my dear sir, Mr.—Mr. Faithful, may I expect you before eight this evening at Blackheath?"

The gentleman in violet waved his hand, as if in assent, as he bustled to the counter where the goods he had wished to see were displayed.

He flew into a violent passion at not finding a particular colour he wanted, and Sir Richard, hearing his complaints, came and apologised for the trouble his men were giving him.

"You've a rascally set here, sir," said he. "A rascally set, 'pon my soul. It wasn't so always. Where's that civil-spoken, intelligent young fellow, Peter—Paul. Yes; Paul What's-his-name. What have you done with him, eh?"

"I'm sorry to say, sir," answered the mercer, "it's owing to that young man's indolence and carelessness that you have had such difficulty to get served to-day. You have, strangely enough, asked for everything which must come from departments in his charge."

"Ah, ah! strange, strange!" murmured the gentleman in violet, and without taking any notice of a fresh supply of silk-pocket handkerchiefs a 'prentice had just brought from the store-room for his inspection, he gave Sir Richard a short nod, and bustled out of the shop.

"Impudent, but interesting, confound him!" exclaimed the mercer, as he looked after him, and pondered how he should best manage him in the impending interview.

CHAPTER XLVI.—THE GUEST ARRIVES AT BLACKHEATH.

Sir Richard Constable sat in the drawing-room at Blackheath making wry faces at Maria's little French songs, and trying to look unconcerned and unexpectant, as he glanced at the timepiece.

It was past the hour appointed by the gentleman in violet for his arrival, and the gentleman in violet had not arrived.

Sir Richard had told Christina and Maria to use all their fascinations to soften the irritable temper of Mr. George Faithful; and Maria, only too glad to be allowed to put on a gay dress again, attired in Christina's new rose-coloured brocade, and with powdered hair, stood with

her guitar in hands, chattering and singing, and sometimes in her feverish spirits performing a little dance, always stopping quickly and glancing in pretty fright and apology to Sir Richard, would laugh, and say—

"Come, come, mistress, you are not in the Rotunda, remember."

Christina smiled at her sometimes, but with effort—sometimes even with tears, jealously hidden by her careful little hand. She was lying on the old sofa, that had great black lion's paws for its feet. She was pale and languid. The little diary was burnt; and every evidence of her love for Paul, to the little rose she had picked and kept as a remembrance of his visit to the garden that Sunday night, was destroyed. Paul was Maria's now, and she must think of him no more; she must only try to make Maria worthy of him.

So Christina lay on the sofa with one little hand on Sir Richard's and one before her eyes, as if the bright light hurt her. And something did hurt her; but it was not the light. It was the thought that, even now, when she had tried her best to turn every dear remembrance of Paul out of her heart as she had turned them out of the drawer of her Bible-stand, she never closed her eyes a minute but Paul's face was before them—never let her thoughts out of her control but they flew to Paul, as caged birds, set free, to their native wood.

"The fellow must have something in him," remarked Sir Richard. "In spite of the indifference he chose to assume this morning, I'll warrant he has gone through some hairbreadth escapes, if he has really achieved what he pretends. If he really entered the place himself, depend upon it there have been moments when his life was not worth two farthings."

Christina started. She had been thinking of Paul's mysterious journey and its probable dangers, and for the instant it seemed as if Sir Richard alluded to him.

She soon, however, remembered their important guest, Mr. Faithful, and, smiling, said—

"You must make him tell us some of his adventures, papa, if Maria succeeds in putting him in a good humour."

"They must be worth hearing, Teena," said Sir Richard, "judging from the stories that get abroad about the way in which the Brothers Coombe treat interlopers. I told you about that Sir Moses Major. A most daring fellow! Made drawings while the manager turned his back an instant. Was found out; dogs set on him. Killed 'em both; made his escape splendidly. By George! I should like to see that man."

"I hear a horse coming," said Maria. "Hark! Yes, and there's the bell."

"Ringing as if he'd pull the house down," muttered Sir Richard. "Just like him—a crusty old fool. I quite expect he will bully me in my own house as he did in my own shop."

"Nay, sir," said Maria, merrily. "I have brought many a worse bear than this can be to my feet with nothing more than a pretty song. Do leave me to tame him. See, I will sit on this cushion behind Christina's sofa, and as soon as ever he begins to growl will I begin to sing."

"Go away with thee, silly child!" answered Sir Richard, laughing, half admiringly, half contemptuously—"as if good business were ever done to the mad tunes of a giddy jade like thee. You cannot live for half an hour at a spell without conspiracy or trickery of some sort."

Maria threw down the cushion behind Christina's sofa, and, crouching on it, and peeping over the high back, waited for the entrance of the adventurous Mr. Faithful.

"A noise with the servants, of course," muttered Sir Richard. "Laughing, too; I suppose he's come in some ridiculous dress."

"I hope Summers would not be so rude as to laugh," said Christina; and then she forgot all about the expected guest as a footstep on the stairs made her face flush, and her heart beat quicker.

Summers threw the door open—Sir Richard rose.

Summers stood still and grinned. The guest seemed suddenly bashful and loth to enter.

Maria stifled a laugh, and pinched Christina's shoulder, while keeping her head behind the back of the sofa. Sir Richard "hemmed" and waited.

"Please, sir," stammered Summers, his hand before his mouth and his face very red, "this gentleman wishes to be announced as Mr. George Faithful, alias Sir Moses Major, alias—"

"Alias," said a well-known voice, as a well-known face and form entered—"alias your unworthy 'prentice Paul."

Sir Richard held back as Paul bowed before him.

"Come, come, sir! what trick is this?" Then, holding out his hand he said, "I am glad to see you, Paul! but why thus use the name of the guest I am expecting?"

At that instant, his eye lighting on Paul's violet suit, he seized him by the shoulder and gazed at him from his head to his feet, and back from his feet to his head, for some time. This done, he sank down in his arm-chair.

"YOU ROGUE!" said he, folding his arms and contemplating Paul. "You are Mr. Faithful!"

"And Sir Moses," added Paul, a little reproachfully.

"Teena," said Sir Richard, "am I dreaming? What is it this fellow says? That my good-for-nothing 'prentice is a hero?"

Christina, at the instant that Sir Richard's moist eyes turned towards her, had seen the whole truth. She rose up and answered him with a wild little cry of joyful pride and triumph. She forgot Maria; forgot her own rank and Paul's low estate; forgot everything but Paul, standing there flushed with triumph and happiness.

"Yes, yes," she cried, falling on her knees by Sir Richard, with a burst of happy tears and happy, childish laughter. "A hero, and I knew it; I felt it! I saw the promise of great things in his eyes when he went away, and I have waited and waited. Oh, I knew it—I felt it!"

For a few minutes the three were all in all to each other. Sir Richard, as he laid his arm round Paul, who had knelt to take Christina's hand, felt that he had a warmer regard for his tiresome 'prentice than he had till this moment been aware of. Paul himself, with his master's arm round him, and his hand held against Christina's throbbing heart, thought his reward so much greater than his deserts that he bent his head in joyful shame. All his adventures grew small in comparison with the happiness of this moment.

They forgot every one in the world but their three selves, till a delicious, low, soft voice, singing quite near, made all start. Paul rose with an agitated face, and gazed round in amazement; Christina, for the first time in her life, repented of an act of charity. If Maria, she thought bitterly, had not been here now, he might have forgotten her; or, at least, they two would have had him to themselves just this one night. She rose and said, in a sharper tone than Maria had ever heard from his lips—

"Maria, I should have thought you might have come forward more quickly to welcome so dear a friend."

Maria came forward, blushing and curtsying charmingly.

"Miss Preston!" stammered Paul, looking beseechingly to Christina for explanation.

"My daughter's—Christina's—guest, Paul," said Sir Richard, watching them all narrowly; "under what circumstances you shall hear shortly. But come, Paul, you are the hero of this evening, and no story shall be told before yours. After that I think I shall surprise you almost as much as you have surprised me. Come, are we first of all to be introduced to Sir Moses Major?"

"No, sir," answered Paul, trying to collect his senses, which had once more been confused by Maria's brilliant eyes. "I must first of all introduce you to an elderly gentleman in search of health, who took cheap lodgings for the winter in Coombe Valley."