

Christina watched Mistress Preston narrowly while the letter was being read, partly in doubt whether or not she was a vile imposter, and partly in womanly sympathy with her bitter disappointment, if she had really believed the story.

"I don't believe a word of it!" was the first remark elicited from Mistress Preston. "It's convenient to get rid of me, I dare say!"

Then she burst out into a flood of passionate tears, and bewailed her hard fate.

And then, going up to Lord Langton, she said, with the utmost power of all her fascinations—

"My dear lord—I will not call you brother, not yet, though you have once called me sister, for I am not worthy of you, but I will try to be! Do not, then—on my knees I entreat you—believe this foolish story, which—which—"

"Must be true, madam," interposed Lord Langton, "for I now recognise the man who wrote that letter as one of my father's most devoted retainers. Nor is that all. But I pray you to rise and listen."

She got up, and took a chair, as he went on: "Do you not understand that Sir Richard Constable and his daughter are living witnesses of the truth? Sir Richard received the child, accepted the trust, educated her as his own: behold my sister where she stands!"

Mistress Preston started, giving Christina a long, angry, threatening look, full of malice, and yet full of curiosity. The earl went on:—

"The first hour I saw that lady, some secret and, to me, inexplicable bond of sympathy drew me to her. Ask her if she did not feel something of a corresponding kind."

"I did! I did! Oh, my dear, dear brother, is it—is it really so?"

"My sister!"

Mistress Preston looked on as they flew to each other's arms, and embraced each other warmly; and she forgot for a moment her own position in enviously watching them, and thinking of the Paradise she had just seen opened, and then lost. Christina now whispered to the earl—

"Say a word to papa! he is almost broken-hearted. I cannot leave him!"

The earl took Christina to Sir Richard, and said—

"Oh, best of friends! How can I sufficiently thank you for giving me this woman instead of that?"

The words were said so low that it was supposed that they would not be heard; but Mistress Preston's ears were quick, and what she could not quite hear she guessed near enough for the truth. The earl went on—

"Christina, Sir Richard, is yours more than mine. You shall ever be to me in all that concerns her what she tells me, already defyingly, she means to be—that is, your veritable daughter, claiming only a daughter's rights, but intending always to claim them."

Then Christina caught the mercer round the neck, and wept many happy tears before she allowed her face to be once more visible.

"Sir Richard," called out the voice of the earl from the further end of the room, some minutes later, and after an embarrassing silence on all sides, "when I came to you, it was with the intention to tell you the whole truth about this unhappy woman. She must pardon me, therefore, if I still tell it. I will spare her just as much and no more than I would have spared her when, as a brother, I believed myself to some extent a sharer in all her degradation. Friends, look upon her in all her beauty, and then hear what she is—a spy!"

"A spy!" almost shouted the mercer.

"A spy!" timidly murmured Christina.

"Not a spy only on one side, but a double spy, playing now the traitor to this side, now to that—betraying, probably, of both!"

Mistress Preston's beautiful face became almost fearful in the looks she cast round, before starting off towards the door.

"Stay, beautiful mistress," said the earl, loudly.

"No, I will not!" almost screamed Mistress

Preston. "I will not stay to be—he so brutally insulted!" Again there was a passion of tears.

"Pardon me, you shall stay!" said the earl, calmly, and interposing between her and the door. Then he went on:—

"To myself she has been most attentive. She, it appears, has already denounced me to the Government. My life has been almost miraculously preserved from the effect of her acts, and to-day, or rather yesterday, for it is, I see, past midnight, we came almost fresh from a new effort, which you, friends, ought to know of."

"This tender, delicate, fragile bit of God's handiwork—this creature, formed to be the delight and glory of humanity, had it only a soul in harmony with such a body—this Mistress Maria Clementina Preston has been laying herself out for me by seeming distresses, has drawn me to her to speak in tones of kindness—to offer her acts of kindness, and all the while she was leading me to my political murderers (no doubt, for a price), who lay in wait outside!"

"Stop, Sir Richard. Touch her not. And you, my dear, sweet sister, do not yet turn away from her in disgust. Let me be just. When she found, or professed to find, I was her brother, she was then conscience-stricken, and she did save me. Thank her for that as I do! And now tell me what we shall do with her."

"I warn you distinctly what she will do to us the moment she leaves us, and is free. She will inform against us, and you, Sir Richard, who know me only as coming to England on private business, will, I doubt not, be implicated by this pretty, musical voice, as she tells her story in some infernal calumny of rebellion and what not! Time presses. I repeat my question—What shall we do with her?"

Mistress Preston, who had looked defyingly, almost triumphantly, during parts of this speech, as if acknowledging how accurately her most secret thoughts were understood, began to change colour a bit, as she saw her own danger through their danger.

Was it likely they would let her go as she was, in such a mood?

Pretty Mistress Maria began to change at once, and tried hard to disclaim all the ideas imputed to her.

"What did you propose to do with her when you thought her your sister?" asked the mercer.

"Forgive her with all my heart and soul, on one condition," replied Lord Langton—"that she would allow me, or rather you, to so shape her life that she might reinstate herself in her own natural self-respect, which would also involve ours. That is what I meant to do with my sister."

"And what do you wish as regards Mistress Preston, no longer your sister?" continued the knight.

"I wish to do exactly the same thing, only I will do what I can for her with even greater liberality, were it only for the relief I experience to find that what I do she must henceforth own is done for her sake, not mine."

Then he went nearer to her, as he added, in a kindly tone—

"Speak, then, Mistress Maria. Give me absolute securities that you will not in any way mention the name of this worthy knight, who abhors my supposed schemes; and as to myself, you may do as you like—make friend or foe of me, which I care not, but for your own sake."

"What is it you offer me?" asked Mistress Preston, speaking as if in great distress and confusion of thought.

"The shelter of a home, which this worthy gentleman will find for you; means for religious and moral culture; finally, if my means permit, a moderate independence for life, that shall make even your brief relationship to me something pleasant and useful to reflect on."

"And if I refuse your help, and demand liberty to go out?"

Christina now interposed, saying to her father—

"Dear papa, may I, in your name, ask this young lady—who has really suffered so much that I cannot but pity her—to stay with me, be my guest for a few days, and let us two women together talk the matter over?"

"Do as your heart impels you," said the admiring mercer, conscious at the same time that Christina's step was about the most prudent one that could be taken under existing circumstances.

Christina went to the unhappy woman, who stood there a picture of the intensest humiliation, took her hand, slid an arm round her waist, kissed her, felt the rebellious heart begin to swell, saw the chastening tears begin to flow, then she turned, and said—

"My dear brother, do I understand you that Maria is the daughter of one of our father's most devoted adherents, and that she has therefore been sacrificed, positively sacrificed from her birth, for my sake?"

"That is so, Christina, and I waited but for you to find that out. I had not forgotten it, trust me! I wanted only to stir the nature that must exist in this most lovely of forms. If she will listen to you, she shall find in me, in you, and in your father lasting friends—friends who will never desert her!"

Maria could bear this no longer. Her heart gave way. She cried out in tones of the bitterest anguish, "Oh, I do want friends! I never had one good one yet! I will change! I will be all you wish me, if you will forgive and forget what an infamous thing I have been. Oh, if you will but receive me—give me a chance for a new life—save me from that detestable wretch who has employed me, and bribed me, and corrupted me, and who now threatens me with a gaol if he ever sees in me one womanly instinct or compunction—oh, save me from him, and I will be so grateful—will again be to you what my father was to your father—you devoted servant, your very slave!"

Here emotion became too strong, and hysteric shrieks of laughter and terrible sobs and cries of agony ended the scene, in a way sad for all, but not without leaving some element of hope of a better future for the spy, and of greater safety for those who might so soon have been her victims.

CHAPTER XL.—CHRISTINA AND MISTRESS PRESTON.

Christina, in spite of having spent one of the happiest evenings of her life, went to her chamber that night with an aching heart.

Why was this? She had not only found a brother, but had heard she had not been entirely without a mother's love, for Lord Langton described to her her first and last parting with her mother—how the wretched lady had first placed her in her nurse's arms, with an agonised prayer to God, then snatched her back again and again, and covered her with kisses and tears—how, at last, when the men who were waiting to take her to the sea began to murmur at the delay, she stood proudly up, and said—

"Fear me not, sirs. I trust Lord Langton's wife can suffer for her king as well as any of you. My babe, farewell! To that Parent who will never forsake thee, as I must now, I give thee!"

"He has never forsaken me," murmured Christina, as she sat, half veiled in soft brown hair, at her little quaint Bible-stand, "never, never! and oh, how wicked I must be to be miserable—for to be miserable with so many blessings one must be wicked!"

That old Bible-stand, with the wax candles on each side, was Christina's confessional, and every night, when her clothes were half put off, and her maid sent to bed, she went and knelt there, and told everything she had done or thought amiss to that ear which seemed never deaf to her or heedless.

To-night she laid her head down on the book, and sobbed out—

"Yes, I have been wicked, very wicked! I have been actually jealous of this poor creature because Stephen thinks so much of her beauty; and because I see it is no wonder Paul should love her, and, having loved her, could never love again, and I have almost hated her, poor, friendless soul!"

She had risen, and was standing before the mirror, trying to humble herself by thinking how poor her beauty was as compared to Maria's, when a sound like that of a child sobbing in its sleep reached her ear. It came from the ad-