

Behind the Mask

A Christmas Story

By N. de Bertrand Luquin.

Etchings by Winifred Luquin.

"No, John will go as the Black Prince," said Harry, correcting the young lady who stood on the hearth-rug facing him, to which young lady he had been secretly engaged for four months. "John will go as the Black Prince, my dear, and I as the renowned Beau Brummel."

"Well, I am sorry; the Black Prince was always my favorite hero, and the date of the Battle of Poitiers is one of the only three dates I can remember." The girl sighed resignedly, and, turning a little from him, leaned against the mantel pillar and placed one slipped foot on the fender. "However, if you will go as Beau Brummel, pray do not carry your gallantry too far in your efforts to do the part justice."

She looked at him questioningly out of the end of her eye. "Evelyn, my dear, am I ever too gallant?" He drew his mouth down comically. "John tells me that since I have grown so stout—" "You are not an inch stouter than John," indignantly. "Besides, Harry, there is only one case in which you over-exert yourself."

She pursed up her lips a little, and then, giving a discreet cough, asked in an abrupt change of tone, "What costume will Norah Trevor wear?" Harry Sandringham was very unsuspecting. He rubbed his chin, thoughtfully, and answered, absently: "A Dresden shepherdess."

"Doubtless the dress will suit her." "She will look like a picture" (warmly). His tone evidently annoyed the young lady. She tapped her foot impatiently.

"How long have you known Miss Trevor?" she asked, with heightened color. "All her life, bless her," he replied, briskly, and then, as he drew his gloves from his pocket, a folded bit of paper fell to the floor. He held out his hand to the girl. "An revoir, dear." He took the fingers she gave him, and shook them gently up and down. "Evelyn," he went on, smiling upon her—he had a very frank, happy smile, but his eyes, when he laughed, often had in them, when he looked at her, a sweet, deep gravity that was happier even than his smile—"Evelyn, do you love me?"

The girl laughed, softly. "Sometimes," she said, lifting her brows. "Not always? Please say always." "I cannot say it to-night," shaking her head. "To-morrow then; to-morrow, at the Bal Masque?"

"Perhaps to-morrow." He left her, unheeding the scrap of paper at his feet. As the door closed the girl stooped, and, picking it up, held it off from her, between her thumb and forefinger.

"Doubtless this is one of mine," she said to herself. "I shall tease him a bit before I return it."

She put it under an ornament on the mantel; then, thinking better of it, drew it out again. "Which one was it?" she wondered. She had only seen him three, for they had seen each other every day since the late summer. She would open it and find out. She hesitated a little, then unfolded the paper, holding it a long way from her eyes, apparently dubious as to whether she would read it or not. At last, with a quick "Oh!" of impatience, she drew it nearer, and, bending her head, read at the end of a dozen lines the signature, "Your Little Norah." The girl's face flushed very hot. It was not her letter, then, after all. She should not read it, of course. No, she could not. Still, in a way, she reasoned hurriedly, she had a right, perhaps, being his fiancée. She looked again at the paper, merely, as she told herself, to see the date; but, unconsciously, her eyes traveled over the paper. "Dear old boy," she read, "are you serious? I cannot believe it. We have been like brother and sister always." "Oh!" Evelyn caught her breath suddenly. She would not read another word. It was quite an accident, she told herself, hysterically, that she had seen this. A sob broke from her lips involuntarily; and then, again, quite by accident, she looked at the end of the letter. "If you will put by all the old loves and content yourself with me alone—"

There, that was enough. There was a great deal yet that she had not seen, but she had read enough. She laid the letter very gently

on the glowing coals, and then seated herself on the little stool directly in front of the fire, and, putting her head in her lap, clasped her arms tightly about her knees. She did not cry, but presently stood up, and with a very white face and feet, and hands that trembled, she walked to the uncurtained window and looked out with wide, dry eyes at the swift-falling snow.

Harry Sandringham was dressing for the opera that evening, when a red-faced little messenger brought a note to his door. He recognized the handwriting in an instant, and with a beaming face bestowed a silver dollar on the small boy, and backed into his room to read the missive. In his shirt-sleeves, with one cuff on and one off, he sat down on the table, just under the lights, and, slitting the envelope carefully, he took out lovingly the large square sheet of half-written note-paper, and ran his eye over the contents. Then, with a face in which anger, amazement and consternation were blended, he stood up, turned around, and, spreading the note on the table, read it again.

"Dear Mr. Sandringham,—For some time now I have feared that this engagement of ours was a mistake. We were both very hasty, and since then, after thinking the matter quietly over, I have come to the conclusion that we had better end things before it is too late. It would be terrible to get married and be sorry afterwards."

"If I could, I would have waited until after the ball before writing this note, because Christmas has always been the happiest time of my life; but I think it would have been wrong to have put off any longer what should have been done months ago."

"Yours sincerely, "EVELYN GRESHAM."

At this moment a quick knock at the door warned Sandringham of his brother's entrance. The latter was fully dressed, even to his gloves. He was tall, slim at the waist and broad at the shoulders—in figure an exact counterpart of Frank.

"You're a pretty fellow," the new-comer said, indignantly, leaning back against the door. "We shall be late, as usual. Tumble into your coat. Helloa," he broke off, abruptly, "What's the matter?"

His brother handed him the letter, silently, and then, compressing his lips and putting his hands deep in his trousers pockets, walked abruptly to the window, where, quite regardless of the world outside, he opened the shutters and stood in his shirt-sleeves, staring at the flickering lights and the passers-by.

The other man read the letter slowly, and then glanced up at his brother's broad back rather quizzically.

"Close the shutter, old chap," he said, "and get into your things. We can talk while you're dressing."

"I can't go to the opera to-night," Harry turned from the window and threw himself heavily into a chair. "Don't wait for me, John."

"Oh, come, now." The other perched himself on the table. "Why the Dickens didn't you tell me of this before, Harry?" he asked, perplexedly.

"It only came to-night." "I mean the engagement—are you engaged to Evelyn, then?" "It looks like it, doesn't it?" sarcastically. "Well, have you been engaged?" "Hang it all, yes—what's the matter with you?" Harry stood up suddenly and again walked to the window.

"You've been very close about it. I never guessed it had gone so far. I say, Harry, for Heaven's sake close that shutter. There's a man and woman in the opposite."

The latter banged the shutter to, with an imprecation, and flung around upon his brother, his face flaming. He seemed to have grown uncontrollably angry all at once.

"John," he said, slowly and tragically, "I have been deceived—basely tricked. I thought I had at last met a pure, true, faithful woman, but—" He threw out his hands, and then plunged them into his pockets again. "They're all alike—every mother's son of 'em."

John bit his lip a moment and once more read the letter. After a minute he spoke.

"Of course, you must know a reason, eh? You have offended her lately—had a quarrel?" "I never quarrelled with Evelyn or any other woman in my life," gloomily. "It's her fickleness. You can't trust 'em. If I were you," fixing a stern look upon his brother, "I wouldn't go any further with Norah Trevor."

"I've gone too far to come back," the other laughed. "The engagement will be announced at the dance her mother gives on New Year's night."

"Well," slowly, "we've known Norah all her life. She's a dear, good girl," huskily. "I congratulate you, old fellow."

"She's the sweetest and best little girl that ever lived," John said, fervently. Then, slapping his leg and leaning towards his brother, "It

all came about last night in the drawing-room. She wore a blue gown. She had been singing to me a quaint little love song, and at the end she stopped with her hands on the keys and looked up at me." He paused and drew a long breath of happy recollection.

"Oh, go to the devil," Harry said, gloomily, and, walking to the dressing table, began to use his brushes furiously upon his hair.

"Did you read that letter I gave you this morning?" asked John, quite unabashed. "That was her acceptance." He rubbed his palm on his knee in blissful satisfaction.

"No, I never thought of it again," Harry spoke, resentfully. "I am in no mood for reading love letters."

"I'll cheer you up, old man." "If she had given the ghost of a reason," Harry was following out his own train of thought, "I might have something to go by."

He laid the brushes down quietly enough, and turned a rather pale face upon his brother. "But she writes and gives me my death-blow as though she were declining an invitation to go to the play." His voice broke a little.

"I can't understand it," John said, slowly. "I have always liked Evelyn, and had always hoped that you two would strike it off. She has money and you have brains."

"That's like your beastly calculating." "Not at all; it's the best sort of combination. Besides, you're not a pauper."

"Nothing matters now," picking up his cuff. "Pauper or no pauper, I shall go to Africa in January."

"Don't be too hasty." Again John bent his eye upon the letter. "She's treating you unfairly if, as you say, she has no reason. If I were in your place I should get at the bottom of this, Harry."

"There's no bottom in it, John; it's been knocked out."

"Never say die, old fellow. At any rate, she's told you plainly that this breaking off is making her unhappy."

"She did not say that." "She writes that until this year Christmas has been the happiest time of her life."

"There is nothing in that." "Well," slowly, "I don't know. If I were you I should go to the ball to-morrow night."

"She wouldn't speak to me. She knows my costume, and would steer clear of me."

"What's the matter with changing togs?" the other spoke, after a short but thoughtful pause.

"She'd recognize me," doubtfully. "What—in a mask? You could change your voice; that's permissible. She'd never know you from me—I'd bet five to one she wouldn't. Still, hesitatingly, "I rather like my costume, and Norah—"

"John," quickly, "perhaps there may be something in your plan. I can try it, anyway. It will be worth while, if only to see her again."

The other looked at his watch. "I am just forty minutes late. If Norah and I had been engaged more than twenty-four hours, I should not be readily forgiven for this." He laid the letter down and took up his hat. "You won't join us, Harry?"

"No thanks, John. Good-night." "Good-night, old man. Brace up."

At Mrs. Livingstone's house on Christmas Eve the guests began to arrive early, and dancing had been going on two hours before Evelyn Gresham and her mother arrived. Harry Sandringham had been standing near the musicians' gallery, at the end of the room, for the past twenty-five minutes, enormously tall in his black, close-fitting suit and high-fashioned helmet, with the visor down.

"Will your Highness not condescend to dance?" Mrs. Livingstone had asked several times of the stolidly straight and sombre figure, but until Evelyn entered the room he had

pleaded an excuse. Now, however, he gave his hostess his arm and let her lead him to Norah Trevor, who with a dimpled chin and pretty laughing mouth showing below the square of black muslin, had just finished a waltz with John. As the Black Prince and the Dresden Shepherdess moved about the room, the former kept the latter dancing close to Evelyn Gresham and her partner. Sandringham watched intently, when space and time would permit, his late fiancée's face, and he saw with much satisfaction that her eyes were always following Beau Brummel, who talked with the hostess's husband at the entrance to the ballroom.

At the end of the dance, having taken his partner to her chaperone, he made his way to Evelyn. She was very fair and sweet and haughty as Mary Antoinette, though Sandringham thought he detected two tiny lines about her mouth that he remembered seeing there once before, when she had cried all night because her cat had died.

He spoke to her in a sepulchral tone of voice, and she handed him her programme indifferently. He put his name down for the supper dance and all four extras; then returned it to her, and, with a low bow, abruptly left her.

After that he danced madly with anyone in the room who happened to be near him when the music started. He would put no names on his programme save hers, just there in the middle, in large, bold letters, "Evelyn."

When at last he came for her, she was sitting in an alcove with the lieutenant with whom she had been dancing the first part of the evening. Most of the people were hurrying to the supper-rooms.

"There is bound to be a crush, Mr. Sandringham," she said, waving her fan slowly, "and really I don't care for supper to-night."

"Shall we sit here, then?" He bent over her. His voice was unsteady, but he was talking in such a basso profundo that his nervousness was disguised.

The lieutenant withdrew, and Sandringham took his seat.

"It was odd of you to take all my extras," began Miss Gresham, coldly. "I would have remonstrated with you, only you left before I could even glance at my programme."

"Perhaps that is why I was so hasty," Sandringham told her. "You see, I wanted to talk with you without fear of interruption."

"It's most absurd of you to keep that tone of voice, Charles," Miss Gresham spoke, impatiently. "I know quite well who you are, Harry. Your brother told me your costume."

"Harry's an ass," in the same deep voice. Miss Gresham tossed her head without replying.

"However," he went on, "I shall keep to bass instead of baritone, for the sake of the practise, if you don't mind."

She looked at him critically and rather contemptuously.

"The lights are rather strong here, don't you think so?" The Black Prince moved uneasily under her gaze. "Wouldn't you like to turn quite around, eh? I'll draw the curtains behind us, and we can watch the moon and be quite secluded."

Miss Gresham leaned a little back from him. "I have not the slightest desire for seclusion, John," she said, severely, "and considering that it is snowing hard—"

"Evelyn," Sandringham interrupted, "He was very warm; his face, under the closed visor, was damp and hot. "Evelyn, you must make allowances for my nervousness to-night. I have been horribly upset about my brother."

He saw her bite her lip suddenly, and she turned her head a little away.

"Your brother has told you everything, then?" she asked, slowly.

"Everything, and—er—is terribly broken up over it. All last night he walked the floor of his room. I tried to get him to go to bed. 'No, John,' said he, 'it will be a long day before I can rest again.' I just managed to drag him here to-night. He only came in the made hope of seeing you—of perhaps saying a last word to you."

Miss Gresham began to hum a little air aloud. She tilted her chin haughtily, though her lip quivered slightly.

"If you had only given him a reason," the Black Prince begged, sinking his voice to such a low bass that his words were scarcely audible. "It's a horrible thing to throw a man down like that, without the ghost of a show."

"John," Miss Gresham began, indignantly, "why will you persist in talking in that silly voice?"

"I told you I was practising. See here, do you think you have acted fairly by Harry?" earnestly. "You were engaged and all that, and—er—he thought so much of you and was trying to get his book finished—"

wildly, "he has danced six dances with her, all in succession, and now," her voice broke in a quick sob, "he has taken her in to supper, and they will be together at unmasking time—"

"Evelyn," he leaned towards her suddenly. "Evelyn, my dear," his voice seemed to start from his boots and end in a high falsetto. A great joy swept over him all of a sudden. She cared then; she really cared.

"You needn't think I mind," the girl said, trying in vain to steady her words. "It doesn't make the least difference to me. Only—only it's wicked of you to pretend so about Harry and to—tell me such stories."

"I haven't told a story, Evelyn," entreatingly, "and you are misjudging my brother. He and Norah are like brother and sister, and he has probably told her this whole unhappy business, in order to get her advice. A woman can best understand a woman, you know."

"I saw him kiss her behind the palm in the conservatory," indignantly.

"Simply a brotherly caress," promptly. "Come, now, let us get at the root of this matter. Tell me why you sent that letter. You must have had some reason. You aren't naturally cruel; you are too good, too sweet, too true a girl to be a coquette."

"Do you really and truly believe that?" she asked, hesitatingly.

"Do I?" The Black Prince moved abruptly nearer to her, and in a very matter-of-fact way took her hand.

"John," she pulled her fingers away and spoke sharply, "don't do that again."

"I beg your pardon; I forgot myself." In spite of himself, the Prince laughed in a spasmodic, choking sort of way.

The girl did not notice his merriment, however. She drew off her mask suddenly, and, taking out her handkerchief, put it to her eyes.

"I—I have not acted quite right myself," she said, "and perhaps I had better tell you about it, though of course it does not make the slightest difference in regard to your brother."

Then she put down her handkerchief and spoke quite angrily. "John," she said, "do take off that great silly helmet. It's very stupid of you to keep this acting up with me."

The Black Prince drew himself up haughtily. "I prefer," he said, stiffly, "to keep my helmet on."

"Oh, very well," slowly, "do as you like; it does not matter." Then she leaned towards him and fixed her blue eyes hard upon his that showed deep and dark behind the polished bands of his visor. With a quick movement Sandringham pulled the curtains in front of them together, shutting out the light.

"We can talk much better so," he said. There was a sudden tone in his voice, something in his gesture, that made the girl start and a warm glow over her face. In the dark she clasped her hands tightly together, and when she spoke her voice was lighter, sweeter, than it had been before.

"John," she said, softly, "it happened yesterday, when Harry was going away. Sometimes, you know, I have been a little angry, for he is always praising Norah Trevor to me. Well, you see, he took out his gloves, and—and a letter dropped out with them—only he didn't notice it."

"Indeed!" Sandringham's voice was startled. He would have said more, but she laid her hand on his arm and continued, quickly: "I—I thought it was mine, else—oh, I wouldn't haven't opened it; you must believe that. I thought it would be such fun to ask him for it, and he would think he had lost it, and—and—I would scold him awfully, and—but it wasn't fun; there wasn't any fun about it John," miserably.

"What was in the letter, Evelyn?" sternly.

"I only read a little. I meant just to see the date, but I couldn't help looking a little farther. She called him 'Dear old boy,' and said that if he would put off the old loves and content himself with her alone—"

"Enough," still sternly, but hugging him



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