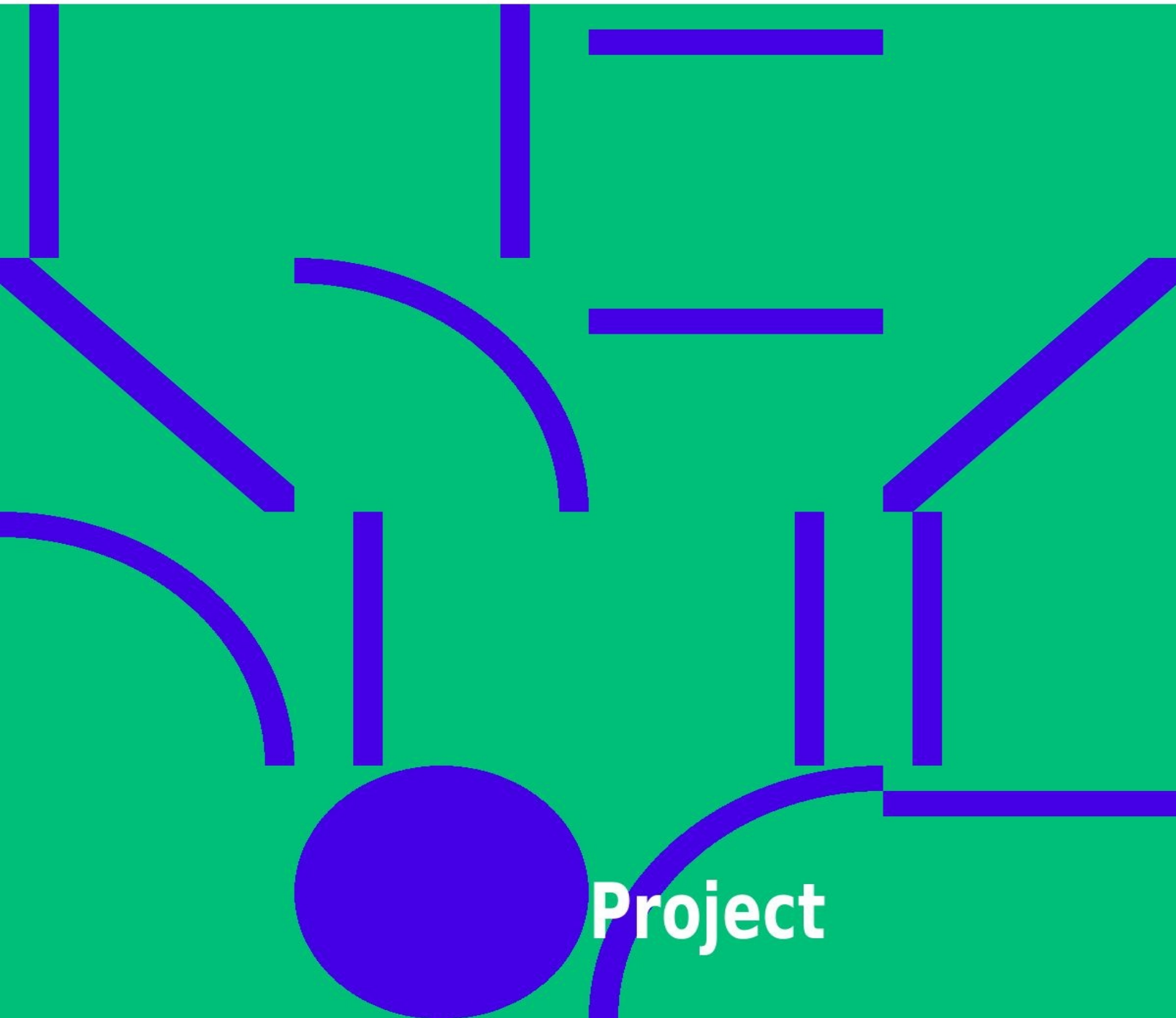
The Midnight Queen

May Agnes Fleming



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By May Agnes Fleming

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CHAPTER I. THE SORCERESS.

The plague raged in the city of London. The destroying angel had gone forth, and kindled with its fiery breath the awful pestilence, until all London became one mighty lazar-house. Thousands were swept away daily; grass grew in the streets, and the living were scarce able to bury the dead. Business of all kinds was at an end, except that of the coffin-makers and drivers of the pest-cart. Whole streets were shut up, and almost every other house in the city bore the fatal red cross, and the ominous inscription, “Lord have mercy on us”. Few people, save the watchmen, armed with halberts, keeping guard over the stricken houses, appeared in the streets; and those who ventured there, shrank from each other, and passed rapidly on with averted faces. Many even fell dead on the sidewalk, and lay with their ghastly, discolored faces, upturned to the mocking sunlight, until the dead-cart came rattling along, and the drivers hoisted the body with their pitchforks on the top of their dreadful load. Few other vehicles besides those same dead-carts appeared in the city now; and they plied their trade busily, day and night; and the cry of the drivers echoed dismally through the deserted streets: “Bring out your dead! bring out your dead!” All who could do so had long ago fled from the devoted city; and London lay under the burning heat of the June sunshine, stricken for its sins by the hand of God. The pest-houses were full, so were the plague-pits, where the dead were hurled in cartfuls; and no one knew who rose up in health in the morning but that they might be lying stark and dead in a few hours. The very churches were forsaken; their pastors fled or lying in the plague-pits; and it was even resolved to convert the great cathedral of St. Paul into a vast plague-hospital. Cries and lamentations echoed from one end of the city to the other, and Death and Charles reigned over London together.

Yet in the midst of all this, many scenes of wild orgies and debauchery still went on within its gates—as, in our own day, when the cholera ravaged Paris, the inhabitants of that facetious city made it a carnival, so now, in London, they were many who, feeling they had but a few days to live at the most, resolved to defy death, and indulge in the revelry while they yet existed. “Eat, drink, and be merry, for to-morrow you die!” was their motto; and if in the midst of the frantic dance or debauched revel one of them dropped dead, the others only shrieked with laughter, hurled the livid body out to the street, and the demoniac mirth grew twice as fast and furious as before. Robbers and cut-purses paraded the streets at noonday, entered boldly closed and deserted houses, and bore off with

impunity, whatever they pleased. Highwaymen infested Hounslow Heath, and all the roads leading from the city, levying a toll on all who passed, and plundering fearlessly the flying citizens. In fact, far-famed London town, in the year of grace 1665, would have given one a good idea of Pandemonium broke loose.

It was drawing to the close of an almost tropical June day, that the crowd who had thronged the precincts of St. Paul's since early morning, began to disperse. The sun, that had throbbed the livelong day like a great heart of fire in a sea of brass, was sinking from sight in clouds of crimson, purple and gold, yet Paul's Walk was crowded. There were court-gallants in ruffles and plumes; ballad-singers chanting the not over-delicate ditties of the Earl of Rochester; usurers exchanging gold for bonds worth three times what they gave for them; quack-doctors reading in dolorous tones the bills of mortality of the preceding day, and selling plague-waters and anti-pestilential abominations, whose merit they loudly extolled; ladies too, richly dressed, and many of them masked; and booksellers who always made St. Paul's a favorite haunt, and even to this day patronize its precincts, and flourish in the regions of Paternoster Row and Ave Maria Lane; court pages in rich liveries, pert and flippant; serving-men out of place, and pickpockets with a keen eye to business; all clashed and jostled together, raising a din to which the Plain of Shinar, with its confusion of tongues and Babylonish workmen, were as nothing.

Moving serenely through this discordant sea of his fellow-creatures came a young man booted and spurred, whose rich doublet of cherry colored velvet, edged and spangled with gold, and jaunty hat set slightly on one side of his head, with its long black plume and diamond clasp, proclaimed him to be somebody. A profusion of snowy shirt-frill rushed impetuously out of his doublet; a black-velvet cloak, lined with amber-satin, fell picturesquely from his shoulders; a sword with a jeweled hilt clanked on the pavement as he walked. One hand was covered with a gauntlet of canary-colored kid, perfumed to a degree that would shame any belle of to-day, the other, which rested lightly on his sword-hilt, flashed with a splendid opal, splendidly set. He was a handsome fellow too, with fair waving hair (for he had the good taste to discard the ugly wigs then in vogue), dark, bright, handsome eyes, a thick blonde moustache, a tall and remarkably graceful figure, and an expression of countenance wherein easy good-nature and fiery impetuosity had a hard struggle for mastery. That he was a courtier of rank, was apparent from his rich attire and rather aristocratic bearing and a crowd of hangers-on followed him as he went, loudly demanding spur-money. A group of timbril-girls, singing shrilly the songs of the day, called boldly to him as he passed; and one of them, more free and easy than the rest,

danced up to him striking her timbrel, and shouting rather than singing the chorus of the then popular ditty,

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“What care I for pest or plague?
  We can die but once, God wot,
 Kiss me darling—stay with me:
  Love me—love me, leave me not!”
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The darling in question turned his bright blue eyes on that dashing street-singer with a cool glance of recognition.

“Very sorry, Nell,” he said, in a nonchalant tone, “but I'm afraid I must. How long have you been here, may I ask?”

“A full hour by St. Paul's; and where has Sir Norman Kingsley been, may I ask? I thought you were dead of the plague.”

“Not exactly. Have you seen—ah! there he is. The very man I want.”

With which Sir Norman Kingsley dropped a gold piece into the girl's extended palm, and pushed on through the crowd up Paul's Walk. A tall, dark figure was leaning moodily with folded arms, looking fixedly at the ground, and taking no notice of the busy scene around him until Sir Norman laid his ungloved and jeweled hand lightly on his shoulder.

“Good morning, Ormiston. I had an idea I would find you here, and—but what's the matter with you, man? Have you got the plague? or has your mysterious inamorata jilted you? or what other annoyance has happened to make you look as woebegone as old King Lear, sent adrift by his tender daughters to take care of himself?”

The individual addressed lifted his head, disclosing a dark and rather handsome face, settled now into a look of gloomy discontent. He slightly raised his hat as he saw who his questioner was.

“Ah! it's you, Sir Norman! I had given up all notion of your coming, and was about to quit this confounded babel—this tumultuous den of thieves. What has detained you?”

“I was on duty at Whitehall. Are we not in time to keep our appointment?”

“Oh, certainly! La Masque is at home to visitors at all hours, day and night. I believe in my soul she doesn't know what sleep means.”

“And you are still as much in love with her as ever, I dare swear! I have no doubt, now, it was of her you were thinking when I came up. Nothing else could ever have made you look so dismally woebegone as you did, when Providence sent me to your relief.”

“I was thinking of her,” said the young man moodily, and with a darkening

brow.

Sir Norman favored him with a half-amused, half-contemptuous stare for a moment; then stopped at a huckster's stall to purchase some cigarettes; lit one, and after smoking for a few minutes, pleasantly remarked, as if the fact had just struck him:

“Ormiston, you're a fool!”

“I know it!” said Ormiston, sententiously.

“The idea,” said Sir Norman, knocking the ashes daintily off the end of his cigar with the tip of his little finger—“the idea of falling in love with a woman whose face you have never seen! I can understand a man a going to any absurd extreme when he falls in love in proper Christian fashion, with a proper Christian face; but to go stark, staring mad, as you have done, my dear fellow, about a black loo mask, why—I consider that a little too much of a good thing! Come, let us go.”

Nodding easily to his numerous acquaintances as he went, Sir Norman Kingsley sauntered leisurely down Paul's Walk, and out through the great door of the cathedral, followed by his melancholy friend. Pausing for a moment to gaze at the gorgeous sunset with a look of languid admiration, Sir Norman passed his arm through that of his friend, and they walked on at rather a rapid pace, in the direction of old London Bridge. There were few people abroad, except the watchmen walking slowly up and down before the plague-stricken houses; but in every street they passed through they noticed huge piles of wood and coal heaped down the centre. Smoking zealously they had walked on for a season in silence, when Ormiston ceased puffing for a moment, to inquire:

“What are all these for? This is a strange time, I should imagine, for bonfires.”

“They're not bonfires,” said Sir Norman; “at least they are not intended for that; and if your head was not fuller of that masked Witch of Endor than common sense (for I believe she is nothing better than a witch), you could not have helped knowing. The Lord Mayor of London has been inspired suddenly, with a notion, that if several thousand fires are kindled at once in the streets, it will purify the air, and check the pestilence; so when St. Paul's tolls the hour of midnight, all these piles are to be fired. It will be a glorious illumination, no doubt; but as to its stopping the progress of the plague, I am afraid that it is altogether too good to be true.”

“Why should you doubt it? The plague cannot last forever.”

“No. But Lilly, the astrologer, who predicted its coming, also foretold that it would last for many months yet; and since one prophecy has come true, I see no

reason why the other should not.”

“Except the simple one that there would be nobody left alive to take it. All London will be lying in the plague-pits by that time.”

“A pleasant prospect; but a true one, I have no doubt. And, as I have no ambition to be hurled headlong into one of those horrible holes, I shall leave town altogether in a few days. And, Ormiston, I would strongly recommend you to follow my example.”

“Not I!” said Ormiston, in a tone of gloomy resolution. “While La Masque stays, so will I.”

“And perhaps die of the plague in a week.”

“So be it! I don't fear the plague half as much as I do the thought of losing her!”

Again Sir Norman stared.

“Oh, I see! It's a hopeless case! Faith, I begin to feel curious to see this enchantress, who has managed so effectually to turn your brain. When did you see her last?”

“Yesterday,” said Ormiston, with a deep sigh. “And if she were made of granite, she could not be harder to me than she is!”

“So she doesn't care about you, then?”

“Not she! She has a little Blenheim lapdog, that she loves a thousand times more than she ever will me!”

“Then what an idiot you are, to keep haunting her like her shadow! Why don't you be a man, and tear out from your heart such a goddess?”

“Ah! that's easily said; but if you were in my place, you'd act exactly as I do.”

“I don't believe it. It's not in me to go mad about anything with a masked face and a marble heart. If I loved any woman—which, thank Fortune! at this present time I do not—and she had the bad taste not to return it, I should take my hat, make her a bow, and go directly and love somebody else made of flesh and blood, instead of cast iron! You know the old song, Ormiston:

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'If she be not fair for me
  What care I how fair she be!'”
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“Kingsley, you know nothing about it!” said Ormiston, impatiently. “So stop talking nonsense. If you are cold-blooded, I am not; and—I love her!”

Sir Norman slightly shrugged his shoulders, and flung his smoked-out weed into a heap of fire-wood.

“Are we near her house?” he asked. “Yonder is the bridge.”

“And yonder is the house,” replied Ormiston, pointing to a large ancient building—ancient even for those times—with three stories, each projecting over the other. “See! while the houses on either side are marked as pest-stricken, hers alone bears no cross. So it is: those who cling to life are stricken with death: and those who, like me, are desperate, even death shuns.”

“Why, my dear Ormiston, you surely are not so far gone as that? Upon my honor, I had no idea you were in such a bad way.”

“I am nothing but a miserable wretch! and I wish to Heaven I was in yonder dead-cart, with the rest of them—and she, too, if she never intends to love me!”

Ormiston spoke with such fierce earnestness, that there was no doubting his sincerity; and Sir Norman became profoundly shocked—so much so, that he did not speak again until they were almost at the door. Then he opened his lips to ask, in a subdued tone:

“She has predicted the future for you—what did she foretell?”

“Nothing good; no fear of there being anything in store for such an unlucky dog as I am.”

“Where did she learn this wonderful black art of hers?”

“In the East, I believe. She has been there and all over the world; and now visits England for the first time.”

“She has chosen a sprightly season for her visit. Is she not afraid of the plague, I wonder?”

“No; she fears nothing,” said Ormiston, as he knocked loudly at the door. “I begin to believe she is made of adamant instead of what other women are made of.”

“Which is a rib, I believe,” observed Sir Norman, thoughtfully. “And that accounts, I dare say, for their being of such a crooked and cantankerous nature. They're a wonderful race women are; and for what Inscrutable reason it has pleased Providence to create them—”

The opening of the door brought to a sudden end this little touch of moralizing, and a wrinkled old porter thrust out a very withered and unlovely face.

“La Masque at home?” inquired Ormiston, stepping in, without ceremony.

The old man nodded, and pointed up stairs; and with a “This way, Kingsley,” Ormiston sprang lightly up, three at a time, followed in the same style by Sir Norman.

“You seem pretty well acquainted with the latitude and longitude of this

place," observed that young gentleman, as they passed into a room at the head of the stairs.

"I ought to be; I've been here often enough," said Ormiston. "This is the common waiting-room for all who wish to consult La Masque. That old bag of bones who let us in has gone to announce us."

Sir Norman took a seat, and glanced curiously round the room. It was a common-place apartment enough, with a floor of polished black oak, slippery as ice, and shining like glass; a few old Flemish paintings on the walls; a large, round table in the centre of the floor, on which lay a pair of the old musical instruments called "virginals." Two large, curtainless windows, with minute diamond-shaped panes, set in leaden casements, admitted the golden and crimson light.

"For the reception-room of a sorceress," remarked Sir Norman, with an air of disappointed criticism, "there is nothing very wonderful about all this. How is it she spaes fortunes any way? As Lilly does by maps and charts; or as these old Eastern mufti do it by magic mirrors and all each fooleries?"

"Neither," said Ormiston, "her style in more like that of the Indian almechs, who show you your destiny in a well. She has a sort of magic lake in her room, and—but you will see it all for yourself presently."

"I have always heard," said Sir Norman, in the same meditative way, "that truth lies at the bottom of a well, and I am glad some one has turned up at last who is able to fish it out. Ah! Here comes our ancient Mercury to show us to the presence of your goddess."

The door opened, and the "old bag of bones," as Ormiston irreverently styled his lady-love's ancient domestic, made a sign for them to follow him. Leading the way down along a corridor, he flung open a pair of shining folding-doors at the end, and ushered them at once into the majestic presence of the sorceress and her magic room. Both gentlemen doffed their plumed hats. Ormiston stepped forward at once; but Sir Norman discreetly paused in the doorway to contemplate the scene of action. As he slowly did so, a look of deep displeasure settled on his features, on finding it not half so awful as he had supposed.

In some ways it was very like the room they had left, being low, large, and square, and having floors, walls and ceiling paneled with glossy black oak. But it had no windows—a large bronze lamp, suspended from the centre of the ceiling, shed a flickering, ghostly light. There were no paintings—some grim carvings of skulls, skeletons, and serpents, pleasantly wreathed the room—neither were there seats nor tables—nothing but a huge ebony caldron at the upper end of the

apartment, over which a grinning skeleton on wires, with a scythe in one hand of bone, and an hour-glass in the other, kept watch and ward. Opposite this cheerful-looking guardian, was a tall figure in black, standing an motionless as if it, too, was carved in ebony. It was a female figure, very tall and slight, but as beautifully symmetrical as a Venus Celestis. Her dress was of black velvet, that swept the polished floor, spangled all over with stars of gold and rich rubies. A profusion of shining black hair fell in waves and curls almost to her feet; but her face, from forehead to chin, was completely hidden by a black velvet mask. In one hand, exquisitely small and white, she held a gold casket, blazing (like her dress) with rubies, and with the other she toyed with a tame viper, that had twined itself round her wrist. This was doubtless La Masque, and becoming conscious of that fact Sir Norman made her a low and courtly bow. She returned it by a slight bend of the head, and turning toward his companion, spoke:

“You here, again, Mr. Ormiston! To what am I indebted for the honor of two visits in two days?”

Her voice, Sir Norman thought, was the sweetest he had ever heard, musical as a chime of silver bells, soft as the tones of an aeolian harp through which the west wind plays.

“Madam, I am aware my visits are undesired,” said Ormiston, with a flushing cheek and, slightly tremulous voice; “but I have merely come with my friend, Sir Norman Kingsley, who wishes to know what the future has in store for him.”

Thus invoked, Sir Norman Kingsley stepped forward with another low bow to the masked lady.

“Yes, madam, I have long heard that those fair fingers can withdraw the curtain of the future, and I have come to see what Dame Destiny is going to do for me.”

“Sir Norman Kingsley is welcome,” said the sweet voice, “and shall see what he desires. There is but one condition, that he will keep perfectly silent; for if he speaks, the scene he beholds will vanish. Come forward!”

Sir Norman compressed his lips as closely as if they were forever hermetically sealed, and came forward accordingly. Leaning over the edge of the ebony caldron, he found that it contained nothing more dreadful than water, for he labored under a vague and unpleasant idea that, like the witches' caldron in Macbeth, it might be filled with serpents' blood and childrens' brains. La Masque opened her golden casket, and took from it a portion of red powder, with which it was filled. Casting it into the caldron, she murmured an invocation in Sanscrit, or Coptic, or some other unknown tongue, and slowly there arose a dense cloud

of dark-red smoke, that nearly filled the room. Had Sir Norman ever read the story of Aladdin, he would probably have thought of it then; but the young courtier did not greatly affect literature of any kind, and thought of nothing now but of seeing something when the smoke cleared away. It was rather long in doing so, and when it did, he saw nothing at first but his own handsome, half-serious, half-incredulous face; but gradually a picture, distinct and clear, formed itself at the bottom, and Sir Norman gazed with bewildered eyes. He saw a large room filled with a sparkling crowd, many of them ladies, splendidly arrayed and flashing in jewels, and foremost among them stood one whose beauty surpassed anything he had ever before dreamed of. She wore the robes of a queen, purple and ermine—diamonds blazed on the beautiful neck, arms, and fingers, and a tiara of the same brilliants crowned her regal head. In one hand she held a sceptre; what seemed to be a throne was behind her, but something that surprised Sir Norton most of all was, to find himself standing beside her, the cynosure of all eyes. While he yet gazed in mingled astonishment and incredulity, the scene faded away, and another took its place. This time a dungeon-cell, damp and dismal; walls, and floor, and ceiling covered with green and hideous slime. A small lamp stood on the floor, and by its sickly, watery gleam, he saw himself again standing, pale and dejected, near the wall. But he was not alone; the same glittering vision in purple and diamonds stood before him, and suddenly he drew his sword and plunged it up to the hilt in her heart! The beautiful vision fell like a stone at his feet, and the sword was drawn out reeking with her life-blood. This was a little too much for the real Sir Norman, and with an expression of indignant consternation, he sprang upright. Instantly it all faded away and the reflection of his own excited face looked up at him from the caldron.

“I told you not to speak,” said La Masque, quietly, “but you must look on still another scene.”

Again she threw a portion of the contents of the casket into the caldron, and “spake aloud the words of power.” Another cloud of smoke arose and filled the room, and when it cleared away, Sir Norman beheld a third and less startling sight. The scene and place he could not discover, but it seemed to him like night and a storm. Two men were lying on the ground, and bound fast together, it appeared to him. As he looked, it faded away, and once more his own face seemed to mock him in the clear water.

“Do you know those two last figures!” asked the lady.

“I do,” said Sir Norman, promptly; “it was Ormiston and myself.”

“Right! and one of them was dead.”

“Dead!” exclaimed Sir Norman, with a perceptible start. “Which one, madam?”

“If you cannot tell that, neither can I. If there is anything further you wish to see, I am quite willing to show it to you.”

“I'm obliged to you,” said Sir Norman, stepping back; “but no more at present, thank you. Do you mean to say, madam, that I'm some day to murder a lady, especially one so beautiful as she I just now saw?”

“I have said nothing—all you've seen will come to pass, and whether your destiny be for good or evil, I have nothing to do with it, except,” said the sweet voice, earnestly, “that if La Masque could strew Sir Norman Kingsley's pathway with roses, she would most assuredly do so.”

“Madam, you are too kind,” said that young gentleman, laying his hand on his heart, while Ormiston scowled darkly—“more especially as I've the misfortune to be a perfect stranger to you.”

“Not so, Sir Norman. I have known you this many a day; and before long we shall be better acquainted. Permit me to wish you good evening!”

At this gentle hint, both gentlemen bowed themselves out, and soon found themselves in the street, with very different expressions of countenance. Sir Norman looking considerably pleased and decidedly puzzled, and Mr. Ormiston looking savagely and uncompromisingly jealous. The animated skeleton who had admitted them closed the door after them; and the two friends stood in the twilight on London Bridge.

CHAPTER II. THE DEAD BRIDE

“Well,” said Ormiston, drawing a long bath, “what do you think of that?”

“Think? Don't ask me yet.” said Sir Norman, looking rather bewildered. “I'm in such a state of mystification that I don't rightly know whether I'm standing on my head or feet. For one thing, I have come to the conclusion that your masked ladylove must be enchantingly beautiful.”

“Have I not told you that a thousand times, O thou of little faith? But why have you come to such a conclusion?”

“Because no woman with such a figure, such a voice and such hands could be otherwise.”

“I knew you would own it some day. Do you wonder now that I love her?”

“Oh! as to loving her,” said Sir Norman, coolly, “that's quite another thing. I could no more love her or her hands, voice, and shape, than I could a figure in wood or wax; but I admire her vastly, and think her extremely clever. I will never forget that face in the caldron. It was the most exquisitely beautiful I ever saw.”

“In love with the shadow of a face! Why, you are a thousandfold more absurd than I.”

“No,” said Sir Norman, thoughtfully, “I don't know as I'm in love with it; but if ever I see a living face like it, I certainly shall be. How did La Masque do it, I wonder?”

“You had better ask her,” said Ormiston, bitterly. “She seems to have taken an unusual interest in you at first sight. She would strew your path with roses, forsooth! Nothing earthly, I believe, would make her say anything half so tender to me.”

Sir Norman laughed, and stroked his moustache complacently.

“All a matter of taste, my dear fellow: and these women are noted for their perfection in that line. I begin to admire La Masque more and more, and I think you had better give up the chase, and let me take your place. I don't believe you have the ghost of a chance, Ormiston.”

“I don't believe it myself,” said Ormiston, with a desperate face “but until the plague carries me off I cannot give her up; and the sooner that happens, the better. Ha! what is this?”

It was a piercing shriek—no unusual sound; and as he spoke, the door of an adjoining house was flung open, a woman rushed wildly out, fled down an adjoining street, and disappeared.

Sir Norman and his companion looked at each other, and then at the house.

“What's all this about?” demanded Ormiston.

“That's a question I can't take it upon myself to answer,” said Sir Norman; “and the only way to solve the mystery, is to go in and see.”

“It may be the plague,” said Ormiston, hesitating. “Yet the house is not marked. There is a watchman. I will ask him.”

The man with the halberd in his hand was walking up and down before an adjoining house, bearing the ominous red cross and piteous inscription: “Lord have mercy on us!”

“I don't know, sir,” was his answer to Ormiston. “If any one there has the plague, they must have taken it lately; for I heard this morning there was to be a wedding there to-night.”

“I never heard of any one screaming in that fashion about a wedding,” said Ormiston, doubtfully. “Do you know who lives there?”

“No, sir. I only came here, myself, yesterday, but two or three times to-day I have seen a very beautiful young lady looking out of the window.”

Ormiston thanked the man, and went back to report to his friend.

“A beautiful young lady!” said Sir Norman, with energy. “Then I mean to go directly up and see about it, and you can follow or not, just as you please.”

So saying, Sir Norman entered the open doorway, and found himself in a long hall, flanked by a couple of doors on each side. These he opened in rapid succession, finding nothing but silence and solitude; and Ormiston—who, upon reflection, chose to follow—ran up a wide and sweeping staircase at the end of the hall. Sir Norman followed him, and they came to a hall similar to the one below. A door to the right lay open; and both entered without ceremony, and looked around.

The room was spacious, and richly furnished. Just enough light stole through the oriel window at the further end, draped with crimson satin embroidered with gold, to show it. The floor was of veined wood of many colors, arranged in fanciful mosaics, and strewn with Turkish rugs and Persian mats of gorgeous colors. The walls were carved, the ceiling corniced, and all fretted with gold network and gilded mouldings. On a couch covered with crimson satin, like the window drapery, lay a cithren and some loose sheets of music. Near it was a

small marble table, covered with books and drawings, with a decanter of wine and an exquisite little goblet of Bohemian glass. The marble mantel was strewn with ornaments of porcelain and alabaster, and a beautifully-carved vase of Parian marble stood in the centre, filled with brilliant flowers. A great mirror reflected back the room, and beneath it stood a toilet-table, strewn with jewels, laces, perfume-bottles, and an array of costly little feminine trifles such as ladies were as fond of two centuries ago as they are to-day. Evidently it was a lady's chamber; for in a recess near the window stood a great quaint carved bedstead, with curtains and snowy lace, looped back with golden arrows and scarlet ribbons. Some one lay on it, too—at least, Ormiston thought so; and he went cautiously forward, drew the curtain, and looked down.

“Great Heaven! what a beautiful face!” was his cry, as he bent still further down.

“What the plague is the matter?” asked Sir Norman, coming forward.

“You have said it,” said Ormiston, recoiling. “The plague is the matter. There lies one dead of it!”

Curiosity proving stronger than fear, Sir Norman stepped forward to look at the corpse. It was a young girl with a face as lovely as a poet's vision. That face was like snow, now; and, in its calm, cold majesty, looked as exquisitely perfect as some ancient Grecian statue. The low, pearly brow, the sweet, beautiful lips, the delicate oval outline of countenance, were perfect. The eyes were closed, and the long dark lashes rested on the ivory cheeks. A profusion of shining dark hair fell in elaborate curls over her neck and shoulders. Her dress was that of a bride; a robe of white satin brocaded with silver, fairly dazzling in its shining radiance, and as brief in the article of sleeves and neck as that of any modern belle. A circlet of pearls were clasped round her snow-white throat, and bracelets of the same jewels encircled the snowy taper arms. On her head she wore a bridal wreath and veil—the former of jewels, the latter falling round her like a cloud of mist. Everything was perfect, from the wreath and veil to the tiny sandaled feet and lying there in her mute repose she looked more like some exquisite piece of sculpture than anything that had ever lived and moved in this groveling world of ours. But from one shoulder the dress had been pulled down, and there lay a great livid purple plague-spot!

“Come away!” said Ormiston, catching his companion by the arm. “It is death to remain here!”

Sir Norman had been standing like one in a trance, from which this address roused him, and he grasped Ormiston's shoulder almost frantically.

“Look there, Ormiston! There lies the very face that sorceress showed me, fifteen minutes ago, in her infernal caldron! I would know it at the other end of the world!”

“Are you sure?” said Ormiston, glancing again with new curiosity at the marble face. “I never saw anything half so beautiful in all my life; but you see she is dead of the plague.”

“Dead? she cannot be! Nothing so perfect could die!”

“Look there,” said Ormiston pointing to the plague-spot. “There is the fatal token! For Heaven's sake let us get out of this, or we will share the same fate before morning!”

But Sir Norman did not move—could not move; he stood there rooted to the spot by the spell of that lovely, lifeless face.

Usually the plague left its victims hideous, ghastly, discolored, and covered with blotches; but in this case then was nothing to mar the perfect beauty of the satin-smooth skin, but that one dreadful mark.

There Sir Norman stood in his trance, as motionless as if some genie out of the “Arabian Nights” had suddenly turned him into stone (a trick they were much addicted to), and destined him to remain there an ornamental fixture for ever. Ormiston looked at him distractedly, uncertain whether to try moral suasion or to take him by the collar and drag him headlong down the stairs, when a providential but rather dismal circumstance came to his relief. A cart came rattling along the street, a bell was loudly rang, and a hoarse voice arose with it: “Bring out your dead! Bring out your dead!”

Ormiston rushed down stair to intercept the dead-cart, already almost full on it way to the plague-pit. The driver stopped at his call, and instantly followed him up stairs, and into the room. Glancing at the body with the utmost sang-froid, he touched the dress, and indifferently remarked:

“A bride, I should say; and an uncommonly handsome one too. We'll just take her along as she is, and strip these nice things off the body when we get it to the plague-pit.”

So saying, he wrapped her in the sheet, and directing Ormiston to take hold of the two lower ends, took the upper corners himself, with the air of a man quite used to that sort of thing. Ormiston recoiled from touching it; and Sir Norman seeing what they were about to do, and knowing there was no help for it, made up his mind, like a sensible young man as he was, to conceal his feelings, and caught hold of the sheet himself. In this fashion the dead bride was carried down stairs, and laid upon a shutter on the top of a pile of bodies in the dead-cart.

It was now almost dark, and as the cart started, the great clock of St. Paul's struck eight. St. Michael's, St Alban's, and the others took up the sound; and the two young men paused to listen. For many weeks the sky had been clear, brilliant, and blue; but on this night dark clouds were scudding in wild unrest across it, and the air was oppressingly close and sultry.

“Where are you going now?” said Ormiston. “Are you for Whitehall's to night?”

“No!” said Sir Norman, rather dejectedly, turning to follow the pest-cart. “I am for the plague-pit in Finsbury fields!”

“Nonsense, man!” exclaimed Ormiston, energetically, “what will take you there? You surely are not mad enough to follow the body of that dead girl?”

“I shall follow it! You can come or not, just as you please.”

“Oh! if you are determined, I will go with you, of course; but it is the craziest freak I ever heard of. After this, you need never laugh at me.”

“I never will,” said Sir Norman, moodily; “for if you love a face you have never seen, I love one I have only looked on when dead. Does it not seem sacrilege to throw any one so like an angel into that horrible plague-pit?”

“I never saw an angel,” said Ormiston, as he and his friend started to go after the dead-cart. “And I dare say there have been scores as beautiful as that poor girl thrown into the plague-pit before now. I wonder why the house has been deserted, and if she was really a bride. The bridegroom could not have loved her much, I fancy, or not even the pestilence could have scared him away.”

“But, Ormiston, what an extraordinary thing it is that it should be precisely the same face that the fortune-teller showed me. There she was alive, and here she is dead; so I've lost all faith in La Masque for ever.”

Ormiston looked doubtful.

“Are you quite sure it is the same, Kingsley?”

“Quite sure?” said Sir Norman, indignantly. “Of course I am! Do you think I could be mistaken is such a case? I tell you I would know that face at Kamschatka or, the North Pole; for I don't believe there ever was such another created.”

“So be it, then! Your object, of course, in following that cart is, to take a last look at her?”

“Precisely so. Don't talk; I feel in no mood for it just at present.”

Ormiston smiled to himself, and did not talk, accordingly; and in silence the two friends followed the gloomy dead-cart. A faint young moon, pale and sickly,

was struggling dimly through drifts of dark clouds, and lighted the lonesome, dreary streets with a wan, watery glimmer. For weeks, the weather had been brilliantly fine—the days all sunshine, the nights all moonlight; but now Ormiston, looking up at the troubled face of the sky, concluded mentally that the Lord Mayor had selected an unpropitious night for the grand illumination. Sir Norman, with his eyes on the pest-cart, and the long white figure therein, took no heed of anything in the heaven above or in the earth beneath, and strode along in dismal silence till they reached, at last, their journey's end.

As the cart stopped the two young men approached the edge of the plague-pit, and looked in with a shudder. Truly it was a horrible sight, that heaving, putrid sea of corruption; for the bodies of the miserable victims were thrown in in cartfuls, and only covered with a handful of earth and quicklime. Here and there, through the cracking and sinking surface, could be seen protruding a fair white arm, or a baby face, mingled with the long, dark tresses of maidens, the golden curls of children, and the white hairs of old age. The pestilential effluvia arising from the dreadful mass was so overpowering that both shrank back, faint and sick, after a moment's survey. It was indeed as Sir Norman had, said, a horrible grave wherein to lie.

Meantime the driver, with an eye to business, and no time for such nonsense as melancholy moralizing, had laid the body of the young girl on the ground, and briskly turned his cart and dumped the remainder of his load into the pit. Then, having flung a few handfuls of clay over it, he unwound the sheet, and kneeling beside the body, prepared to remove the jewels. The rays of the moon and his dark lantern fell on the lovely, snow-white face together, and Sir Norman groaned despairingly as he saw its death-cold rigidity. The man had stripped the rings off the fingers, the bracelets off the arms; but as he was about to perform the same operation toward the necklace, he was stopped by a startling interruption enough. In his haste, the clasp entered the beautiful neck, inflicting a deep scratch, from which the blood spouted; and at the same instant the dead girl opened her eyes with a shrill cry. Uttering a yell of terror, as well he might, the man sprang back and gazed at her with horror, believing that his sacrilegious robbery had brought the dead to life. Even the two young men—albeit, neither of them given to nervousness nor cowardice—recoiled for an instant, and stared aghast. Then, as the whole truth struck them, that the girl had been in a deep swoon and not dead, both simultaneously darted forward, and forgetting all fear of infection, knelt by her side. A pair of great, lustrous black eyes were staring wildly around, and fixed themselves first on one face and then on the other.

“Where am I?” she exclaimed, with a terrified look, as she strove to raise

herself on her elbow, and fell instantaneously back with a cry of agony, as she felt for the first time the throbbing anguish of the wound.

“You are with friends, dear lady!” said Sir Norman, in a voice quite tremulous between astonishment and delight. “Fear nothing, for you shall be saved.”

The great black eyes turned wildly upon him, while a fierce spasm convulsed the beautiful face.

“O, my God, I remember! I have the plague!” And, with a prolonged shriek of anguish, that thrilled even to the hardened heart of the dead-cart driver, the girl fell back senseless again. Sir Norman Kingsley sprang to his feet, and with more the air of a frantic lunatic than a responsible young English knight, caught the cold form in his arms, laid it in the dead-cart, and was about springing into the driver's seat, when that individual indignantly interposed.

“Come, now; none of that! If you were the king himself, you shouldn't run away with my cart in that fashion; so you just get out of my place as fast as you can!”

“My dear Kingsley, what are you about to do?” asked Ormiston, catching his excited friend by the arm.

“Do!” exclaimed Sir Norman, in a high key. “Can't you see that for yourself! And I'm going to have that girl cured of the plague, if there is such a thing as a doctor to be had for love or money in London.”

“You had better have her taken to the pest house at once, then; there are chirurgeons and nurses enough there.”

“To the pest-house! Why man, I might as well have her thrown into the plague-pit there, at once! Not I! I shall have her taken to my own house, and there properly cared for, and this good fellow will drive her there instantly.”

Sir Norman backed this insinuation by putting a broad gold-piece into the driver's hand, which instantly produced a magical effect on his rather surly countenance.

“Certainly, sir,” he began, springing into his seat with alacrity. “Where shall I drive the young lady to?”

“Follow me,” said Sir Norman. “Come along, Ormiston.” And seizing his friend by the arm, he hurried along with a velocity rather uncomfortable, considering they both wore cloaks, and the night was excessively sultry. The gloomy vehicle and its fainting burden followed close behind.

“What do you mean to do with her?” asked Ormiston, as soon as he found breath enough to speak.

“Haven't I told you?” said Sir Norman, impatiently. “Take her home, of course.”

“And after that?”

“Go for a doctor.”

“And after that?”

“Take care of her till she gets well.”

“And after that?”

“Why—find out her history, and all about her.”

“And after that?”

“After that! After that! How do I know what after that!” exclaimed Sir Norman, rather fiercely. “Ormiston, what do you mean?”

Ormiston laughed.

“And after that you'll marry her, I suppose!”

“Perhaps I may, if she will have me. And what if I do?”

“Oh, nothing! Only it struck me you may be saving another man's wife.”

“That's true!” said Sir Norman, in a subdued tone, “and if such should unhappily be the case, nothing will remain but to live in hopes that he may be carried off by the plague.”

“Pray Heaven that we may not be carried off by it ourselves!” said Ormiston, with a slight shudder. “I shall dream of nothing but that horrible plague-pit for a week. If it were not for La Masque, I would not stay another hour in this pest-stricken city.”

“Here we are,” was Sir Norman's rather inapposite answer, as they entered Piccadilly, and stopped before a large and handsome house, whose gloomy portal was faintly illuminated by a large lamp. “Here, my man just carry the lady in.”

He unlocked the door as he spoke, and led the way across a long hall to a sleeping chamber, elegantly fitter up. The man placed the body on the bed and departed while Sir Norman, seizing a handbell, rang a peal that brought a staid-looking housekeeper to the scene directly. Seeing a lady, young and beautiful, in bride robes, lying apparently dead on her young master's bed at that hour of the night, the discreet matron, over whose virtuous head fifty years and a snow-white cap had passed, started back with a slight scream.

“Gracious me, Sir Norman! What on earth is the meaning of this?”

“My dear Mrs. Preston,” began Sir Norman blandly, “this young lady is ill of the plague, and—”

But all further explanation was cut short by a horrified shriek from the old lady, and a precipitate rush from the room. Down stairs she flew, informing the other servants as she went, between her screams, and when Sir Norman, in a violent rage, went in search of her five minutes after, he found not only the kitchen, but the whole house deserted.

“Well,” said Ormiston, as Sir Norman strode back, looking fiery hot and savagely angry.

“Well, they have all fled, every man and woman of them, the—” Sir Norman ground out something not quite proper, behind his moustache. “I shall have to go for the doctor, myself. Doctor Forbes is a friend of mine, and lives near; and you,” looking at him rather doubtfully, “would you mind staying here, lest she should recover consciousness before I return?”

“To tell you the truth,” said Ormiston, with charming frankness, “I should! The lady is extremely beautiful, I must own; but she looks uncomfortably corpse-like at this present moment. I do not wish to die of the plague, either, until I see La Masque once more; and so if it is all the same to you, my dear friend, I will have the greatest pleasure in stepping round with you to the doctor's.”

Sir Norman, though he did not much approve of this, could not very well object, and the two sallied forth together. Walking a short distance up Piccadilly, they struck off into a bye street, and soon reached the house they were in search of. Sir Norman knocked loudly at the door, which was opened by the doctor himself. Briefly and rapidly Sir Norman informed him how and where his services were required; and the doctor being always provided with everything necessary for such cases, set out with him immediately. Fifteen minutes after leaving his own house, Sir Norman was back there again, and standing in his own chamber. But a simultaneous exclamation of amazement and consternation broke from him and Ormiston, as on entering the room they found the bed empty, and the lady gone!

A dead pause followed, during which the three looked blankly at the bed, and then at each other. The scene, no doubt, would have been ludicrous enough to a third party; but neither of our trio could saw anything whatever to laugh at. Ormiston was the first to speak.

“What in Heaven's name has happened!” he wonderingly exclaimed.

“Some one has been here,” said Sir Norman, turning very pale, “and carried her off while we were gone.”

“Let us search the house,” said the doctor; “you should have locked your door,

Sir Norman; but it may not be too late yet."

Acting on the hint, Sir Norman seized the lamp burning on the table, and started on the search. His two friends followed him, and

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“The highest, the lowest, the loveliest spot,
 They searched for the lady, and found her not.”
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No, though there was not the slightest trace of robbers or intruders, neither was there the slightest trace of the beautiful plague-patient. Everything in the house was precisely as it always was, but the silver shining vision was gone.

CHAPTER III. THE COURT PAGE

The search was given over at last in despair, and the doctor took his hat and disappeared. Sir Norman and Ormiston stopped in the lower hall and looked at each other in mute amaze.

“What can it all mean?” asked Ormiston, appealing more to society at large than to his bewildered companion.

“I haven't the faintest idea,” said Sir Norman, distractedly; “only I am pretty certain, if I don't find her, I shall do something so desperate that the plague will be a trifle compared to it!”

“It seems almost impossible that she can have been carried off—doesn't it?”

“If she has!” exclaimed Sir Norman, “and I find out the abductor, he won't have a whole bone in his body two minutes after!”

“And yet more impossible that she can have gone off herself,” pursued Ormiston with the air of one entering upon an abstruse subject, and taking no heed whatever of his companion's marginal notes.

“Gone off herself! Is the man crazy?” inquired Sir Norman, with a stare. “Fifteen minutes before we left her dead, or in a dead swoon, which is all the same in Greek, and yet he talks of her getting up and going off herself!”

“In fact, the only way to get at the bottom of the mystery,” said Ormiston, “is to go in search of her. Sleeping, I suppose, is out of the question.”

“Of course it is! I shall never sleep again till I find her!”

They passed out, and Sir Norman this time took the precaution of turning the key, thereby fulfilling the adage of locking the stable-door when the steed was stolen. The night had grown darker and hotter; and as they walked along, the clock of St. Paul's tolled nine.

“And now, where shall we go?” inquired Sir Norman, as they rapidly hurried on.

“I should recommend visiting the house we found her first; if not there, then we can try the pest-house.”

Sir Norman shuddered.

“Heaven forefend she should be there! It is the most mysterious thing ever I heard of!”

“What do you think now of La Masque's prediction—dare you doubt still?”

“Ormiston, I don't know what to think. It is the same face I saw, and yet—”

“Well—and yet—”

“I can't tell you—I am fairly bewildered. If we don't find the lady at her own house, I have half a mind to apply to your friend, La Masque, again.”

“The wisest thing you could do, my dear fellow. If any one knows your unfortunate beloved's whereabouts, it is La Masque, depend upon it.”

“That's settled then; and now, don't talk, for conversation at this smart pace I don't admire.”

Ormiston, like the amiable, obedient young man that he was, instantly held his tongue, and they strode along at a breathless pace. There was an unusual concourse of men abroad that night, watching the gloomy face of the sky, and waiting the hour of midnight to kindle the myriad of fires; and as the two tall, dark figures went rapidly by, all supposed it to be a case of life or death. In the eyes of one of the party, perhaps it was; and neither halted till they came once more in sight of the house, whence a short time previously they had carried the death-cold bride. A row of lamps over the door-portals shed a yellow, uncertain light around, while the lights of barges and wherries were sown like stars along the river.

“There is the house,” cried Ormiston, and both paused to take breath; “and I am about at the last gasp. I wonder if your pretty mistress would feel grateful if she knew what I have come through to-night for her sweet sake?”

“There are no lights,” said Sir Norman, glancing anxiously up at the darkened front of the house; “even the link before the door is unlit. Surely she cannot be there.”

“That remains to be seen, though I'm very doubtful about it myself. Ah! whom have we here?”

The door of the house in question opened, as he spoke, and a figure—a man's figure, wearing a slouched hat and long, dark cloak, came slowly out. He stopped before the house and looked at it long and earnestly; and, by the twinkling light of the lamps, the friends saw enough of him to know he was young and distinguished looking.

“I should not wonder in the least if that were the bridegroom,” whispered Ormiston, maliciously.

Sir Norman turned pale with jealousy, and laid his hand on his sword, with a quick and natural impulse to make the bride a widow forthwith. But he checked

the desire for an instant as the brigandish-looking gentleman, after a prolonged stare at the premises, stepped up to the watchman, who had given them their information an hour or two before, and who was still at his post. The friends could not be seen, but they could hear, and they did so very earnestly indeed.

“Can you tell me, my friend,” began the cloaked unknown, “what has become of the people residing in yonder house?”

The watchman, held his lamp up to the face of the interlocutor—a handsome face by the way, what could be seen of it—and indulged himself in a prolonged survey.

“Well!” said the gentleman, impatiently, “have you no tongue, fellow? Where are they, I say?”

“Blessed if I know,” said the watchman. “I, wasn't set here to keep guard over them was I? It looks like it, though,” said the man in parenthesis; “for this makes twice to-night I've been asked questions about it.”

“Ah!” said the gentleman, with a slight start. “Who asked you before, pray?”

“Two young gentlemen; lords, I expect, by their dress. Somebody ran screaming out of the house, and they wanted to know what was wrong.”

“Well?” said the stranger, breathlessly, “and then?”

“And then, as I couldn't tell them they went in to see for themselves, and shortly after came out with a body wrapped in a sheet, which they put in a pest-cart going by, and had it buried, I suppose, with the rest in the plague-pit.”

The stranger fairly staggered back, and caught at a pillar near for support. For nearly ten minutes, he stood perfectly motionless, and then, without a word, started up and walked rapidly away. The friends looked after him curiously till he was out of sight.

“So she is not there,” said Ormiston; “and our mysterious friend in the cloak is as much at a loss as we are ourselves. Where shall we go next—to La Masque or the peat-house?”

“To La Masque—I hate the idea of the pest-house!”

“She may be there, nevertheless; and under present circumstances, it is the best place for her.”

“Don't talk of it!” said Sir Norman, impatiently. “I do not and will not believe she is there! If the sorceress shows her to me in the caldron again, I verily believe I shall jump in head foremost.”

“And I verily believe we will not find La Masque at home. She wanders through the streets at all hours, but particularly affects the night.”

“We shall try, however. Come along!”

The house of the sorceress was but a short distance from that of Sir Norman's plague-stricken lady-love's; and shod with a sort of seven-league boots, they soon reached it. Like the other, it was all dark and deserted.

“This is the home,” said Ormiston, looking at it doubtfully, “but where is La Masque?”

“Here!” said a silvery voice at his elbow; and turning round, they saw a tall, slender figure, cloaked, hooded, and masked. “Surely, you two do not want me again to-night?”

Both gentlemen doffed their plumed hats, and simultaneously bowed.

“Fortune favors us,” said Sir Norman. “Yes, madam, it is even so; once again to-night we would tax your skill.”

“Well, what do you wish to know?”

“Madam, we are in the street.”

“Sir, I'm aware of that. Pray proceed.”

“Will you not have the goodness to permit us to enter?” said Sir Norman, inclined to feel offended. “How can you tell us what we wish to know, here?”

“That is my secret,” said the sweet voice. “Probably Sir Norman Kingsley wishes to know something of the fair lady I showed him some time ago?”

“Madam, you've guessed it. It is for that purpose I have sought you now.”

“Then you have seen her already?”

“I have.”

“And love her?”

“With all my heart!”

“A rapid flame,” said the musical voice, in a tone that had just a thought of sarcasm; “for one of whose very existence you did not dream two hours ago.”

“Madame La Masque,” said Norman, flushed sad haughty, “love is not a question of time.”

“Sir Norman Kingsley,” said the lady, somewhat sadly, “I am aware of that. Tell me what you wish to know, and if it be in my power, you shall know it.”

“A thousand thanks! Tell me, then, is she whom I seek living or dead?”

“She is alive.”

“She has the plague?” said Sir Norman.

“I know it.”

“Will she recover?”

“She will.”

“Where is she now?”

La Masque hesitated and seemed uncertain whether or not to reply, Sir Norman passionately broke in:

“Tell me, madam, for I must know!”

“Then you shall; but, remember, if you get into danger, you must not blame me.”

“Blame you! No, I think I would hardly do that. Where am I to seek for her?”

“Two miles from London beyond Newgate,” said the mask. “There stand the ruins of what was long ago a hunting-lodge, now a crumbling skeleton, roofless and windowless, and said, by rumor, to be haunted. Perhaps you have seen or heard of it?”

“I have seen it a hundred times,” broke in Sir Norman. “Surely, you do not mean to say she is there?”

“Go there, and you will see. Go there to-night, and lose no time—that is, supposing you can procure a license.”

“I have one already. I have a pass from the Lord Mayor to come and go from the city when I please.”

“Good! Then you'll go to-night.”

“I will go. I might as well do that as anything else, I suppose; but it is quite impossible,” said Sir Norman, firmly, not to say obstinately, “that she can be there.”

“Very well you'll see. You had better go on horseback, if you desire to be back in time to witness the illumination.”

“I don't particularly desire to see the illumination, as I know of; but I will ride, nevertheless. What am I to do when I get there?”

“You will enter the ruins, and go on till you discover a spiral staircase leading to what was once the vaults. The flags of these vaults are loose from age, and if you should desire to remove any of them, you will probably not find it an impossibility.”

“Why should I desire to remove them?” asked Sir Norman, who felt dubious, and disappointed, and inclined to be dogmatical.

“Why, you may see a glimmering of light—hear strange noises; and if you remove the stones, may possibly see strange sights. As I told you before, it is

rumored to be haunted, which is true enough, though not in the way they suspect; and so the fools and the common herd stay away."

"And if I am discovered peeping like a rascally valet, what will be the consequences?"

"Very unpleasant ones to you; but you need not be discovered if you take care. Ah! Look there!"

She pointed to the river, and both her companions looked. A barge gayly painted and gilded, with a light in prow and stern, came gliding up among less pretentious craft, and stopped at the foot of a flight of stairs leading to the bridge. It contained four persons—the oarsman, two cavaliers sitting in the stern, and a lad in the rich livery of a court-page in the act of springing out. Nothing very wonderful in all this; and Sir Norman and Ormiston looked at her for an explanation.

"Do you know those two gentlemen?" she asked.

"Certainly," replied Sir Norman, promptly; "one is the Duke of York, the other the Earl of Rochester."

"And that page, to which of them does he belong?"

"The page!" said Sir Norman, with a stare, as he leaned forward to look; "pray, madam, what has the page to do with it?"

"Look and see!"

The two peers has ascended the stairs, and were already on the bridge. The page loitered behind, talking, as it seemed, to the waterman.

"He wears the livery of the Earl of Rochester," said Ormiston, speaking for the first time, "but I cannot see his face."

"He will follow presently, and be sure you see it then! Possibly you may not find it entirely new to you."

She drew back into the shadow as she spoke; and the two nobles, as they advanced, talking earnestly, beheld Sir Norman and Ormiston. Both raised their hats with a look of recognition, and the salute was courteously returned by the others.

"Good-night, gentlemen," said Lord Rochester; "a hot evening, is it not? Have you come here to witness the illumination?"

"Hardly," said Sir Norman; "we have come for a very different purpose, my lord."

"The fires will have one good effect," said Ormiston laughing; "if they clear

the air and drive away this stifling atmosphere."

"Pray God they drive away the plague!" said the Duke of York, as he and his companion passed from view.

The page sprang up the stairs after them, humming as he came, one of his master's love ditties—songs, saith tradition, savoring anything but the odor of sanctity. With the warning of La Masque fresh in their mind, both looked at him earnestly. His gay livery was that of Lord Rochester, and became his graceful figure well, as he marched along with a jaunty swagger, one hand on his aide, and the other toying with a beautiful little spaniel, that frisked in open violation of the Lord Mayor's orders, commanding all dogs, great and small, to be put to death as propagators of the pestilence. In passing, the lad turned his face toward them for a moment—a bright, saucy, handsome face it was—and the next instant he went round an angle and disappeared. Ormiston suppressed an oath. Sir Norman stifled a cry of amazement—for both recognized that beautiful colorless face, those perfect features, and great, black, lustrous eyes. It was the face of the lady they had saved from the plague-pit!

"Am I sane or mad?" inquired Sir Norman, looking helplessly about him for information. "Surely that is she we are in search of."

"It certainly is!" said Ormiston. "Where are the wonders of this night to end?"

"Satan and La Masque only know; for they both seem to have united to drive me mad. Where is she?"

"Where, indeed?" said Ormiston; "where is last year's snow?" And Sir Norman, looking round at the spot where she had stood a moment before, found that she, too, had disappeared.

CHAPTER IV. THE STRANGER.

The two friends looked at each other in impressive silence for a moment, and spake never a word. Not that they were astonished—they were long past the power of that emotion: and if a cloud had dropped from the sky at their feet, they would probably have looked at it passively, and vaguely wonder if the rest would follow. Sir Norman, especially, had sank into a state of mind that words are faint and feeble to describe. Ormiston, not being quite so far gone, was the first to open his lips.

“Upon my honor, Sir Norman, this is the most astonishing thing ever I heard of. That certainly was the face of our half-dead bride! What, in the name of all the gods, can it mean, I wonder?”

“I have given up wondering,” said Sir Norman, in the same helpless tone. “And if the earth was to open and swallow London up, I should not be the least surprised. One thing is certain: the lady we are seeking and that page are one and the same.”

“And yet La Masque told you she was two miles from the city, in the haunted ruin; and La Masque most assuredly knows.”

“I have no doubt she is there. I shall not be the least astonished if I find her in every street between this and Newgate.”

“Really, it is a most singular affair! First you see her in the magic caldron; then we find her dead; then, when within an ace of being buried, she comes to life; then we leave her lifeless as a marble statue, shut up in your room, and fifteen minutes after, she vanishes as mysteriously as a fairy in a nursery legend. And, lastly, she turns up in the shape of a court-page, and swaggers along London Bridge at this hour of the night, chanting a love song. Faith! it would puzzle the sphinx herself to read this riddle, I've a notion!”

“I, for one, shall never try to read it,” said Sir Norman. “I am about tired of this labyrinth of mysteries, and shall save time and La Masque to unravel them at their leisure.”

“Then you mean to give up the pursuit?”

“Not exactly. I love this mysterious beauty too well to do that; and when next I find her, be it where it may, I shall take care she does not slip so easily through my fingers.”

“I cannot forget that page,” said Ormiston, musingly. “It is singular since, he wears the Earl of Rochester's livery, that we have never seen him before among his followers. Are you quite sure, Sir Norman, that you have not?”

“Seen him? Don't be absurd, Ormiston! Do you think I could ever forget such a face as that?”

“It would not be easy, I confess. One does not see such every day. And yet—and yet—it is most extraordinary!”

“I shall ask Rochester about him the first thing to-morrow; and unless he is an optical illusion—which I vow I half believe is the case—I will come at the truth in spite of your demoniac friend, La Masque!”

“Then you do not mean to look for him to-night?”

“Look for him? I might as well look for a needle in a haystack. No! I have promised La Masque to visit the old ruins, and there I shall go forthwith. Will you accompany me?”

“I think not. I have a word to say to La Masque, and you and she kept talking so busily, I had no chance to put it in.”

Sir Norman laughed.

“Besides, I have no doubt it is a word you would not like to utter in the presence of a third party, even though that third party be your friend and Pythias, Kingsley. Do you mean to stay here like a plague-sentinel until she returns?”

“Possibly; or if I get tired I may set out in search of her. When do you return?”

“The Fates, that seem to make a foot-ball of my best affections, and kick them as they please, only know. If nothing happens—which, being interpreted, means, if I am still in the land of the living—I shall surely be back by daybreak.”

“And I shall be anxious about that time to hear the result of your night's adventure; so where shall we meet?”

“Why not here? it is as good a place as any.”

“With all my heart. Where do you propose getting a horse?”

“At the King's Arms—but a stones throw from here. Farewell.”

“Good-night, and God speed you!” said Ormiston. And wrapping his cloak close about him, he leaned against the doorway, and, watching the dancing lights on the river, prepared to await the return of La Masque.

With his head full of the adventures and misadventures of the night, Sir Norman walked thoughtfully on until he reached the King's Arms—a low inn on the bank of the river. To his dismay he found the house shut up, and bearing the

dismal mark and inscription of the pestilence. While he stood contemplating it in perplexity, a watchman, on guard before another plague-stricken house, advanced and informed him that the whole family had perished of the disease, and that the landlord himself, the last survivor, had been carried off not twenty minutes before to the plague-pit.

“But,” added the man, seeing Sir Norman's look of annoyance, and being informed what he wanted, “there are two or three horses around there in the stable, and you may as well help yourself, for if you don't take them, somebody else will.”

This philosophic logic struck Sir Norman as being so extremely reasonable, that without more ado he stepped round to the stables and selected the best it contained. Before proceeding on his journey, it occurred to him that, having been handling a plague-patient, it would be a good thing to get his clothes fumigated; so he stepped into an apothecary's store for that purpose, and provided himself also with a bottle of aromatic vinegar. Thus prepared for the worst, Sir Norman sprang on his horse like a second Don Quixote striding his good steed Rozinante, and sallied forth in quest of adventures. These, for a short time, were of rather a dismal character; for, hearing the noise of a horse's hoofs in the silent streets at that hour of the night, the people opened their doors as he passed by, thinking it the pest-cart, and brought forth many a miserable victim of the pestilence. Averting his head from the revolting spectacles, Sir Norman held the bottle of vinegar to his nostrils, and rode rapidly till he reached Newgate. There he was stopped until his bill of health was examined, and that small manuscript being found all right, he was permitted to pass on in peace. Everywhere he went, the trail of the serpent was visible over all. Death and Desolation went hand in hand. Outside as well as inside the gates, great piles of wood and coal were arranged, waiting only the midnight hour to be fired. Here, however, no one seemed to be stirring; and no sound broke the silence but the distant rumble of the death-cart, and the ringing of the driver's bell. There were lights in some of the houses, but many of them were dark and deserted, and nearly every one bore the red cross of the plague.

It was a gloomy scene and hour, and Sir Norman's heart turned sick within him as he noticed the ruin and devastation the pestilence had everywhere wrought. And he remembered, with a shudder, the prediction of Lilly, the astrologer, that the paved streets of London would be like green fields, and the living be no longer able to bury the dead. Long before this, he had grown hardened and accustomed to death from its very frequence; but now, as he looked round him, he almost resolved to ride on and return no more to London

till the plague should have left it. But then came the thought of his unknown lady-love, and with it the reflection that he was on his way to find her; and, rousing himself from his melancholy reverie, he rode on at a brisker pace, heroically resolved to brave the plague or any other emergency, for her sake. Full of this laudable and lover-like resolution, he had got on about half a mile further, when he was suddenly checked in his rapid career by an exciting, but in no way surprising, little incident.

During the last few yards, Sir Norman had come within sight of another horseman, riding on at rather a leisurely pace, considering the place and the hour. Suddenly three other horsemen came galloping down upon him, and the leader presenting a pistol at his head, requested him in a stentorial voice for his money or his life. By way of reply, the stranger instantly produced a pistol of his own, and before the astonished highwayman could comprehend the possibility of such an act, discharged it full in his face. With a loud yell the robber reeled and fell from his saddle, and in a twinkling both his companions fired their pistols at the traveler, and bore, with a simultaneous cry of rage, down upon him. Neither of the shots had taken effect, but the two enraged highwaymen would have made short work of their victim had not Sir Norman, like a true knight, ridden to the rescue. Drawing his sword, with one vigorous blow he placed another of the assassins hors de combat; and, delighted with the idea of a fight to stir his stagnant blood, was turning (like a second St. George at the Dragon), upon the other, when that individual, thinking discretion the better part of valor, instantaneously turned tail and fled. The whole brisk little episode had not occupied five minutes, and Sir Norman was scarcely aware the fight had began before it had triumphantly ended.

“Short, sharp, and decisive!” was the stranger's cool criticism, as he deliberately wiped his blood-stained sword, and placed it in a velvet scabbard. “Our friends, there, got more than they bargained for, I fancy. Though, but for you, Sir,” he said, politely raising his hat and bowing, “I should probably have been ere this in heaven, or—the other place.”

Sir Norman, deeply edified by the easy sang-froid of the speaker, turned to take a second look at him. There was very little light; for the night had grown darker as it wore on, and the few stars that had glimmered faintly had hid their diminished heads behind the piles of inky clouds. Still, there was a sort of faint phosphorescent light whitening the gloom, and by it Sir Norman's keen bright eyes discovered that he wore a long dark cloak and slouched hat. He discovered something else, too—that he had seen that hat and cloak, and the man inside of them on London Bridge, not an hour before. It struck Sir Norman there was a

sort of fatality in their meeting; and his pulses quickened a trifle, as he thought that he might be speaking to the husband of the lady for whom he had so suddenly conceived such a rash and inordinate attachment. That personage meantime having reloaded his pistol, with a self-possession refreshing to witness, replaced it in his doublet, gathered up the reins, and, glancing slightly at his companion, spoke again,

“I should thank you for saving my life, I suppose, but thanking people is so little in my line, that I scarcely know how to set about it. Perhaps, my dear sir, you will take the will for the deed.”

“An original, this,” thought Sir Norman, “whoever he is.” Then aloud: “Pray don't trouble yourself about thanks, sir, I should have dome precisely the same for the highwaymen, had you been three to one over them.”

“I don't doubt it in the least; nevertheless I feel grateful, for you have saved my life all the same, and you have never seen me before.”

“There you are mistaken,” said Sir Norman, quietly “I had the pleasure of seeing you scarce an hour ago.”

“Ah!” said the stranger, in an altered tone, “and where?”

“On London Bridge.”

“I did not see you.”

“Very likely, but I was there none the less.”

“Do you know me?” said the stranger; and Sir Norman could see he was gazing at him sharply from under the shadow of his slouched hat.

“I have not that honor, but I hope to do so before we part.”

“It was quite dark when you saw me on the bridge—how comes it, then, that you recollect me so well?”

“I have always been blessed with an excellent memory,” said Sir Norman carelessly, “and I knew your dress, face, and voice instantly.”

“My voice! Then you heard me speak, probably to the watchman guarding a plague-stricken house?”

“Exactly! and the subject being a very interesting one, I listened to all you said.”

“Indeed! and what possible interest could the subject have for you, may I ask?”

“A deeper one than you think!” said Sir Norman, with a slight tremor in his voice as he thought of the lady, “the watchman told you the lady you sought for

had been carried away dead, and thrown into the plague-pit!”

“Well,” cried the stranger starting violently, “and was it not true?”

“Only partly. She was carried away in the pest-cart sure enough, but she was not thrown into the plague-pit!”

“And why?”

“Because, when on reaching that horrible spot, she was found to be alive!”

“Good Heaven! And what then?”

“Then,” exclaimed Sir Norman, in a tone almost as excited as his own, “she was brought to the house of a friend, and left alone for a few minutes, while that friend went in search of a doctor. On returning they found her—where do you think?”

“Where?”

“Gone!” said Sir Norman emphatically, “spirited away by some mysterious agency; for she was dying of the plague, and could not possibly stir hand or foot herself.”

“Dying of the plague, O Leoline!” said the stranger, in a voice full of pity and horror, while for a moment he covered his face with his hands.

“So her name is Leoline?” said Sir Norman to himself. “I have found that out, and also that this gentleman, whatever he may be to her, is as ignorant of her whereabouts as I am myself. He seems in trouble, too. I wonder if he really happens to be her husband?”

The stranger suddenly lifted his head and favored Sir Norman with a long and searching look.

“How come you to know all this, Sir Norman Kingsley,” he asked abruptly.

“And how come you to know my name?” demanded Sir Norman, very much amazed, notwithstanding his assertion that nothing would astonish him more.

“That is of no consequence! Tell me how you've learned all this?” repeated the stranger, in a tone of almost stern authority.

Sir Norman started and stared. That voice! I have had heard it a thousand times! It had evidently been disguised before; but now, in the excitement of the moment, the stranger was thrown off his guard, and it became perfectly familiar. But where had he heard it? For the life of him, Sir Norman could not tell, yet it was as well known to him as his own. It had the tone, too, of one far more used to command than entreaty; and Sir Norman, instead of getting angry, as he felt he ought to have done, mechanically answered:

“The watchman told you of the two young men who brought her out and laid her in the dead-cart—I was one of the two.”

“And who was the other?”

“A friend of mine—one Malcolm Ormiston.”

“Ah! I know him! Pardon my abruptness, Sir Norman,” said the stranger, once more speaking in his assumed suave tone, “but I feel deeply on this subject, and was excited at the moment. You spoke of her being brought to the house of a friend—now, who may that friend be, for I was not aware that she had any?”

“So I judged,” said Sir Norman, rather bitterly, “or she would not have been left to die alone of the plague. She was brought to my house, sir, and I am the friend who would have stood by her to the last!”

Sir Norman sat up very straight and haughty on his horse; and had it been daylight, he would have seen a slight derisive smile pass over the lips of his companion.

“I have always heard that Sir Norman Kingsley was a chivalrous knight,” he said; “but I scarcely dreamed his gallantry would have carried him so far as to brave death by the pestilence for the sake of an unknown lady—however beautiful. I wonder you did not carry her to the pest-house.”

“No doubt! Those who could desert her at such a time would probably be capable of that or any other baseness!”

“My good friend,” said the stranger, calmly, “your insinuation is not over-courteous, but I can forgive it, more for the sake of what you've done for her to-night than for myself.”

Sir Norman's lip curled.

“I'm obliged to you! And now, sir, as you have seen fit to question me in this free and easy manner, will you pardon me if I take the liberty of returning the compliment, and ask you a few in return?”

“Certainly; pray proceed, Sir Norman,” said the stranger, blandly; “you are at liberty to ask as many questions as you please—so am I to answer them.”

“I answered all yours unhesitatingly, and you owe it to me to do the same,” said Sir Norman, somewhat haughtily. “In the first place, you have an advantage of me which I neither understand, nor relish; so, to place us on equal terms, will you have the goodness to tell me your name?”

“Most assuredly! My name,” said the stranger, with glib airiness, “is Count L'Estrange.”

“A name unknown to me,” said Sir Norman, with a piercing look, “and

equally unknown, I believe, at Whitehall. There is a Lord L'Estrange in London; but you and he are certainly not one and the same."

"My friend does not believe me," said the count, almost gayly—"a circumstance I regret, but cannot help. Is there anything else Sir Norman wishes to know?"

"If you do not answer my questions truthfully, there is little use in my asking them," said Sir Norman, bluntly. "Do you mean to say you are a foreigner?"

"Sir Norman Kingsley is at perfect liberty to answer that question as he pleases," replied the stranger, with most provoking indifference.

Sir Norman's eye flashed, and his hand fell on his sword; but, reflecting that the count might find it inconvenient to answer any more questions if he ran him through, he restrained himself and went on.

"Sir, you are impertinent, but that is of no consequence, just now. Who was that lady—what was her name?"

"Leoline."

"Was she your wife?"

The stranger paused for a moment, as if reflecting whether she was or not, and then said, meditatively,

"No—I don't know as she was. On the whole, I am pretty sure she was not."

Sir Norman felt as if a ton weight had been suddenly hoisted from the region of his heart.

"Was she anybody else's wife?"

"I think not. I'm inclined to think that, except myself, she did not know another man in London."

"Then why was she dressed as a bride?" inquired Sir Norman, rather mystified.

"Was she? My poor Leoline!" said the stranger, sadly. "Because-" he hesitated, "because—in short, Sir Norman," said the stranger, decidedly, "I decline answering any more questions!"

"I shall find out, for all that," said Sir Norman, "and here I shall bid you good-night, for this by-path leads to my destination."

"Good-night," said the stranger, "and be careful, Sir Norman—remember, the plague is abroad."

"And so are highwaymen!" called Sir Norman after him, a little maliciously; but a careless laugh from the stranger was the only reply as he galloped away.

CHAPTER V. THE DWARF AND THE RUIN.

The by-path down which Sir Norman rode, led to an inn, “The Golden Crown,” about a quarter of a mile from the ruin. Not wishing to take his horse, lest it should lead to discovery, he proposed leaving it here till his return; and, with this intention, and the strong desire for a glass of wine—for the heat and his ride made him extremely thirsty—he dismounted at the door, and consigning the animal to the care of a hostler, he entered the bar-room. It was not the most inviting place in the world, this same bar-room—being illy-lighted, dim with tobacco-smoke, and pervaded by a strong spirituous essence of stronger drinks than malt or cold water. A number of men were loitering about, smoking, drinking, and discussing the all-absorbing topic of the plague, and the fires that might be kindled. There was a moment's pause, as Sir Norman entered, took a seat, and called for a glass of sack, and then the conversation went on as before. The landlord hastened to supply his wants by placing a glass and a bottle of wine before him, and Sir Norman fell to helping himself, and to ruminating deeply on the events of the night. Rather melancholy these ruminations were, though to do the young gentleman justice, sentimental melancholy was not at all in his line; but then you will please to recollect he was in love, and when people come to that state, they are no longer to be held responsible either for their thoughts or actions. It is true his attack had been a rapid one, but it was no less severe for that; and if any evil-minded critic is disposed to sneer at the suddenness of his disorder, I have only to say, that I know from observation, not to speak of experience, that love at first sight is a lamentable fact, and no myth.

Love is not a plant that requires time to flourish, but is quite capable of springing up like the gourd of Jonah full grown in a moment. Our young friend, Sir Norman, had not been aware of the existence of the object of his affections for a much longer space than two hours and a half, yet he had already got to such a pitch, that if he did not speedily find her, he felt he would do something so desperate as to shake society to its utmost foundations. The very mystery of the affair spurred him on, and the romantic way in which she had been found, saved, and disappeared, threw such a halo of interest round her, that he was inclined to think sometimes she was nothing but a shining vision from another world. Those dark, splendid eyes; that lovely marblelike face; those wavy ebon tresses; that exquisitely exquisite figure; yes, he felt they were all a great deal too perfect for this imperfect and wicked world. Sir Norman was in a very bad way, beyond

doubt, but no worse than millions of young men before and after him; and he heaved a great many profound sighs, and drank a great many glasses of sack, and came to the sorrowful conclusion that Dame Fortune was a malicious jade, inclined to poke fun at his best affections, and make a shuttlecock of his heart for the rest of his life. He thought, too, of Count L'Estrange; and the longer he thought, the more he became convinced that he knew him well, and had met him often. But where? He racked his brain until, between love, Leoline, and the count, he got that delicate organ into such a maze of bewilderment and distraction, that he felt he would be a case of congestion, shortly, if he did not give it up. That the count's voice was not the only thing about him assumed, he was positive; and he mentally called over the muster-roll of his past friends, who spent half their time at Whitehall, and the other half going through the streets, making love to the honest citizens' pretty wives and daughters; but none of them answered to Count L'Estrange. He could scarcely be a foreigner—he spoke English with too perfect an accent to be that; and then he knew him, Sir Norman, as if he had been his brother. In short, there was no use driving himself insane trying to read so unreadable a riddle; and inwardly consigning the mysterious count to Old Nick, he swallowed another glass of sack, and quit thinking about him.

So absorbed had Sir Norman been in his own mournful musings, that he paid no attention whatever to those around him, and had nearly forgotten their very presence, when one of them, with a loud cry, sprang to his feet, and then fell writhing to the floor. The others, in dismay, gathered abut him, but the next instant fell back with a cry of, “He has the plague!” At that dreaded announcement, half of them scampered off incontinently; and the other half with the landlord at their head, lifted the sufferer whose groans and cries were heart-rendering, and carried him out of the house. Sir Norman, rather dismayed himself, had risen to his feet, fully aroused from his reverie, and found himself and another individual sole possessors of the premises. His companion he could not very well make out; for he was sitting, or rather crouching, in a remote and shadowy corner, where nothing was clearly visible but the glare of a pair of fiery eyes. There was a great redundancy of hair, too, about his head and face, indeed considerable more about the latter than there seemed any real necessity for, and even with the imperfect glimpse he caught of him the young man set him down in his own mind as about as hard-looking a customer as he had ever seen. The fiery eyes were glaring upon him like those of a tiger, through a jungle of bushy hair, but their owner spoke never a word, though the other stared back with compound interest. There they sat, beaming upon each other—one fiercely, the

other curiously, until the re-appearance of the landlord with a very lugubrious and woebegone countenance. It struck Sir Norman that it was about time to start for the ruin; and, with an eye to business, he turned to cross-examine mine host a trifle.

“What have they done with that man?” he asked by way of preface.

“Sent him to the pest-house,” replied the landlord, resting his elbows on the counter and his chin in his hands, and staring dismally at the opposite wall. “Ah! Lord 'a' mercy on us! These be dreadful times!”

“Dreadful enough!” said Sir Norman, sighing deeply, as he thought of his beautiful Leoline, a victim of the merciless pestilence. “Have there been many deaths here of the distemper?”

“Twenty-five to-day!” groaned the man. “Lord! what will become of us?”

“You seem rather disheartened,” said Sir Norman, pouring out a glass of wine and handing it to him. “Just drink this, and don't borrow trouble. They say sack is a sure specific against the plague.”

Mine host drained the bumper, and wiped his mouth, with another hollow groan.

“If I thought that, sir, I'd not be sober from one week's end to t'other; but I know well enough I will be in a plague-pit in less than a week. O Lord! have mercy on us!”

“Amen!” said Sir Norman, impatiently. “If fear has not taken away your wits, my good sir, will you tell me what old ruin that is I saw a little above here as I rode up?”

The man started from his trance of terror, and glanced, first at the fiery eyes in the corner, and then at Sir Norman, in evident trepidation of the question.

“That ruin, sir? You must be a stranger in this place, surely, or you would not need to ask that question.”

“Well, suppose I am a stranger? What then?”

“Nothing, sir; only I thought everybody knew everything about that ruin.”

“But I do not, you see? So fill your glass again, and while you are drinking it, just tell me what that everything comprises.”

Again the landlord glanced fearfully at the fiery eyes in the corner, and again hesitated.

“Well!” exclaimed Sir Norman, at once surprised and impatient at his taciturnity, “Can't you speak man? I want you to tell me all about it.”

“There is nothing to tell, sir,” replied the host, goaded to desperation. “It is an old, deserted ruin that's been here ever since I remember; and that's all I know about it.”

While, he spoke, the crouching shape in the corner reared itself upright, and keeping his fiery eyes still glaring upon Sir Norman, advanced into the light. Our young knight was in the act of raising his glass to his lips; but as the apparition approached, he laid it down again, untasted, and stared at it in the wildest surprise and intensest curiosity. Truly, it was a singular-looking creature, not to say a rather startling one. A dwarf of some four feet high, and at least five feet broad across the shoulders, with immense arms and head—a giant in everything but height. His immense skull was set on such a trifle of a neck as to be scarcely worth mentioning, and was garnished by a violent mat of coarse, black hair, which also overran the territory of his cheeks and chin, leaving no neutral ground but his two fiery eyes and a broken nose all twisted awry. On a pair of short, stout legs he wore immense jack-boots, his Herculean shoulders and chest were adorned with a leathern doublet, and in the belt round his waist were conspicuously stuck a pair of pistols and a dagger. Altogether, a more ugly or sinister gentleman of his inches it would have been hard to find in all broad England. Stopping deliberately before Sir Norman, he placed a hand on each hip, and in a deep, guttural voice, addressed him:

“So, sir knight—for such I perceive you are—you are anxious to know something of that old ruin yonder?”

“Well,” said Sir Norman, so far recovering from his surprise as to be able to speak, “suppose I am? Have you anything to say against it, my little friend?”

“Oh, not in the least!” said the dwarf, with a hoarse chuckle. “Only, instead of wasting your breath asking this good man, who professes such utter ignorance, you had better apply to me for information.”

Again Sir Norman surveyed the little Hercules from head to foot for a moment, in silence, as one, nowadays, would an intelligent gorilla.

“You think so—do you? And what may you happen to know about it, my pretty little friend?”

“O Lord!” exclaimed the landlord, to himself, with a frightened face, while the dwarf “grinned horribly a ghastly smile” from ear to ear.

“So much, my good sir, that I would strongly advise you not to go near it, unless you wish to catch something worse than the plague. There have been others—our worthy host, there, whose teeth, you may perceive, are chattering in his head, can tell you about those that have tried the trick, and—”

“Well?” said Sir Norman, curiously.

“And have never returned to tell what they found!” concluded the little monster, with a diabolical leer. And as the landlord fell, gray and gasping, back in his seat, he broke out into a loud and hyena-like laugh.

“My dear little friend,” said Sir Norman, staring at him in displeased wonder, “don't laugh, if you can help it. You are unprepossessing enough at best, but when you laugh, you look like the very (a downward gesture) himself!”

Unheeding this advice, the dwarf broke again into an unearthly cachinnation, that frightened the landlord nearly into fits, and seriously discomposed the nervous system even of Sir Norman himself. Then, grinning like a baboon, and still transfixing our puissant young knight with the same tiger-like and unpleasant glare, he nodded a farewell; and in this fashion, grinning, and nodding, and backing, he got to the door, and concluding the interesting performance with a third hoarse and hideous laugh, disappeared in the darkness.

For fully ten minutes after he was gone, the young man kept his eyes blankly fixed on the door, with a vague impression that he was suffering from an attack of nightmare; for it seemed impossible that anything so preposterously ugly as that dwarf could exist out of one. A deep groan from the landlord, however, convinced him that it was no disagreeable midnight vision, but a brawny reality; and turning to that individual, he found him gasping, in the last degree of terror, behind the counter.

“Now, who in the name of all the demons out of Hades may that ugly abortion be?” inquired Sir Norman.

“O Lord! be merciful! sir, it's Caliban; and the only wonder is, he did not leave you a bleeding corpse at his feet!”

“I should like to see him try it. Perhaps he would have found that is a game two can play at! Where does he come from and who is he!”

The landlord leaned over the counter, and placed a very pale and startled face close to Sir Norman's.

“That's just what I wanted to tell you, sir, but I was afraid to speak before him. I think he lives up in that same old ruin you were inquiring about—at least, he is often seen hanging around there; but people are too much afraid of him to ask him any questions. Ah, sir, it's a strange place, that ruin, and there be strange stories afloat about it,” said the man, with a portentious shake of the head.

“What are they?” inquired Sir Norman. “I should particularly like to know.”

“Well, sir, for one thing, some folks say it is haunted, on account of the queer

lights and noises about it, sometimes; but, again, there be other folks, sir, that say the ghosts are alive, and that he”—nodding toward the door—“is a sort of ringleader among them.”

“And who are they that cut up such cantrips in the old place, pray?”

“Lord only knows, sir. I'm sure I don't. I never go near it myself; but there are others who have, and some of them tell of the most beautiful lady, all in white, with long, black hair, who walks on the battlements moonlight nights.”

“A beautiful lady, all in white, with long, black hair! Why, that description applies to Leoline exactly.”

And Sir Norman gave a violent start, and arose to proceed to the place directly.

“Don't you go near it, sir!” said the host, warningly. “Others have gone, as he told you, and never come back; for these be dreadful times, and men do as they please. Between the plague and their wickedness, the Lord only knows what will become of us!”

“If I should return here for my horse in an hour or two, I suppose I can get him?” sad Sir Norman, as he turned toward the door.

“It's likely you can, sir, if I'm not dead by that time,” said the landlord, as he sank down again, groaning dismally, with his chin between his hands.

The night was now profoundly dark; but Sir Norman knew the road and ruin well, and, drawing his sword, walked resolutely on. The distance between it and the ruin was trifling, and in less than ten minutes it loomed up before him, a mass of deeper black in the blackness. No white vision floated on the broken battlements this night, as Sir Norman looked wistfully up at them; but neither was there any ungainly dwarf, with two-edged sword, guarding the ruined entrance; and Sir Norman passed unmolested in. He sought the spiral staircase which La Masque had spoken of, and, passing carefully from one ancient chamber to another, stumbling over piles of rubbish and stones as he went, he reached it at last. Descending gingerly its tortuous steepness, he found himself in the mouldering vaults, and, as he trod them, his ear was greeted by the sound of faint and far-off music. Proceeding farther, he heard distinctly, mingled with it, a murmur of voices and laughter, and, through the chinks in the broken flags, he perceived a few faint rays of light. Remembering the directions of La Masque, and feeling intensely curious, he cautiously knelt down, and examined the loose flagstones until he found one he could raise; he pushed it partly aside, and, lying flat on the stones, with his face to the aperture, Sir Norman beheld a most wonderful sight.

CHAPTER VI. LA MASQUE

“Love is like a dizziness,” says the old song. Love is something else—it is the most selfish feeling in existence. Of course, I don't allude to the fraternal or the friendly, or any other such nonsensical old-fashioned trash that artless people still believe in, but to the real genuine article that Adam felt for Eve when he first saw her, and which all who read this—above the innocent and unsusceptible age of twelve—have experienced. And the fancy and the reality are so much alike, that they amount to about the same thing. The former perhaps, may be a little short-lived; but it is just as disagreeable a sensation while it lasts as its more enduring sister. Love is said to be blind, and it also has a very injurious effect on the eyesight of its victims—an effect that neither spectacles nor oculists can aid in the slightest degree, making them see whether sleeping or waking, but one object, and that alone.

I don't know whether these were Mr. Malcolm or Ormiston's thoughts, as he leaned against the door-way, and folded his arms across his chest to await the shining of his day-star. In fact, I am pretty sure they were not: young gentlemen, as a general thing, not being any more given to profound moralizing in the reign of His Most Gracious Majesty, Charles II., than they are at the present day; but I do know, that no sooner was his bosom friend and crony, Sir Norman Kingsley, out of sight, than he forgot him as totally as if he had never known that distinguished individual. His many and deep afflictions, his love, his anguish, and his provocations; his beautiful, tantalizing, and mysterious lady-love; his errand and its probable consequences, all were forgotten; and Ormiston thought of nothing or nobody in the world but himself and La Masque. La Masque! La Masque! that was the theme on which his thoughts rang, with wild variations of alternate hope and fear, like every other lover since the world began, and love was first an institution. “As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,” truly, truly it is an odd and wonderful thing. And you and I may thank our stars, dear readers, that we are a great deal too sensible to wear our hearts in our sleeves for such a bloodthirsty dew to peck at. Ormiston's flame was longer-lived than Sir Norman's; he had been in love a whole month, and had it badly, and was now at the very crisis of a malady. Why did she conceal her face—would she ever disclose it—would she listen to him—would she ever love him? feverishly asked Passion; and Common Sense (or what little of that useful commodity he had left) answered—probably because she was eccentric—

possibly she would disclose it for the same reason; that he had only to try and make her listen; and as to her loving him, why, Common Sense owned he had her there.

I can't say whether the adage! “Faint heart never won fair lady!” was extant in his time; but the spirit of it certainly was, and Ormiston determined to prove it. He wanted to see La Masque, and try his fate once again; and see her he would, if he had to stay there as a sort of ornamental prop to the house for a week. He knew he might as well look for a needle in a haystack as his whimsical beloved through the streets of London—dismal and dark now as the streets of Luxor and Tadmor in Egypt; and he wisely resolved to spare himself and his Spanish leathers boots the trial of a one-handed game of “hide-and-go-to-seek.” Wisdom, like Virtue, is its own reward; and scarcely had he come to this laudable conclusion, when, by the feeble glimmer of the house-lamps, he saw a figure that made his heart bound, flitting through the night-gloom toward him. He would have known that figure on the sands of Sahara, in an Indian jungle, or an American forest—a tall, slight, supple figure, bending and springing like a bow of steel, queenly and regal as that of a young empress. It was draped in a long cloak reaching to the ground, in color as black as the night, and clasped by a jewel whose glittering flash, he saw even there; a velvet hood of the same color covered the stately head; and the mask—the tiresome, inevitable mask covered the beautiful—he was positive it was beautiful—face. He had seen her a score of times in that very dress, flitting like a dark, graceful ghost through the city streets, and the sight sent his heart plunging against his side like an inward sledge-hammer. Would one pulse in her heart stir ever so faintly at sight of him? Just as he asked himself the question, and was stepping forward to meet her, feeling very like the country swain in love—“hot and dry like, with a pain in his side like”—he suddenly stopped. Another figure came forth from the shadow of an opposite house, and softly pronounced her name. It was a short figure—a woman's figure. He could not see the face, and that was an immense relief to him, and prevented his having jealousy added to his other pains and tribulations. La Masque paused as well as he, and her soft voice softly asked:

“Who calls?”

“It is I, madame—Prudence.”

“Ah! I am glad to meet you. I have been searching the city through for you. Where have you been?”

“Madame, I was so frightened that I don't know where I fled to, and I could scarcely make up my mind to come back at all. I did feel dreadfully sorry for her, poor thing! but you know, Madame Masque, I could do nothing for her, and I

should not have come back, only I was afraid of you."

"You did wrong, Prudence," said La Masque, sternly, or at least as sternly as so sweet a voice could speak; "you did very wrong to leave her in such a way. You should have come to me at once, and told me all."

"But, madame, I was so frightened!"

"Bah! You are nothing but a coward. Come into this doorway, and tell me all about it."

Ormiston drew back as the twain approached, and entered the deep portals of La Masque's own doorway. He could see them both by the aforesaid faint lamplight, and he noticed that La Masque's companion was a wrinkled old woman, that would not trouble the peace of mind of the most jealous lover in Christendom. Perhaps it was not just the thing to hover aloof and listen; but he could not for the life of him help it; and stand and listen he accordingly did. Who knew but this nocturnal conversation might throw some light on the dark mystery he was anxious to see through, and, could his ears have run into needle-points to hear the better, he would have had the operation then and there performed. There was a moment's silence after the two entered the portal, during which La Masque stood, tall, dark, and commanding, motionless as a marble column; and the little withered old specimen of humanity beside her stood gazing up at her with something between fear and fascination.

"Do you know what has become of your charge, Prudence?" asked the low, vibrating voice of La Masque, at last.

"How could I, madame? You know I fled from the house, and I dared not go back. Perhaps she is there still."

"Perhaps she is not? Do you suppose that sharp shriek of yours was unheard? No; she was found; and what do you suppose has become of her?"

The old woman looked up, and seemed to read in the dark, stern figure, and the deep solemn voice, the fatal truth. She wrung her hands with a sort of cry.

"Oh! I know, I know; they have put her in the dead-cart, and buried her in the plague-pit. O my dear, sweet young mistress."

"If you had stayed by your dear, sweet young mistress, instead of running screaming away as you did, it might not have happened," said La Masque, in a tone between derision and contempt.

"Madame," sobbed the old woman, who was crying, "she was dying of the plague, and how could I help it? They would have buried her in spite of me."

"She was not dead; there was your mistake. She was as much alive as you or I

at this moment.”

“Madame, I left her dead!” said the old woman positively.

“Prudence, you did no such thing; you left her fainting, and in that state she was found and carried to the plague-pit.”

The old woman stood silent for a moment, with a face of intense horror, and then she clasped both hands with a wild cry.

“O my God! And they buried her alive—buried her alive in that dreadful plague-pit!”

La Masque, leaning against a pillar, stood unmoved; and her voice, when she spoke, was as coldly sweet as modern ice-cream.

“Not exactly. She was not buried at all, as I happen to know. But when did you discover that she had the plague, and how could she possibly have caught it?”

“That I do not know, madam. She seemed well enough all day, though not in such high spirits as a bride should be. Toward evening she complained of a headache and a feeling of faintness; but I thought nothing of it, and helped her to dress for the bridal. Before it was over, the headache and faintness grew worse, and I gave her wine, and still suspected nothing. The last time I came in, she had grown so much worse, that notwithstanding her wedding dress, she had lain down on her bed, looking for all the world like a ghost, and told me she had the most dreadful burning pain in her chest. Then, madame, the horrid truth struck me—I tore down her dress, and there, sure enough, was the awful mark of the distemper. `You have the plague!' I shrieked; and then I fled down stairs and out of the house, like one crazy. O madame, madame! I shall never forget it—it was terrible! I shall never forget it! Poor, poor child; and the count does not know a word of it!”

La Masque laughed—a sweet, clear, deriding laugh, “So the count does not know it, Prudence? Poor man! he will be in despair when he finds it out, won't he? Such an ardent and devoted lover as he was you know!”

Prudence looked up a little puzzled.

“Yes, madame, I think so. He seemed very fond of her; a great deal fonder than she ever was of him. The fact is, madame,” said Prudence, lowering her voice to a confidential stage whisper, “she never seemed fond of him at all, and wouldn't have been married, I think, if she could have helped it.”

“Could have helped it? What do you mean, Prudence? Nobody made her, did they?”

Prudence fidgeted, and looked rather uneasy.

“Why, madame, she was not exactly forced, perhaps; but you know—you know you told me—”

“Well?” said La Masque, coldly.

“To do what I could,” cried Prudence, in a sort of desperation; “and I did it, madame, and harassed her about it night and day. And then the count was there, too, coaxing and entreating; and he was handsome and had such ways with him that no woman could resist, much less one so little used to gentlemen as Leoline. And so, Madame Masque, we kept at her till we got her to consent to it at last; but in her secret heart, I know she did not want to be married—at least to the count,” said Prudence, on serious afterthought.

“Well, well; that has nothing to do with it. The question is, where is she to be found?”

“Found!” echoed Prudence; “has she then been lost?”

“Of coarse she has, you old simpleton! How could she help it, and she dead, with no one to look after her?” said La Masque, with something like a half laugh. “She was carried to the plague-pit in her bridal-robes, jewels and lace; and, when about to be thrown in, was discovered, like Moses is the bulrushes, to be all alive.”

“Well,” whispered Prudence, breathlessly.

“Well, O most courageous of guardians! she was carried to a certain house, and left to her own devices, while her gallant rescuer went for a doctor; and when they returned she was missing. Our pretty Leoline seems to have a strong fancy for getting lost!”

There was a pause, during which Prudence looked at her with a face full of mingled fear and curiosity. At last:

“Madame, how do you know all this? Were you there?”

“No. Not I, indeed! What would take me there?”

“Then how do you happen to know everything about it?”

La Masque laughed.

“A little bird told me, Prudence! Have you returned to resume your old duties?”

“Madame, I dare not go into that house again. I am afraid of taking the plague.”

“Prudence, you are a perfect idiot! Are you not liable to take the plague in the remotest quarter of this plague-infested city? And even if you do take it, what

odds? You have only a few years to live, at the most, and what matter whether you die now or at the end of a year or two?”

“What matter?” repeated Prudence, in a high key of indignant amazement. “It may make no matter to you, Madame Masque, but it makes a great deal to me; I can tell you; and into that infected house I'll not put one foot.”

“Just as you please, only in that case there is no need for further talk, so allow me to bid you good-night!”

“But, madame, what of Leoline? Do stop one moment and tell me of her.”

“What have I to tell? I have told you all I know. If you want to find her, you must search in the city or in the pest-house!”

Prudence shuddered, and covered her face with her hands.

“O, my poor darling! so good and so beautiful. Heaven might surely have spared her! Are you going to do nothing farther about it?”

“What can I do? I have searched for her and have not found her, and what else remains?”

“Madame, you know everything—surely, surely you know where my poor little nursling is, among the rest.”

Again La Masque laughed—another of her low, sweet, derisive laughs.

“No such thing, Prudence. If I did, I should have her here in a twinkling, depend upon—it. However, it all comes to the same thing in the end. She is probably dead by this time, and would have to be buried in the plague-pit, anyhow. If you have nothing further to say, Prudence, you had better bid me good-night, and let me go.”

“Good-night, madame!” said Prudence, with a sort of groan, as she wrapped her cloak closely around her, and turned to go.

La Masque stood for a moment looking after her, and then placed a key in the lock of the door. But there is many a slip—she was not fated to enter as soon as she thought; for just at that moment a new step sounded beside her, a new voice pronounced her name, and looking around, she beheld Ormiston. With what feelings that young person had listened to the neat and appropriate dialogue I have just had the pleasure of immortalizing, may be—to use a phrase you may have heard before, once or twice—better imagined than described. He knew very well who Leoline was, and how she had been saved from the plague-pit; but where in the world had La Masque found it out. Lost in a maze of wonder, and inclined to doubt the evidence of his own ears, he had stood perfectly still, until his ladylove had so coolly dismissed her company, and then rousing himself just

in time, he had come forward and accosted her. La Masque turned round, regarded him in silence for a moment, and when she spoke, her voice had an accent of mingled surprise and displeasure.

“You, Mr. Ormiston! How many more times am I to have the pleasure of seeing you again to-night?”

“Pardon, madame; it is the last time. But you must hear me now.”

“Must I? Very well, then; if I must, you had better begin at once, for the night-air is said to be unhealthy, and as good people are scarce, I want to take care of myself.”

“In that case, perhaps you had better let me enter, too. I hate to talk on the street, for every wall has ears.”

“I am aware of that. When I was talking to my old friend, Prudence, two minutes ago, I saw a tall shape that I have reason to know, since it haunts me, like my own shadow, standing there and paying deed attention. I hope you found our conversation interesting, Mr. Ormiston!”

“Madame!” began Ormiston, turning crimson.

“Oh, don't blush; there is quite light enough from yonder lamp to show that. Besides,” added the lady, easily, “I don't know as I had any objection; you are interested in Leoline, and must feel curious to know something about her.”

“Madame, what must you think of me? I have acted unpardonably.”

“Oh, I know all that. There is no need to apologize, and I don't think any the worse of you for it. Will you come to business, Mr. Ormiston? I think I told you I wanted to go in. What may you want of me at this dismal hour?”

“O madame, need you ask! Does not your own heart tell you?”

“I am not aware that it does! And to tell you the truth, Mr. Ormiston, I don't know that I even have a heart! I am afraid I must trouble you to put it in words.”

“Then, madame, I love you!”

“Is that all? If my memory serves me, you have told me that little fact several times before. Is there anything else tormenting you, or may I go in?”

Ormiston groaned out an oath between his teeth, and La Masque raised one jeweled, snowy taper finger, reprovingly.

“Don't Mr. Ormiston—it's naughty, you know! May I go in?”

“Madame, you are enough to drive a man mad. Is the love I bear you worthy of nothing but mockery!”

“No, Mr. Ormiston, it is not; that is, supposing you really love me, which you

don't.”

“Madame!”

“Oh, you needn't flash and look indignant; it is quite true! Don't be absurd, Mr. Ormiston. How is it possible for you to love one you have never seen?”

“I have seen you. Do you think I am blind?” he demanded, indignantly.

“My face, I mean. I don't consider that you can see a person without looking in her face. Now you have never looked in mine, and how do you know I have any face at all?”

“Madame, you mock me.”

“Not at all. How are you to know what is behind this mask?”

“I feel it, and that is better; and I love you all the same.”

“Mr. Ormiston, how do you know but I am ugly.”

“Madame, I do not believe you are; you are all too perfect not to have a perfect face; and even were it otherwise, I still love you!”

She broke into a laugh—one of her low, short, deriding laughs.

“You do! O man, how wise thou art! I tell you, if I took off this mask, the sight would curdle the very blood in your veins with horror—would freeze the lifeblood in your heart. I tell you!” she passionately cried, “there are sights too horrible for human beings to look on and live, and this—this is one of them!”

He started back, and stared at her aghast.

“You think me mad,” she said, in a less fierce tone, “but I am not; and I repeat it, Mr. Ormiston, the sight of what this mask conceals would blast you. Go now, for Heaven's sake, and leave me in peace, to drag out the rest of my miserable life; and if ever you think of me, let it be to pray that it might speedily end. You have forced me to say this: so now be content. Be merciful, and go!”

She made a desperate gesture, and turned to leave him, but he caught her hand and held her fast.

“Never!” he cried, fiercely. “Say what you will! let that mask hide what it may! I will never leave you till life leaves me!”

“Man, you are mad! Release my hand and let me go!”

“Madame, hear me. There is but one way to prove my love, and my sanity, and that is—”

“Well?” she said, almost touched by his earnestness.

“Raise your mask and try me! Show me your face and see if I do not love you still!”

“Truly I know how much love you will have for me when it is revealed. Do you know that no one has looked in my face for the last eight years.”

He stood and gazed at her in wonder.

“It is so, Mr. Ormiston; and in my heart I have vowed a vow to plunge headlong into the most loathsome plague-pit in London, rather than ever raise it again. My friend, be satisfied. Go and leave me; go and forget me.”

“I can do neither until I have ceased to forget every thing earthly. Madame, I implore you, hear me!”

“Mr. Ormiston, I tell you, you but court your own doom. No one can look on me and live!”

“I will risk it,” he said with an incredulous smile. “Only promise to show me your face.”

“Be it so then!” she cried almost fiercely. “I promise, and be the consequences on your own head.”

His whole face flushed with joy.

“I accept them. And when is that happy time to come?”

“Who knows! What must be done, had best be done quickly; but I tell thee it were safer to play with the lightning's chain than tamper with what thou art about to do.”

“I take the risk! Will you raise your mask now?”

“No, no—I cannot! But yet, I may before the sun rises. My face”—with bitter scorn—“shows better by darkness than by daylight. Will you be out to see, the grand illumination.”

“Most certainly.”

“Then meet me here an hour after midnight, and the face so long hidden shall be revealed. But, once again, on the threshold of doom, I entreat you to pause.”

“There is no such word for me!” he fiercely and exultingly cried. “I have your promise, and I shall hold you to it! And, madame, if, at last, you discover my love is changeless as fate itself, then—then may I not dare to hope for a return?”

“Yes; then you may hope,” she said, with cold mockery. “If your love survives the sight, it will be mighty, indeed, and well worthy a return.”

“And you will return it?”

“I will.”

“You will be my wife?”

“With all my heart!”

“My darling!” he cried, rapturously—“for you are mine already—how can I ever thank you for this? If a whole lifetime devoted and consecrated to your happiness can repay you, it shall be yours!”

During this rhapsody, her hand had been on the handle of the door. Now she turned it.

“Good-night, Mr. Ormiston,” she said, and vanished.

CHAPTER VII. THE EARL'S BARGE.

Shocks of joy, they tell me, seldom kill. Of my own knowledge I cannot say, for I have had precious little experience of such shocks in my lifetime, Heaven knows; but in the present instance, I can safely aver, they had no such dismal effect on Ormiston. Nothing earthly could have given that young gentleman a greater shock of joy than the knowledge he was to behold the long hidden face of his idol. That that face was ugly, he did not for an instant believe, or, at least, it never would be ugly to him. With a form so perfect—a form a sylph might have envied—a voice sweeter than the Singing Fountain of Arabia, hands and feet the most perfectly beautiful the sun ever shone on, it was simply a moral and physical impossibility that they could be joined to a repulsive face. There was a remote possibility that it was a little less exquisite than those ravishing items, and that her morbid fancy made her imagine it homely, compared with them, but he knew he never would share in that opinion. It was the reasoning of love, rather than logic; for when love glides smiling in at the door, reason stalks gravely, not to say sulkily, out of the window, and, standing afar off, eyes disdainfully the didos and antics of her late tenement. There was very little reason, therefore, in Ormiston's head and heart, but a great deal of something sweeter, joy—joy that thrilled and vibrated through every nerve within him. Leaning against the portal, in an absurd delirium of delight—for it takes but a trifle to jerk those lovers from the slimiest depths of the Slough of Despond to the topmost peak of the mountain of ecstasy—he uncovered his head that the night-air might cool its feverish throbbings. But the night-air was as hot as his heart; and, almost suffocated by the sultry closeness, he was about to start for a plunge in the river, when the sound of coming footsteps and voices arrested him. He had met with so many odd ad ventures to-night that he stopped now to see who was coming; for on every hand all was silent and forsaken.

Footsteps and voices came closer; two figures took shape in the gloom, and emerged from the darkness into the glimmering lamp light. He recognised them both. One was the Earl of Rochester; the other, his dark-eyed, handsome page—that strange page with the face of the lost lady! The earl was chatting familiarly, and laughing obstreperously at something or other, while the boy merely wore a languid smile, as if anything further in that line were quite beneath his dignity.

“Silence and solitude,” said the earl, with a careless glance around, “I protest,

Hubert, this night seems endless. How long is it till midnight?”

“An hour and a half at least, I should fancy,” answered the boy, with a strong foreign accent. “I know it struck ten as we passed St. Paul's.”

“This grand bonfire of our most worshipful Lord Mayor will be a sight worth seeing,” remarked the earl. “When all these piles are lighted, the city will be one sea of fire.”

“A slight foretaste of what most of its inhabitants will behold in another world,” said the page, with a French shrug. “I have heard Lilly's prediction that London is to be purified by fire, like a second Sodom; perhaps it is to be verified to-night.”

“Not unlikely; the dome of St. Paul's would be an excellent place to view the conflagration.”

“The river will do almost as well, my lord.”

“We will have a chance of knowing that presently,” said the earl, as he and his page descended to the river, where the little gilded barge lay moored, and the boatman waiting.

As they passed from sight Ormiston came forth, and watched thoughtfully after them. The face and figure were that of the lady, but the voice was different; both were clear and musical enough, but she spoke English with the purest accent, while his was the voice of a foreigner. It most have been one of those strange, unaccountable likenesses we sometimes see among perfect strangers, but the resemblance in this ease was something wonderful. It brought his thoughts back from himself and his own fortunate love, to his violently-smitten friend, Sir Norman, and his plague-stricken beloved; and he began speculating what he could possibly be about just then, or what he had discovered in the old ruin. Suddenly he was aroused; a moment before, the silence had been almost oppressive but now on the wings of the night, there came a shout. A tumult of voices and footsteps were approaching.

“Stop her! Stop her!” was cried by many voices; and the next instant a fleet figure went flying past him with a rush, and plunged head foremost into she river.

A slight female figure, with floating robes of white, waving hair of deepest, blackness, with a sparkle of jewels on neck and arms. Only for an instant did he see it; but he knew it well, and his very heart stood still. “Stop her! stop her! she is ill of the plague!” shouted the crowd, preying panting on; but they came too late; the white vision had gone down into the black, sluggish river, and disappeared.

“Who is it? What is it? Where is it?” cried two or three watchmen, brandishing their halberds, and rushing up; and the crowd—a small mob of a dozen or so—answered all at once: “She is delirious with the plague; she was running through the streets; we gave chase, but she out-stepped us, and is now at the bottom of the Thames.”

Ormiston, waited to hear no more, but rushed precipitately down to the waters edge. The alarm has now reached the boats on the river, and many eyes within them were turned in the direction whence she had gone down. Soon she reappeared on the dark surface—something whiter than snow, whiter than death; shining like silver, shone the glittering dress and marble face of the bride. A small batteau lay close to where Ormiston stood; in two seconds he had sprang in, shoved it off, and was rowing vigorously toward that snow wreath in the inky river. But he was forestalled, two hands white and jeweled as her own, reached over the edge of a gilded barge, and, with the help of the boatmen, lifted her in. Before she could be properly established on the cushioned seats, the batteau was alongside, and Ormiston turned a very white and excited face toward the Earl of Rochester.

“I know that lady, my lord! She is a friend of mine, and you must give her to me!”

“Is it you, Ormiston? Why what brings you here alone on the river, at this hour?”

“I have come for her,” said Ormiston, pressing over to lift the lady. “May I beg you to assist me, my lord, in transferring her to my boat?”

“You must wait till I see her first,” said Rochester, partly raising her head, and holding a lamp close to her face, “as I have picked her out, I think I deserve it. Heavens! what an extraordinary likeness!”

The earl had glanced at the lady, then at his page, again at the lady, and lastly at Ormiston, his handsome countenance full of the most unmitigated wonder. “To whom?” asked Ormiston, who had very little need to inquire.

“To Hubert, yonder. Why, don't you see it yourself? She might be his twin-sister!”

“She might be, but as she is not, you will have the goodness to let me take charge of her. She has escaped from her friends, and I must bring her back to them.”

He half lifted her as he spoke; and the boatman, glad enough to get rid of one sick of the plague, helped her into the batteau. The lady was not insensible, as might be supposed, after her cold bath, but extremely wide-awake, and gazing

around her with her great, black, shining eyes. But she made no resistance; either she was too faint or frightened for that, and suffered herself to be hoisted about, “passive to all changes.” Ormiston spread his cloak in the stern of the boat, and laid her tenderly upon it, and though the beautiful, wistful eyes were solemnly and unwinkingly fixed on his face, the pale, sweet lips parted not—uttered never a word. The wet bridal robes were drenched and dripping about her, the long dark hair hung in saturated masses over her neck and arms, and contrasted vividly with a face, Ormiston thought at once, the whitest, most beautiful, and most stonelike he had ever seen.

“Thank you, my man; thank you, my lord,” said Ormiston, preparing to push off.

Rochester, who had been leaning from the barge, gazing in mingled curiosity, wonder, and admiration at the lovely face, turned now to her champion.

“Who is she, Ormiston?” he said, persuasively.

But Ormiston only laughed, and rowed energetically for the shore. The crowd was still lingering; and half a dozen hands were extended to draw the boat up to the landing. He lifted the light form in his arms and bore it from the boat; but before he could proceed farther with his armful of beauty, a faint but imperious voice spoke: “Please put me down. I am not a baby, and can walk myself.”

Ormiston was so surprised, or rather dismayed, by this unexpected address, that he complied at once, and placed her on her own pretty feet. But the young lady's sense of propriety was a good deal stronger than her physical powers; and she swayed and tottered, and had to cling to her unknown friend for support.

“You are scarcely strong enough, I am afraid, dear lady,” he said, kindly. “You had better let me carry you. I assure you I am quite equal to it, or even a more weighty burden, if necessity required.”

“Thank you, sir,” said the faint voice, faintly; “but I would rather walk. Where are you taking me to?”

“To your own house, if you wish—it is quite close at hand.”

“Yes. Yes. Let us go there! Prudence is there, and she will take care of me.”.

“Will she?” said Ormiston, doubtfully. “I hope you do not suffer much pain!”

“I do not suffer at all,” she said, wearily; “only I am so tired. Oh, I wish I were home!”

Ormiston half led, half lifted her up the stairs.

“You are almost there, dear lady—see, it is close at hand!”

She half lifted her languid eyes, but did not speak. Leaning panting on his

arm, he drew her gently on until they reached her door. It was still unfastened. Prudence had kept her word, and not gone near it; and he opened it, and helped her in.

“Where now?” he asked.

“Up stairs,” she said, feebly. “I want to go to my own room.”

Ormiston knew where that was, and assisted her there as tenderly as he could have done La Masque herself. He paused on the threshold; for the room was dark.

“There is a lamp and a tinder-box on the mantel,” said the faint, sweet voice, “if you will only please to find them.”

Ormiston crowed the room—fortunately he knew the latitude of the place — and moving his hand with gingerly precaution along the mantel-shelf, lest he should upset any of the gimcracks thereon, soon obtained the articles named, and struck a light. The lady was leaning wearily against the door-post, but now she came forward, and dropped exhausted into the downy pillows of a lounge.

“Is there anything I can do for you, madame?” began Ormiston, with as solicitous an air as though he had been her father. “A glass of wine would be of use to you, I think, and then, if you wish, I will go for a doctor.”

“You are very kind. You will find wine and glasses in the room opposite this, and I feel so faint that I think you had better bring me some.”

Ormiston moved across the passage, like the good, obedient young man that he was, filled a glass of Burgundy, and as he was returning with it, was startled by a cry from the lady that nearly made him drop and shiver it on the floor.

“What under heaven has come to her now?” he thought, hastening in, wondering how she could possibly have come to grief since he left her.

She was sitting upright on the sofa, her dress palled down off her shoulder where the plague-spot had been, and which, to his amazement, he saw now pure and stainless, and free from every loathsome trace.

“You are cured of the plague!” was all he could say.

“Thank God!” she exclaimed, fervently clasping her hands. “But oh! how can it have happened? It must be a miracle!”

“No, it was your plunge into the river; I have heard of one or two such cases before, and if ever I take it,” said Ormiston, half laughing, half shuddering, “my first rush shall be for old Father Thames. Here, drink this, I am certain it will complete the cure.”

The girl—she was nothing but a girl—drank it off and sat upright like one

inspired with new life. As she set down the glass, she lifted her dark, solemn, beautiful eyes to his face with a long, searching gaze.

“What is your name?” she simply asked.

“Ormiston, madame,” he said, bowing low.

“You have saved my life, have you not?”

“It was the Earl of Rochester who reserved you from the river; but I would have done it a moment later.”

“I do not mean that. I mean”—with a slight shudder—“are you not one of those I saw at the plague-pit? Oh! that dreadful, dreadful plague-pit!” she cried, covering her face with her hands.

“Yes. I am one of those.”

“And who was the other?”

“My friend, Sir Norman Kingsley.

“Sir Norman Kingsley?” she softly repeated, with a sort of recognition in her voice and eyes, while a faint roseate glow rose softly over her face and neck. “Ah! I thought—was it to his house or yours I was brought?”

“To his,” replied Ormiston, looking at her curiously; for he had seen that rosy glow, and was extremely puzzled thereby; “from whence, allow me to add, you took your departure rather unceremoniously.”

“Did I?” she said, in a bewildered sort of way. “It is all like a dream to me. I remember Prudence screaming, and telling me I had the plague, and the unutterable horror that filled me when I heard it; and then the next thing I recollect is, being at the plague-pit, and seeing your face and his bending over me. All the horror came back with that awakening, and between it and anguish of the plague-sore I think I fainted again.” (Ormiston nodded sagaciously), “and when I next recovered I was alone in a strange room, and in bed. I noticed that, though I think I must have been delirious. And then, half-mad with agony, I got out to the street, somehow and ran, and ran, and ran, until the people saw and followed me here. I suppose I had some idea of reaching home when I came here; but the crowd pressed so close behind, and I felt though all my delirium, that they would bring me to the pest-house if they caught me, and drowning seemed to me preferable to that. So I was in the river before I knew it—and you know the rest as well as I do. But I owe you my life, Mr. Ormiston—owe it to you and another; and I thank you both with all my heart.”

“Madame, you are too grateful; and I don't know as we have done anything much to deserve it.”

“You have saved my life; and though you may think that a valueless trifle, not worth speaking of, I assure you I view it in a very different light,” she said, with a half smile.

“Lady, your life is invaluable; but as to our saving it, why, you would not have us throw you alive into the plague-pit, would you?”

“It would have been rather barbarous, I confess, but there are few who would risk infection for the sake of a mere stranger. Instead of doing as you did, you might have sent me to the pest-house, you know.”

“Oh, as to that, all your gratitude is due to Sir Norman. He managed the whole affair, and what is more, fell—but I will leave that for himself to disclose. Meantime, may I ask the name of the lady I have been so fortunate as to serve!”

“Undoubtedly, sir—my name is Leoline.”

“Leoline is only half a name.”

“Then I am so unfortunate an only to possess half a name, for I never had any other.”

Ormiston opened his eyes very wide indeed.

“No other! you must have had a father some time in your life; most people have,” said the young gentleman, reflectively.

She shook her head a little sadly.

“I never had, that I know of, either father or mother, or any one but Prudence. And by the way,” she said, half starting up, “the first thing to be done is, to see about this same Prudence. She must be somewhere in the house.”

“Prudence is nowhere in the house,” said Ormiston, quietly; “and will not be, she says, far a month to come. She is afraid of the plague.”

“Is she?” said Leoline, fixing her eyes on him with a powerful glance. “How do you know that?”

“I heard her say so not half an hour ago, to a lady a few doors distant. Perhaps you know her—La Masque.”

“That singular being! I don't know her; but I have seen her often. Why was Prudence talking of me to her, I wonder?”

“That I do not know; but talking of you the was, and she said she was coming back here no more. Perhaps you will be afraid to stay here alone?”

“Oh no, I am used to being alone,” she said, with a little sigh, “but where”—hesitating and blushing vividly, “where is—I mean, I should like to thank sir Norman Kingsley.”

Ormiston saw the blush and the eyes that dropped, and it puzzled him again beyond measure.

“Do you know Sir Norman Kingsley?” he suspiciously asked.

“By sight I know many of the nobles of the court,” she answered evasively, and without looking up: “they pass here often, and Prudence knows them all; and so I have learned to distinguish them by name and sight, your friend among the rest.”

“And you would like to see my friend?” he said, with malicious emphasis.

“I would like to thank him,” retorted the lady, with some asperity: “you have told me how much I owe him, and it strikes me the desire is somewhat natural.”

“Without doubt it is, and it will save Sir Norman much fruitless labor; for even now he is in search of you, and will neither rest nor sleep until he finds you.”

“In search of me!” she said softly, and with that rosy glow again illumining her beautiful face; “he is indeed kind, and I am most anxious to thank him.”

“I will bring him here in two hours, then,” said Ormiston, with energy; “and though the hour may be a little unseasonable, I hope you will not object to it; for if you do, he will certainly not survive until morning.”

She gayly laughed, but her cheek was scarlet.

“Rather than that, Mr. Ormiston, I will even see him tonight. You will find me here when you come.”

“You will not run away again, will you?” said Ormiston, looking at her doubtfully. “Excuse me; but you have a trick of doing that, you know.”

Again she laughed merrily.

“I think you may safely trust me this time. Are you going?”

By way of reply, Ormiston took his hat and started for the door. There he paused, with his hand upon it.

“How long have you known Sir Norman Kingsley?” was his careless, artful question.

But Leoline, tapping one little foot on the floor, and looking down at it with hot cheeks and humid ayes, answered not a word.

CHAPTER VIII. THE MIDNIGHT QUEEN.

When Sir Norman Kingsley entered the ancient ruin, his head was full of Leoline—when he knelt down to look through the aperture in the flagged floor, head and heart were full of her still. But the moment his eyes fell on the scene beneath, everything fled far from his thoughts, Leoline among the rest; and nothing remained but a profound and absorbing feeling of intensest amaze.

Right below him he beheld an immense room, of which the flag he had raised seemed to form part of the ceiling, in a remote corner. Evidently it was one of a range of lower vaults, and as he was at least fourteen feet above it, and his corner somewhat in shadow, there was little danger of his being seen. So, leaning far down to look at his leisure, he took the goods the gods provided him, and stared to his heart's content.

Sir Norman had seen some queer sights during the four-and-twenty years he had spent in this queer world, but never anything quite equal to this. The apartment below, though so exceedingly large, was lighted with the brilliance of noon-day; and every object it contained; from one end to the other, was distinctly revealed. The floor, from glimpses he had of it in obscure corners, was of stone; but from end to end it was covered with richest rugs and mats, and squares of velvet of as many colors as Joseph's coat. The walls were hung with splendid tapestry, gorgeous in silk and coloring, representing the wars of Troy, the exploits of Coeur de Lion among the Saracens, the death of Hercules, all on one side; and on the other, a more modern representation, the Field of the Cloth of Gold. The illumination proceeded from a range of wax tapers in silver candelabra, that encircled the whole room. The air was redolent of perfumes, and filled with strains of softest and sweetest music from unseen hands. At one extremity of the room was a huge door of glass and gilding; and opposite it, at the other extremity, was a glittering throne. It stood on a raised dais, covered with crimson velvet, reached by two or three steps carpeted with the same; the throne was as magnificent as gold, and satin, and ornamentation could make it. A great velvet canopy of the same deep, rich color, cut in antique points, and heavily hung with gold fringe, was above the seat of honor. Beside it, to the right, but a little lower down, was a similar throne, somewhat less superb, and minus a canopy. From the door to the throne was a long strip of crimson velvet, edged and embroidered with gold, and arranged in a sweeping semi-circle, on

either side, were a row of great carved, gilded, and cushioned chairs, brilliant, too, with crimson and gold, and each for every-day Christians, a throne in itself. Between the blaze of illumination, the flashing of gilding and gold, the tropical flush of crimson velvet, the rainbow dyes on floor and walls, the intoxicating gushes of perfume, and the delicious strains of unseen music, it is no wonder Sir Norman Kingsley's head was spinning like a bewildered teetotum.

Was he sane—was he sleeping? Had he drank too much wine at the Golden Crown, and had it all gone to his head? Was it a scene of earnest enchantment, or were fairy-tales true? Like Abou Hasson when he awoke in the palace of the facetious Caliph of Bagdad, he had no notion of believing his own eyes and ears, and quietly concluded it was all an optical illusion, as ghosts are said to be; but he quietly resolved to stay there, nevertheless, and see how the dazzling phantasmagoria would end. The music was certainly ravishing, and it seemed to him, as he listened with enchanted ears, that he never wanted to wake up from so heavenly a dream.

One thing struck him as rather odd; strange and bewildered as everything was, it did not seem at all strange to him, on the contrary, a vague idea was floating mistily through his mind that he had beheld precisely the same thing somewhere before. Probably at some past period of his life he had beheld a similar vision, or had seen a picture somewhere like it in a tale of magic, and satisfying himself with this conclusion, he began wondering if the genii of the place were going to make their appearance at all, or if the knowledge that human eyes were upon them had scared them back to Erebus.

While still ruminating on this important question, a portion of the tapestry, almost beneath him, shriveled up and up, and out flocked a glittering throng, with a musical mingling of laughter and voices. Still they came, more and more, until the great room was almost filled, and a dazzling throng they were. Sir Norman had mingled in many a brilliant scene at Whitehall, where the gorgeous court of Charles shone in all its splendor, with the “merry monarch” at their head, but all he had ever witnessed at the king's court fell far short of this pageant. Half the brilliant flock were ladies, superb in satins, silks, velvets and jewels. And such jewels! every gem that ever flashed back the sunlight sparkled and blazed in blending array on those beautiful bosoms and arms—diamonds, pearls, opals, emeralds, rubies, garnets, sapphires, amethysts—every jewel that ever shone. But neither dresses nor gems were half so superb as the peerless forms they adorned; and such an army of perfectly beautiful faces, from purest blonde to brightest brunette, had never met and mingled together before.

Each lovely face was unmasked, but Sir Norman's dazzled eyes in vain sought

among them for one he knew. All that “rosebud garden of girls” were perfect strangers to him, but not so the gallants, who fluttered among them like moths around meteors. They, too, were in gorgeous array, in purple and fine linen, which being interpreted, signifieth in silken hose of every color under the sun, spangled and embroidered slippers radiant with diamond buckles, doublets of as many different shades as their tights, slashed with satin and embroidered with gold. Most of them wore huge powdered wigs, according to the hideous fashion then in vogue, and under those same ugly scalps, laughed many a handsome face Sir Norman well knew. The majority of those richly-robed gallants were strangers to him as well as the ladies, but whoever they were, whether mortal men or “spirits from the vasty deep,” they were in the tallest sort of clover just then. Evidently they knew it, too, and seemed to be on the best of terms with themselves and all the world, and laughed, and flirted, and flattered, with as much perfection as so many ball-room Apollos of the present day.

Still no one ascended the golden and crimson throne, though many of the ladies and gentlemen fluttering about it were arrayed as royally as any common king or queen need wish to be. They promenaded up and down, arm in arm; they seated themselves in the carved and gilded chairs; they gathered in little groups to talk and laugh, did everything, in short, but ascend the throne; and the solitary spectator up above began to grow intensely curious to know who it was for. Their conversation he could plainly hear, and to say that it amazed him, would be to use a feeble expression, altogether inadequate to his feelings. Not that it was the remarks they made that gave his system each a shook, but the names by which they addressed each other. One answered to the aspiring cognomen of the Duke of Northumberland; another was the Earl of Leicester; another, the Duke of Devonshire; another, the Earl of Clarendon; another, the Duke of Buckingham; and so on, ad infinitum, dukes and earls alternately, like bricks and mortar in the wall of a house. There were other dignitaries besides, some that Sir Norman had a faint recollection of hearing were dead for some years—Cardinal Wolsey, Sir Thomas More, the Earl of Bothwell, King Henry Darnley, Sir Walter Raleigh, the Duke of Norfolk, the Earl of Southampton, the Duke of York, and no end of others with equally sonorous titles. As for mere lords and baronets, and such small deer, there was nothing so plebeian present, and they were evidently looked upon by the distinguished assembly, like small deer in thunder, with pity and contempt. The ladies, too, were all duchesses, marchionesses, countesses, and looked fit for princesses, Sir Norman thought, though he heard none of them styled quite so high as that. The tone of conversation was light and easy, but at the same time extremely ceremonious and courtly, and all seemed to

be enjoying themselves in the most delightful sort of a way, which people of, such distinguished rank, I am told, seldom do. All went merry as a marriage-bell, and sweetly over the gay jingle of voices rose the sweet, faint strains of the unseen music.

Suddenly all was changed. The great door of glass and gilding opposite the throne was flung wide, and a grand usher in a grand court livery flourished a mighty grand wand, and shouted, in a stentorian voice,

“Back: back, ye lieges, and make way for Her Majesty, Queen Miranda!”

Instantly the unseen band thundered forth the national anthem. The splendid throng fell back on either hand in profoundest silence and expectation. The grand usher mysteriously disappeared, and in his place there stalked forward a score of soldiers, with clanking swords and fierce moustaches, in the gorgeous uniform of the king's body-guard. These showy warriors arranged themselves silently on either side of the crimson throne, and were followed by half a dozen dazzling personages, the foremost crowned with mitre, armed with crozier, and robed in the ecclesiastical glory of an archbishop, but the face underneath, to the deep surprise and scandal of Sir Norman, was that of the fastest young roue of Charles court, after him came another pompous dignitary, in such unheard of magnificence that the unseen looker-on set him down for a prime minister, or a lord high chancellor, at the very least. The somewhat gaudy-looking gentlemen who stepped after the pious prelate and peer wore the stars and garters of foreign courts, and were evidently embassadors extraordinary to that of her midnight majesty. After them came a snowy flock of fair young girls, angels all but the wings, slender as sylphs, and robed in purest white. Each bore on her arm a basket of flowers, roses and rosebuds of every tint, from snowy white to darkest crimson, and as they floated in they scattered them lightly as they went. And then after all came another vision, “the last, the brightest, the best—the Midnight Queen,” herself. One other figure followed her, and as they entered, a shout arose from the whole assemblage, “Long live Queen Miranda!” And bowing gracefully and easily to the right and left, the queen with a queenly step, trod the long crimson carpet and mounted the regal throne.

From the first moment of his looking down, Sir Norman had been staring with all the eyes in his head, undergoing one shock of surprise after another with the equanimity of a man quite new to it; but now a cry arose to his lips, and died there in voiceless consternation. For he recognized the queen—well he might!—he had seen her before, and her face was the face of Leoline!

As she mounted the stairs, she stood there for a moment crowned and sceptred, before sitting down, and in that moment he recognized the whole

scene. That gorgeous room and its gorgeous inmates; that regal throne and its regal owner, all became palpable as the sun at noonday; that slender, exquisite figure, robed in royal purple and ermine; the uncovered neck and arms, snowy and perfect, ablaze with jewels; that lovely face, like snow, like marble, in its whiteness and calm, with the great, dark, earnest eyes looking out, and the waving wealth of hair falling around it. It was the very scene, and room, and vision, that La Masque had shown him in the caldron, and that face was the face of Leoline, and the earl's page.

Could he be dreaming? Was he sane or mad, or were the three really one?

While he looked, the beautiful queen bowed low, and amid the profoundest and most respectful silence, took her seat. In her robes of purple, wearing the glittering crown, sceptre in hand, throned and canopied, royally beautiful she looked indeed, and a most vivid contrast to the gentleman near her, seated very much at his ease, on the lower throne. The contrast was not of dress—for his outward man was resplendent to look at; but in figure and face, or grace and dignity, he was a very mean specimen of the lords of creation, indeed. In stature, he scarcely reached to the queen's royal shoulder, but made up sideways what he wanted in length—being the breadth of two common men; his head was in proportion to his width, and was decorated with a wig of long, flowing, flaxen hair, that scarcely harmonized with a profusion of the article whiskers, in hue most unmitigated black; his eyes were small, keen, bright, and piercing, and glared on the assembled company as they had done half an hour before on Sir Norman Kingsley, in the bar-room of the Golden Crown; for the royal little man was no other than Caliban, the dwarf. Behind the thrones the flock of floral angels grouped themselves; archbishop, prime minister, and embassadors, took their stand within the lines of the soldiery, and the music softly and impressively died sway in the distance; dead silence reigned.

“My lord Duke,” began the queen, in the very voice he had heard at the plague-pit, as she turned to the stylish individual next the archbishop, “come forward and read us the roll of mortality since our last meeting.”

His grace, the duke, instantly stepped forward, bowing so low that nothing was seen of him for a brief space, but the small of his back, and when he reared himself up, after this convulsion of nature, Sir Norman beheld a face not entirely new to him. At first, he could not imagine where he had seen it, but speedily she recollected it was the identical face of the highwayman who had beaten an inglorious retreat from him and Count L'Estrange, that very night. This ducat robber drew forth a roll of parchment, and began reading, in lachrymose tones, a select litany of defunct gentlemen, with hifalutin titles who had departed this life

during the present week. Most of them had gone with the plague, but a few had died from natural causes, and among these were the Earls of Craven and Ashley.

“My lords Craven and Ashley dead!” exclaimed the queen, in tones of some surprise, but very little anguish; “that is singular, for we saw them not two hours ago, in excellent health and spirits.”

“True, poor majesty,” said the duke, dolefully, “and it is not an hour since they quitted this vale of tears. They and myself rode forth at nightfall, according to Custom, to lay your majesty's tax on all travelers, and soon chanced to encounter one who gave vigorous battle; still, it would have done him little service, had not another person come suddenly to his aid, and between them they clove the skulls of Ashley and Craven; and I,” said the duke, modestly, “I left.”

“Were either of the travelers young, and tall, and of courtly bearing?” exclaimed the dwarf with sharp rudeness.

“Both were, your highness,” replied the duke, bowing to the small speaker, “and uncommonly handy with their weapons.”

“I saw one of them down at the Golden Crown, not long ago,” said the dwarf; “a forward young popinjay, and mighty inquisitive about this, our royal palace. I promised him, if he came here, a warm reception—a promise I will have the greatest pleasure in fulfilling.”

“You may stand aside, my lord duke,” said the queen, with a graceful wave of her hand, “and if any new subjects have been added to our court since our last weekly meeting, let them come forward, and be sworn.”

A dozen or more courtiers immediately stepped forward, and kneeling before the queen, announced their name and rank, which were both ambitiously high. A few silvery-toned questions were put by that royal lady and satisfactorily answered, and then the archbishop, armed with a huge tome, administered a severe and searching oath, which the candidates took with a great deal of sang froid, and were then permitted to kiss the hand of the queen—a privilege worth any amount of swearing—and retire.

“Let any one who has any reports to make, make them immediately,” again commanded her majesty.

A number of gentlemen of high rank, presented themselves at this summons, and began relating, as a certain sect of Christians do in church, their experience! Many of these consisted, to the deep disapproval of Sir Norman, of accounts of daring highway robberies, one of them perpetrated on the king himself, which distinguished personage the duplicate of Leoline styled “our brother Charles,” and of the sums thereby attained. The treasurer of state was then ordered to show

himself, and give an account of the said moneys, which he promptly did; and after him came a number of petitioners, praying for one thing and another, some of which the queen promised to grant, and some she didn't. These little affairs of state being over, Miranda turned to the little gentleman beside her, with the observation,

“I believe, your highness, it is on this night the Earl of Gloucester is to be tried on a charge of high treason, is it not?”

His highness growled a respectful assent.

“Then let him be brought before us,” said the queen. “Go, guards, and fetch him.”

Two of the soldiers bowed low, and backed from the royal presence, amid dead and ominous silence. At this interesting stage of the proceedings, as Sir Norman was leaning forward, breathless and excited, a footstep sounded on the flagged floor beside him, and some one suddenly grasped his shoulder with no gentle hand.

CHAPTER IX. LEOLINE.

In one instant Sir Norman was on his feet and his hand on his sword. In the tarry darkness, neither the face nor figure of the intruder could be made out, but he merely saw a darker shadow beside him standing in the sea of darkness. Perhaps he might have thought it a ghost, but that the hand which grasped his shoulder was unmistakably of flesh, and blood, and muscle, and the breathing of its owner was distinctly audible by his side.

“Who are you?” demanded Sir Norman, drawing out his sword, and wrenching himself free from his unseen companion.

“Ah! it is you, is it? I thought so,” said a not unknown voice. “I have been calling you till I am hoarse, and at last gave it up, and started after you in despair. What are you doing here?”

“You, Ormiston!” exclaimed Sir Norman, in the last degree astonished. “How—when—what are you doing here?”

“What are you doing here? that's more to the purpose. Down flat on your face, with your head stuck through that hole. What is below there, anyway?”

“Never mind,” said Sir Norman, hastily, who, for some reason quite unaccountable to himself, did not wish Ormiston to see. “There's nothing therein particular, but a lower range of vaults. Do you intend telling me what has brought you here?”

“Certainly; the very fleetest horse I could find in the city.”

“Pshaw! You don't say so?” exclaimed Sir Norman, incredulously. “But I presume you had some object in taking such a gallop? May I ask what? Your anxious solicitude on my account, very likely?”

“Not precisely. But, I say, Kingsley, what light is that shining through there? I mean to see.”

“No, you won't,” said Sir Norman, rapidly and noiselessly replacing the flag. “It's nothing, I tell you, but a number of will-o-'wisps having a ball. Finally, and for the last time, Mr. Ormiston, will you have the goodness to tell me what has sent you here?”

“Come out to the air, then. I have no fancy for talking in this place; it smells like a tomb.”

“There is nothing wrong, I hope?” inquired Sir Norman, following his friend,

and threading his way gingerly through the piles of rubbish in the profound darkness.

“Nothing wrong, but everything extremely right. Confound this place! It would be easier walking on live eels than through these winding and lumbered passages. Thank the fates, we are through them, at last! for there is the daylight, or, rather the nightlight, and we have escaped without any bones broken.”

They had reached the mouldering and crumbling doorway, shown by a square of lighter darkness, and exchanged the damp, chill atmosphere of the vaults for the stagnant, sultry open air. Sir Norman, with a notion in his head that his dwarfish highness might have placed sentinels around his royal residence, endeavored to pierce the gloom in search of them. Though he could discover none, he still thought discretion the better part of valor, and stepped out into the road.

“Now, then, where are you going?” inquired Ormiston for, following him.

“I don't wish to talk here; there is no telling who may be listening. Come along.”

Ormiston glanced back at the gloomy rain looming up like a black spectre in the blackness.

“Well, they must have a strong fancy for eavesdropping, I must say, who world go to that haunted heap to listen. What have you seen there, and where have you left your horse?”

“I told you before,” said Sir Norman, rather impatiently, “that I have seen nothing—at least, nothing you would care about; and my horse is waiting me at the Golden Crown.”

“Very well, we have no time to lose; so get there as fast as you can, and mount him and ride as if the demon were after you back to London.”

“Back to London? Is the man crazy? I shall do no such thing, let me tell you, to-night.”

“Oh, just as you please,” said Ormiston, with a great deal of indifference, considering the urgent nature of his former request. “You can do as you like, you know, and so can I—which translated, means, I will go and tell her you have declined to come.”

“Tell her? Tell whom? What are you talking about? Hang it, man!” exclaimed Sir Norman, getting somewhat excited and profane, “what are you driving at? Can't you speak out and tell me at once?”

“I have told you!” said Ormiston, testily: “and I tell you again, she sent me in

search of you, and if you don't choose to come, that's your own affair, and not mine.”

This was a little too much for Sir Norman's overwrought feelings, and in the last degree of exasperation, he laid violent hands on the collar of Ormiston's doublet, and shook him as if he would have shaken the name out with a jerk.

“I tell you what it is, Ormiston, you had better not aggravate me! I can stand a good deal, but I'm not exactly Moses or Job, and you had better mind what you're at. If you don't come to the point at once, and tell me who I she is, I'll throttle you where you stand; and so give you warning.”

Half-indignant, and wholly laughing, Ormiston stepped back out of the way of his excited friend.

“I cry you mercy! In one word, then, I have been dispatched by a lady in search of you, and that lady is—Leoline.”

It has always been one of the inscrutable mysteries in natural philosophy that I never could fathom, why men do not faint. Certain it is, I never yet heard of a man swooning from excess of surprise or joy, and perhaps that may account for Sir Norman's not doing so on the present occasion. But he came to an abrupt stand-still in their rapid career; and if it had not been quite so excessively dark, his friend would have beheld a countenance wonderful to look on, in its mixture of utter astonishment and sublime consternation.

“Leoline!” he faintly gasped. “Just stop a moment, Ormiston, and say that again—will you?”

“No,” said Ormiston, hurrying unconcernedly on; “I shall do no such thing, for there is no time to lose, and if there were I have no fancy for standing in this dismal road. Come on, man, and I'll tell you as we go.”

Thus abjured, and seeing there was no help for it, Sir Norman, in a dazed and bewildered state, complied; and Ormiston promptly and briskly relaxed into business.

“You see, my dear fellow, to begin at the beginning, after you left, I stood at ease at La Masque's door, awaiting that lady's return, and was presently rewarded by seeing her come up with an old woman called Prudence. Do you recollect the woman who rushed screaming out of the home of the dead bride?”

“Yes, yes!”

“Well, that was Prudence. She and La Masque were talking so earnestly they did not perceive me, and I—well, the fact is, Kingsley, I stayed and listened. Not a very handsome thing, perhaps, but I couldn't resist it. They were talking of

some one they called Leoline, and I, in a moment, knew that it was your flame, and that neither of them knew any more of her whereabouts than we did."

"And yet La Masque told me to come here in search of her," interrupted Sir Norman.

"Very true! That was odd—wasn't it? This Prudence, it appears, was Leoline's nurse, and La Masque, too, seemed to have a certain authority over her; and between them, I learned she was to have been married this very night, and died—or, at least, Prudence thought so—an hour or two before the time."

"Then she was not married?" cried Sir Norman, in an ecstasy of delight.

"Not a bit of it; and what is more, didn't want to be; and judging from the remarks of Prudence, I should say, of the two, rather preferred the plague."

"Then why was she going to do it? You don't mean to say she was forced?"

"Ah, but I do, though! Prudence owned it with the most charming candor in the world."

"Did you hear the name of the person she was to have married?" asked Sir Norman, with kindling eyes.

"I think not; they called him the count, if my memory serves me, and Prudence intimated that he knew nothing of the melancholy fate of Mistress Leoline. Most likely it was the person in the cloak and slouched hat we saw talking to the watchman."

Sir Norman said nothing, but he thought a good deal, and the burden of his thoughts was an ardent and heartfelt wish that the Court L'Estrange was once more under the swords of the three robbers, and waiting for him to ride to the rescue—that was all!

"La Masque urged Prudence to go back," continued Ormiston; "but Prudence respectfully declined, and went her way bemoaning the fate of her darling. When she was gone, I stepped up to Madame Masque, and that lady's first words of greeting were an earnest hope that I had been edified and improved by what I had overheard."

"She saw you, then?" said Sir Norman.

"See me? I believe you! She has more eyes than ever Argus had, and each one is as sharp as a cambric needle. Of course I apologized, and so on, and she forgave me handsomely, and then we fell to discoursing—need I tell you on what subject?"

"Love, of course," said Sir Norman.

"Yes, mingled with entreaties to take off her mask that would have moved a

heart of stone. It moved what was better—the heart of La Masque; and, Kingsley, she has consented to do it; and she says that if, after seeing her face, I still love her, she will be my wife."

"Is it possible? My dear Ormiston, I congratulate you with all my heart!"

"Thank you! After that she left me, and I walked away in such a frenzy of delight that I couldn't have told whether I was treading this earth or the shining stars of the seventh heaven, when suddenly there flew past me a figure all in white—the figure of a bride, Kingsley, pursued by an excited mob. We were both near the river, and the first thing I knew, she was plump into it, with the crowd behind, yelling to stop her, that she was ill of the plague."

"Great Heaven! and was she drowned?"

"No, though it was not her fault. The Earl of Rochester and his page—you remember that page, I fancy—were out in their barge, and the earl picked her up. Then I got a boat, set out after her, claimed her—for I recognized her, of course—brought her ashore, and deposited her safe and sound in her own house. What do you think of that?"

"Ormiston," said Norman, catching him by the shoulder, with a very excited face, "is this true?"

"True as preaching, Kingsley, every word of it! And the most extraordinary part of the business is, that her dip in cold water has effectually cured her of the plague; not a trace of it remains."

Sir Norman dropped his hand, and walked on, staring straight before him, perfectly speechless. In fact, no known language in the world could have done justice to his feelings at that precise period; for three times that night, in three different shapes, had he seen this same Leoline, and at the same moment he was watching her decked out in royal state in the rain, Ormiston had probably been assisting her from her cold bath in the river Thames.

Astonishment and consternation are words altogether too feeble to express his state of mind; but one idea remained clear and bright amid all his mental chaos, and that was, that the Leoline he had fallen in love with dead, was awaiting him, alive and well, in London.

"Well," said Ormiston, "you don't speak! What do you think of all this?"

"Think! I can't think—I've got past that long ago!" replied his friend, hopelessly. "Did you really say Leoline was alive and well?"

"And waiting for you—yes, I did, and I repeat it; and the sooner you get back to town, the sooner you will see her; so don't loiter—"

“Ormiston, what do you mean! Is it possible I can see her to-night?”

“Yes, it is; the dear creature is waiting for you even now. You see, after we got to the house, and she had consented to become a little rational, mutual explanations ensued, by which it appeared she had ran away from Sir Norman Kingsley's in a state of frenzy, had jumped into the river in a similarly excited state of mind, and was most anxious to go down on her pretty knees and thank the aforesaid Sir Norman for saving her life. What could any one as gallant as myself do under these circumstances, but offer to set forth in quest of that gentleman? And she promptly consented to sit up and wait his coming, and dismissed me with her blessing. And, Kingsley, I've a private notion she is as deeply affected by you as you are by her; for, when I mentioned your name, she blushed, yea, verily to the roots of her hair; and when she spoke of you, couldn't so much as look me in the face—which is, you must own, a very bad symptom.”

“Nonsense!” said Sir Norman, energetically. And had it been daylight, his friend would have seen that he blushed almost as extensively as the lady. “She doesn't know me.”

“Ah, doesn't she, though? That shows all you know about it! She has seen you go past the window many and many a time; and to see you,” said Ormiston, making a grimace undercover of the darkness, “is to love! She told me so herself.”

“What! That she loved me!” exclaimed Sir Norman, his notions of propriety to the last degree shocked by such a revelation.

“Not altogether, she only looked that; but she said she knew you well by sight, and by heart, too, as I inferred from her countenance when she said it. There now, don't make me talk any more, for I have told you everything I know, and am about hoarse with my exertions.”

“One thing only—did she tell you who she was?”

“No, except that her name was Leoline, and nothing else—which struck me as being slightly improbable. Doubtless, she will tell you everything, and one piece of advice I may venture to give you, which is, you may propose as soon as you like without fear of rejection. Here we are at the Golden Crown, so go in and get your horse, and let us be off.”

All this time Ormiston had been leading his own horse by the bridle, and as Sir Norman silently complied with this suggestion, in five minutes more they were in their saddles, and galloping at break-neck speed toward the city. To tell the truth, one was not more inclined for silence than the other, and the profoundest and thoughtfulest silence was maintained till they reached it. One

was thinking of Leoline, the other of La Masque, and both were badly in love, and just at that particular moment very happy. Of course the happiness of people in that state never lasts longer than half an hour at a stretch, and then they are plunged back again into misery and distraction; but while it does last, it in, very intense and delightful indeed.

Our two friends having drained the bitten, had got to the bottom of the cup, and neither knew that no sooner were the sweets swallowed, than it was to be replenished with a doubly-bitter dose. Neither of them dismounted till they reached the house of Leoline, and there Sir Norman secured his horse, and looked up at it with a beating heart. Not that it was very unusual for his heart to beat, seeing it never did anything else; but on that occasion its motion was so much accelerated, that any doctor feeling his pulse might have justly set him down as a bad case of heart-disease. A small, bright ray of light streamed like a beacon of hope from an upper window, and the lover looked at it as a clouded mariner might at the shining of the North Star.

“Are you coming in, Ormiston?” he inquired, feeling, for the first time in his life, almost bashful. “It seems to me it would only be right, you know.”

“I don't mind going in and introducing` you,” said Ormiston; “but after you have been delivered over, you may fight your own battles, and take care of yourself. Come on.”

The door was unfastened, and Ormiston sprang upstairs with the air of a man —quite at home, followed more decorously by Sir Norman. The door of the lady's room stood ajar, as he had left it, and in answer to his “tapping at the chamber-door,” a sweet feminine voice called “come in.”

Ormiston promptly obeyed, and the next instant they were in the room, and in the presence of the dead bride. Certainly she did not look dead, but very much alive, just then, as she sat in an easy-chair, drawn up before the dressing-table, on which stood the solitary lamp that illumed the chamber. In one hand she held a small mirror, or, as it was then called, a “sprunking-glass,” in which she was contemplating her own beauty, with as much satisfaction as any other pretty girl might justly do. She had changed her drenched dress during Ormiston's absence, and now sat arrayed in a swelling amplitude of rose-colored satin, her dark hair clasped and bound by a circle of milk-white pearls, and her pale, beautiful face looking ten degrees more beautiful than ever, in contrast with the bright rose-silk, shining dark hair, and rich white jewels. She rose up as they entered, and came forward with the same glow on her face and the same light in her eyes that one of them had seen before, and stood with drooping eyelashes, lovely as a vision in the centre of the room.

“You see I have lost no time in obeying your ladyship's commands,” began Ormiston, bowing low. “Mistress Leoline, allow me to present Sir Norman Kingsley.”

Sir Norman Kingsley bent almost as profoundly before the lady as the lord high chancellor had done before Queen Miranda; and the lady courtesied, in return, until her pink-satin skirt ballooned out all over the floor. It was quite an affecting tableau. And so Ormiston felt, as he stood eyeing it with preternatural gravity.

“I owe my life to Sir Norman Kingsley,” murmured the faint, sweet voice of the lady, “and could not rest until I had thanked him. I have no words to say how deeply thankful and grateful I am.”

“Fairest Leoline! one word from such lips would be enough to repay me, had I done a thousandfold more,” responded Norman, laying his hand on his heart, with another deep genuflection.

“Very pretty indeed!” remarked Ormiston to himself, with a little approving nod; “but I'm afraid they won't be able to keep it up, and go on talking on stilts like that, till they have finished. Perhaps they may get on all the better if I take myself off, there being always one too many in a case like this.” Then aloud: “Madame, I regret that I am obliged to depart, having a most particular appointment; but, doubtless, my friend will be able to express himself without my assistance. I have the honor to wish you both good-night.”

With which neat and appropriate speech, Ormiston bowed himself out, and was gone before Leoline could detain him, even if she wished to do so. Probably, however, she thought the care of one gentleman sufficient responsibility at once; and she did not look very seriously distressed by his departure; and, the moment he disappeared, Sir Norman brightened up wonderfully.

It is very discomposing to the feelings to make love in the presence of a third party; and Sir Norman had no intention of wasting his time on anything, and went at it immediately. Taking her hand, with a grace that would have beaten Sir Charles Grandison or Lord Chesterfield all to nothing, he led her to a couch, and took a seat as near her as was at all polite or proper, considering the brief nature of their acquaintance. The curtains were drawn; the lamp shed a faint light; the house was still, and there was no intrusive papa to pounce down upon them; the lady was looking down, and seemed in no way haughty or discouraging, and Sir Norman's spirits went up with a jump to boiling-point.

Yet the lady, with all her pretty bashfulness, was the first to speak.

“I'm afraid, Sir Norman, you must think this a singular hour to come here; but,

in these dreadful times, we cannot tell if we may live from one moment to another; and I should not like to die, or have you die, without my telling, and you hearing, all my gratitude. For I do assure you, Sir Norman," said the lady, lifting her dark eyes with the prettiest and most bewitching earnestness, "that I am grateful, though I cannot find words to express it."

"Madame, I would not listen to you if you would; for I have done nothing to deserve thanks. I wish I could tell you what I felt when Ormiston told me you were alive and safe."

"You are very kind, but pray do not call me madame. Say Leoline!"

"A thousand thanks, dear Leoline!" exclaimed Sir Norman, raising her hand to his lips, and quite beside himself with ecstasy.

"Ah, I did not tell you to say that!" she cried, with a gay laugh and vivid blush. "I never said you were to call me dear."

"It arose from my heart to my lips," said Sir Norman, with thrilling earnestness and fervid glance; "for you are dear to me—dearer than all the world beside!"

The flush grew a deeper glow on the lady's face; but, singular to relate, she did not look the least surprised or displeased; and the hand he had feloniously purloined lay passive and quite contented in his.

"Sir Norman Kingsley is pleased to jest," said the lady, in a subdued tone, and with her eyes fixed pertinaciously on her shining dress; "for he has never spoken to me before in his life!"

"That has nothing to do with it, Leoline. I love you as devotedly as if I had known you from your birthday; and, strange to say, I feel as if we had been friends for years instead of minutes. I cannot realize at all that you are a stranger to me!"

Leoline laughed:

"Nor I; though, for that matter, you are not a stranger to me, Sir Norman!"

"Am I not? How is that!"

"I have seen you go past so often, you know; and Prudence told me who you were; and so I need—I used—" hesitating and glowing to a degree before which her dress paled.

"Well, dearest," said Sir Norman, getting from the positive to the superlative at a jump, and diminishing the distance between them, "you need to—what?"

"To watch for you!" said Leoline, in a sly whisper. "And so I have got to know you very well!"

“My own darling! And, O Leoline! may I hope—dare I hope—that you do not altogether hate me?”

Leoline looked reflective; though her bleak eyes were sparkling under their sweeping lashes.

“Why, no,” she said, demurely, “I don't know as I do. It's very sinful and improper to hate one's fellow-creatures, you know, Sir Norman, and therefore I don't indulge in it.”

“Ah! you are given to piety, I see. In that case, perhaps you are aware of a precept commanding us to love our neighbors. Now, I'm your nearest neighbor at present; so, to keep up a consistent Christian spirit, just be good enough to say you love me!”

Again Leoline laughed; and this time the bright, dancing eyes beamed in their sparkling darkness full upon him.

“I am afraid your theology is not very sound, my friend, and I have a dislike to extremes. There is a middle course, between hating and loving. Suppose I take that?”

“I will have no middle courses—either hating or loving it must be! Leoline! Leoline!” (bending over her, and imprisoning both hands this time) “do say you love me!”

“I am captive in your hands, so I must, I suppose. Yes, Sir Norman, I do love you!”

Every man hearing that for the first time from a pair of loved lips is privileged to go mad for a brief season, and to go through certain manoeuvers much more delectable to the enjoyers than to society at large. For fully ten minutes after Leoline's last speech, there was profound silence. But actions sometimes speak louder than words; and Leoline was perfectly convinced that her declaration had not fallen on insensible ears. At the end of that period, the space between them on the couch had so greatly diminished, that the ghost of a zephyr would have been crushed to death trying to get between them; and Sir Norman's face was fairly radiant. Leoline herself looked rather beaming; and she suddenly, and without provocation, burst into a merry little peal of laughter.

“Well, for two people who were perfect strangers to each other half an hour ago, I think we have gone on remarkably well. What will Mr. Ormiston and Prudence say, I wonder, when they hear this?”

“They will say what is the truth—that I am the luckiest man in England. O Leoline! I never thought it was in me to love any one as I do you.”'

“I am very glad to hear it; but I knew that it was in me long before I ever dreamed of knowing you. Are you not anxious to know something about the future Lady Kingsley's past history?”

“It will all come in good time; it is not well to have a surfeit of joy in one night.

“I do not know that this will add to your joy; but it had better be told and be done with, at once and forever. In the first place, I presume I am an orphan, for I have never known father or mother, and I have never had any other name but Leoline.”

“So Ormiston told me.”

“My first recollection is of Prudence; she was my nurse and governess, both in one; and we lived in a cottage by the sea—I don't know where, but a long way from this. When I was about ten years old, we left it, and came to London, and lived in a house in Cheapside, for five or six years; and then we moved here. And all this time, Sir Norman you will think it strange—but I never made any friends or acquaintances, and knew no one but Prudence and an old Italian professor, who came to our lodgings in Cheapside, every week, to give me lessons. It was not because I disliked society, you must know; but Prudence, with all her kindness and goodness—and I believe she truly loves me—has been nothing more or less all my life than my jailer.”

She paused to clasp a belt of silver brocade, fastened by a pearl buckle, close around her little waist, and Sir Norman fixed his eyes upon her beautiful face, with a powerful glance.

“Knew no one—that is strange, Leoline! Not even the Count L'Estrange?”

“Ah! you know him?” she cried eagerly, lifting her eyes with a bright look; “do—do tell me who he is?”

“Upon my honor, my dear,” said Sir Norman, considerably taken aback, “it strikes me you are the person to answer that question. If I don't greatly mistake, somebody told me you were going to marry him.”

“Oh, so I was,” said Leoline, with the utmost simplicity. “But I don't know him, for all that; and more than that, Sir Norman, I do not believe his name is Count L'Estrange, any more than mine is!”

“Precisely my opinion; but why, in the name of—no, I'll not swear; but why were you going to marry him, Leoline?”

Leoline half pouted, and shrugged her pretty pink satin shoulders.

“Because I couldn't help it—that's why. He coaxed, and coaxed; and I said no,

and no, and no, until I got tired of it. Prudence, too, was as bad as he was, until between them I got about distracted, and at last consented to marry him to get rid of him."

"My poor, persecuted little darling! Oh," cried Sir Norman, with a burst of enthusiasm, "how I should admire to have Count L'Estrange here for about ten minutes, just now! I would spoil his next wooing for him, or I am mistaken!"

"No, no!" said Leoline, looking rather alarmed; "you must not fight, you know. I shouldn't at all like either of you to get killed. Besides, he has not married me; and so there's no harm done."

Sir Norman seemed rather struck by that view of the case, and after a few moments reflection on it, came to the conclusion that she knew best, and settled down peaceably again.

"Why do you suppose his name is not Count L'Estrange?" he asked.

"For many reasons. First—he is disguised; wears false whiskers, moustache, and wig, and even the voice he uses appears assumed. Then Prudence seems in the greatest awe of him, and she is not one to be easily awed. I never knew her to be in the slightest degree intimidated by any human being but himself and that mysterious woman, La Masque.

"Ah! you know La Masque, then?"

"Not personally; but I have seen her as I did you, you remember," with an arch glance; "and, like you, being once seen, is not to be forgotten."

Sir Norman promptly paid her for the compliment in Cupid's own coin:

"Little flatterer! I can almost forgive Count L'Estrange for wanting to marry you; for I presume he it only a man, and not quite equal to impossibilities. How long is it since you knew him first?"

"Not two months. My courtships," said Leoline, with a gay laugh, "seem destined to be of the shortest. He saw me one evening in the window, and immediately insisted on being admitted; and after that, he continued coming until I had to promise, as I have told you, to be Countess L'Estrange."

"He cannot be much of a gentleman, or he would not attempt to force a lady against her will. And so, when you were dressed for your bridal, you found you had the plague?"

"Yes, Sir Norman; and horrible as that was I do assure you I almost preferred it to marrying him."

"Leoline, tell me how long it is since you've known me?"

"Nearly three months," said Leoline, blushing again celestial rosy red.

“And how long have you loved me?”

“Nonsense. What a question! I shall not tell you.”

“You shall—you must—I insist upon it. Did you love me before you met the count? Out with it.”

“Well, then—yes!” cried Leoline desperately.

Sir Norman raised the hand he held, in rapture to his lips:

“My darling! But I will reserve my raptures, for it is growing late, and I know you must want to go to rest. I have a thousand things to tell you, but they must wait for daylight; only I will promise, before parting, that this is the last night you must spend here.”

Leoline opened her bright eyes very wide.

“To-morrow morning,” went on Sir Norman, impressively, and with dignity, “you will be up and dressed by sunrise, and shortly after that radiant period, I will make my appearance with two horses—one of which I shall ride, and the other I shall lead: the one I lead you shall mount, and we will ride to the nearest church, and be married without any pomp or pageant; and then Sir Norman and Lady Kingsley will immediately leave London, and in Kingsley Castle, Devonshire, will enjoy the honeymoon and blissful repose till the plague is over. Do you understand that?”

“Perfectly,” she answered, with a radiant face.

“And agree to it?”

“You know I do, Sir Norman; only—”

“Well, my pet, only what?”

“Sir Norman, I should like to see Prudence. I want Prudence. How can I leave her behind?”

“My dear child, she made nothing of leaving you when she thought you were dying; so never mind Prudence, but say, will you be ready?”

“I will.”

“That is my good little Leoline. Now give me a kiss, Lady Kingsley, and good-night.”

Lady Kingsley dutifully obeyed; and Sir Norman went out with a glow at his heart, like a halo round a full moon.

CHAPTER X. THE PAGE, THE FIRES, AND THE FALL.

The night was intensely dark when Sir Norman got into it once more; and to any one else would have been intensely dismal, but to Sir Norman all was bright as the fair hills of Beulah. When all is bright within, we see no darkness without; and just at that moment our young knight had got into one of those green and golden glimpses of sunshine that here and there checker life's rather dark pathway, and with Leoline beside him would have thought the dreary shores of the Dead Sea itself a very paradise.

It was now near midnight, and there was an unusual concourse of people in the streets, waiting for St. Paul's to give the signal to light the fires. He looked around for Ormiston; but Ormiston was nowhere to be seen—horse and rider had disappeared. His own horse stood tethered where he had left him. Anxious as he was to ride back to the ruin, and see the play played out, he could not resist the temptation of lingering a brief period in the city, to behold the grand spectacle of the myriad fires. Many persons were hurrying toward St. Paul's to witness it from the dome; and consigning his horse to the care of the sentinel on guard at the house opposite, he joined them, and was soon striding along, at a tremendous pace, toward the great cathedral. Ere he reached it, its long-tongued clock tolled twelve, and all the other churches, one after another, took up the sound, and the witching hour of midnight rang and rerang from end to end of London town. As if by magic, a thousand forked tongues of fire shot up at once into the blind, black night, turning almost in an instant the darkened face of the heavens to an inflamed, glowing red. Great fires were blazing around the cathedral when they reached it, but no one stopped to notice them, but only hurried on the faster to gain their point of observation.

Sir Norman just glanced at the magnificent pile—for the old St. Paul's was even more magnificent than the new,—and then followed after the rest, through many a gallery, tower, and spiral staircase till the dome was reached. And there a grand and mighty spectacle was before him—the whole of London swaying and heaving in one great sea of fire. From one end to the other, the city seemed wrapped in sheets of flame, and every street, and alley, and lane within it shone in a lurid radiance far brighter than noonday. All along the river fires were gleaming, too; and the whole sky had turned from black to blood-red crimson.

The streets were alive and swarming—it could scarcely be believed that the plague-infested city contained half so many people, and all were unusually hopeful and animated; for it was popularly believed that these fires would effectually check the pestilence. But the angry fiat of a Mighty Judge had gone forth, and the tremendous arm of the destroying angel was not to be stopped by the puny hand of man.

It has been said the weather for weeks was unusually brilliant, days of cloudless sunshine, nights of cloudless moonlight, and the air was warm and sultry enough for the month of August in the tropics. But now, while they looked, a vivid flash of lightning, from what quarter of the heavens no man knew, shot athwart the sky, followed by another and another, quick, sharp, and blinding. Then one great drop of rain fell like molten lead on the pavement, then a second and a third quicker, faster, and thicker, until down it crashed in a perfect deluge. It did not wait to rain; it fell in floods—in great, slanting sheets of water, an is the very floodgates of heaven had opened for a second deluge. No one ever remembered to have seen such torrents fall, and the populace fled before it in wildest dismay. In five minutes, every fire, from one extremity of London to the other, was quenched in the very blackness of darkness, and on that night the deepest gloom and terror reigned throughout the city. It was clear the hand of an avenging Deity was in this, and He who had rained down fire on Sodom and Gomorrah had not lost His might. In fifteen minutes the terrific flood was over; the dismal clouds cleared away, a pale, fair, silver moon shone serenely out, and looked down on the black, charred heaps of ashes strewn through the streets of London. One by one, the stars that all night had been obscured, glanced and sparkled over the sky, and lit up with their soft, pale light the doomed and stricken town. Everybody had quitted the dome in terror and consternation; and now Sir Norman, who had been lost in awe, suddenly bethought him of his ride to the ruin, and hastened to follow their example. Walking rapidly, not to say recklessly, along, he abruptly knocked against some one sauntering leisurely before him, and nearly pitched headlong on the pavement. Recovering his centre of gravity by a violent effort, he turned to see the cause of the collision, and found himself accosted by a musical and foreign-accented voice.

“Pardon,” said the sweet, and rather feminine tones; “it was quite an accident, I assure you, monsieur. I had no idea I was in anybody's way.”

Sir Norman looked at the voice, or rather in the direction whence it came, and found it proceeded from a lad in gay livery, whose clear, colorless face, dark eyes, and exquisite features were by no means unknown. The boy seemed to recognize him at the same moment, and slightly touched his gay cap.

“Ah! it is Sir Norman Kingsley! Just the very person, but one, in the world that I wanted most to see.”

“Indeed! And, pray, whom have I the honor of addressing?” inquired Sir Norman, deeply edified by the cool familiarity of the accoster.

“They call me Hubert—for want of a better name, I suppose,” said the lad, easily. “And may I ask, Sir Norman, if you are shod with seven-leagued boots, or if your errand is one of life and death, that you stride along at such a terrific rate?”

“And what is that to you?” asked Sir Norman, indignant at his free-and-easy impudence.

“Nothing; only I should like to keep up with you, if my legs were long enough; and as they're not, and as company is not easily to be had in these forlorn streets, I should feel obliged to you if you would just slacken your pace a trifle, and take me in tow.”

The boy's face in the moonlight, in everything but expression, was exactly that of Leoline, to which softening circumstance may be attributed Sir Norman's yielding to the request, and allowing the page to keep along side.

“I've met you once before to-night?” inquired Sir Norman, after a prolonged and wondering stare at him.

“Yes; I have a faint recollection of seeing you and Mr. Ormiston on London Bridge, a few hours ago, and, by the way, perhaps I may mention I am now in search of that same Mr. Ormiston.”

“You are! And what may you want of him, pray?”

“Just a little information of a private character—perhaps you can direct me to his whereabouts.”

“Should be happy to oblige you, my dear boy, but, unfortunately, I cannot. I want to see him myself, if I could find any one good enough to direct me to him. Is your business pressing?”

“Very—there is a lady in the case; and such business, you are aware, is always pressing. Probably you have heard of her—a youthful angel, in virgin white, who took a notion to jump into the Thames, not a great while ago.”

“Ah!” said Sir Norman, with a start that did not escape the quick eyes of the boy. “And what do you want of her?”

The page glanced at him.

“Perhaps you know her yourself, sir Norman? If so, you will answer quite as well as your friend, as I only want to know where she lives.”

“I have been out of town to-night,” said Sir Norman, evasively, “and there may have been more ladies than one jumped into the Thames during my absence. Pray, describe your angel in white.”

“I did not notice her particularly myself,” said the boy, with easy indifference, “as I am not in the habit of paying much attention to young ladies who run wild about the streets at night and jump promiscuously into rivers. However, this one was rather remarkable, for being dressed as a bride, having long black hair, and a great quantity of jewelry about her, and looking very much like me. Having said she looks like me, I need not add she is handsome.”

“Vanity of vanities, all in vanity!” murmured Sir Norman, meditatively. “Perhaps she is a relative of yours, Master Hubert, since you take such an interest in her, and she looks so much like you.”

“Not that I know of,” said Hubert, in his careless way. “I believe I was born minus those common domestic afflictions, relatives; and I don't take the slightest interest in her, either; don't think it!”

“Then why are you in search of her?”

“For a very good reason—because I've been ordered to do so.”

“By whom—your master?”

“My Lord Rochester,” said that nobleman's page, waving off the insinuation by a motion of his hand and a little displeased frown; “he picked her up adrift, and being composed of highly inflammable materials, took a hot and vehement fancy for her, which fact he did not discover until your friend, Mr. Ormiston, had carried her off.”

Sir Norman scowled.

“And so he sent you in search of her, has he?”

“Exactly so; and now you perceive the reason why it is quite important that I find Mr. Ormiston. We do not know where he has taken her to, but fancy it must be somewhere near the river.”

“You do? I tell you what it is, my boy,” exclaimed Sir Norman, suddenly and in an elevated key, “the best thing you can do is, to go home and go to bed, and never mind young ladies. You'll catch the plague before you'll catch this particular young lady—I can tell you that!”

“Monsieur is excited,” lisped the lad raising his hat and running his taper fingers through his glossy, dark curls. “Is she as handsome as they say she is, I wonder?”

“Handsome!” cried Sir Norman, lighting up with quite a new sensation at the

recollection. “I tell you handsome doesn't begin to describe her! She is beautiful, lovely, angelic, divine—” Here Sir Norman's litany of adjectives beginning to give out, he came to a sudden halt, with a face as radiant as the sky at sunrise.

“Ah! I did not believe them, when they told me she was so much like me; but if she is as near perfection as you describe, I shall begin to credit it. Strange, is it not, that nature should make a duplicate of her greatest earthly chef d'oeuvre?”

“You conceited young jackanapes!” growled Sir Norman, in deep displeasure. “It is far stranger how such a bundle of vanity can contrive to live in this work-a-day world. You are a foreigner, I perceive?”

“Yes, Sir Norman, I am happy to say I am.”

“You don't like England, then?”

“I'd be sorry to like it; a dirty, beggarly, sickly place as I ever saw!”

Sir Norman eyed the slender specimen of foreign manhood, uttering this sentiment in the sincerest of tones, and let his hand fall heavily on his shoulder.

“My good youth, be careful! I happen to be a native, and not altogether used to this sort of talk. How long have you been here? Not long, I know myself—at least, not in the Earl of Rochester's service, or I would have seen you.”

“Right! I have not been here a month; but that month has seemed longer than a year elsewhere. Do you know, I imagine when the world was created, this island of yours must have been made late on Saturday night, and then merely thrown in from the refuse to fill up a dent in the ocean.”

Sir Norman paused in his walk, and contemplated the speaker a moment in severest silence. But Master Hubert only lifted up his saucy face and laughing black eyes, in dauntless sang froid.

“Master Hubert,” began Master Hubert's companion, in his deepest and sternest bass, “I don't know your other name, and it would be of no consequence if I did—just listen to me a moment. If you don't want to get run through (you perceive I carry a sword), and have an untimely end put to your career, just keep a civil tongue in your head, and don't slander England. Now come on!”

Hubert laughed and shrugged his shoulders:

“Thought is free, however, so I can have my own opinion in spite of everything. Will you tell me, monsieur, where I can find the lady?”

“You will have it, will you?” exclaimed Sir Norman, half drawing his sword. “Don't ask questions, but answer them. Are you French?”

“Monsieur has guessed it.”

“How long have you been with your present master?”

“Monsieur, I object to that term,” said Hubert, with calm dignity. “Master is a vulgarism that I dislike; so, in alluding to his lordship, take the trouble to say, patron.”

Sir Norman laughed.

“With all my heart! How long, then, have you been with your present patron?”

“Not quite two weeks.”

“I do not like to be impertinently inquisitive in addressing so dignified a gentleman, but perhaps you would not consider it too great a liberty, if I inquired how you became his page?”

“Monsieur shall ask as many questions as he pleases, and it shall not be considered the slightest liberty,” said the young gentleman, politely. “I had been roaming at large about the city and the palace of his majesty—whom may Heaven preserve, and grant a little more wisdom!—in search of a situation; and among that of all nobles of the court, the Earl of Rochester's livery struck me as being the most becoming, and so I concluded to patronize him.”

“What an honor for his lordship! Since you dislike England so much, however, you will probably soon throw up the situation and, patronize the first foreign ambassador—”

“Perhaps! I rather like Whitehall, however. Old Rowlie has taken rather a fancy to me,” said the boy speaking with the same easy familiarity of his majesty as he would of a lap-dog. “And what is better, so has Mistress Stewart—so much so, that Heaven forefend the king should become jealous. This, however, is strictly entre nous, and not to be spoken of on any terms.”

“Your secret shall be preserved at the risk of my life,” said Sir Norman, laying his hand on the left side of his doublet; “and in return, may I ask if you have any relatives living—any sisters for instance?”

“I see! you have a suspicion that the lady in white may be a sister of mine. Well, you may set your mind at rest on that point—for if she is, it is news to me, as I never saw her in my life before tonight. Is she a particular friend of yours, Sir Norman?”

“Never you mind that, my dear boy; but take my advice, and don't trouble yourself looking for her; for, most assuredly, if you find her, I shall break your head!”

“Much obliged,” said Hubert, touching his cap, “but nevertheless, I shall risk it. She had the plague, though, when she jumped into the river, and perhaps the

best place to find her would be the pest-house. I shall try."

"Go, and Heaven speed you! Yonder is the way to it, and my road lies here. Good night, master Hubert."

"Good night, Sir Norman," responded the page, bowing airily; "and if I do not find the lady to-night, most assuredly I shall do so to-morrow."

Turning along a road leading to the pest-house, and laughing as he went, the boy disappeared. Fearing lest the page should follow him, and thereby discover a clue to Leoline's abode, Sir Norman turned into a street some distance from the house, and waited in the shadow until he was out of sight. Then he came forth, and, full of impatience to get back to the ruin, hurried on to where he had left his horse. He was still in the care of the watchman, whom he repaid for his trouble; and as he sprang on his back, he glanced up at the windows of Leoline's house. It was all buried in profound darkness but that one window from which that faint light streamed, and he knew that she had not yet gone to rest. For a moment he lingered and looked at it in the absurd way lovers will look, and was presently rewarded by seeing what he watched for—a shadow flit between him and the light. The sight was a strong temptation to him to dismount and enter, and, under pretence of warning her against the Earl of Rochester and his "pretty page," see her once again. But reflection, stepping rebukingly up to him, whispered indignantly, that his ladylove was probably by this time in her night robe, and not at home to lovers; and Sir Norman respectfully bowed to reflection's superior wisdom. He thought of Hubert's words, "If I do not find her tonight, I shall most assuredly to-morrow," and a chill presentiment of coming evil fell upon him.

"To-morrow," he said, as he turned to go. "Who knows what to-morrow may bring forth! Fairest and dearest Leoline, good-night!"

He rode away in the moonlight, with the stars shining peacefully down upon him. His heart at the moment was a divided one—one half being given to Leoline, and the other to the Midnight Queen and her mysterious court. The farther he went away from Leoline, the dimmer her star became in the horizon of his thoughts; and the nearer he came to Miranda, the brighter and more eagerly she loomed up, until he spurred his horse to a most furious gallop, lest he should find the castle and the queen lost in the regions of space when he got there. Once the plague-stricken city lay behind him, his journey was short; and soon, to his great delight, he turned into the silent deserted by-path leading to the ruin.

Tying his horse to a stake in the crumbling wall, he paused for a moment to look at it in the pale, wan light of the midnight moon. He had looked at it many a time before, but never with the same interest as now; and the ruined battlements,

the fallen roof, the broken windows, and mouldering sides, had all a new and weird interest for him. No one was visible far or near; and feeling that his horse was secure in the shadow of the wall, he entered, and walked lightly and rapidly along in the direction of the spiral staircase. With more haste, but the same precaution, he descended, and passed through the vaults to where he knew the loose flag-stone was. It was well he did know; for there was neither strain of music nor ray of light to guide him now; and his heart sank to zero as he thought he might raise the stone and discover nothing. His hand positively trembled with eagerness as he lifted it; and with unbounded delight, not to be described, looked down on the same titled assembly he had watched before. But there had been a change since—half the lights were extinguished, and the great vaulted room was comparatively in shadow—the music had entirely died away and all was solemnly silent. But what puzzled Sir Norman most of all was, the fact that there seemed to be a trial of acme sort going on.

A long table, covered with green velvet, and looking not unlike a modern billiard table, stood at the right of the queen's crimson throne; and behind it, perched in a high chair, and wearing a long, solemn, black robe, sat a small, thick personage, whose skin Sir Norman would have known on a bush. He glanced at the lower throne and found it as he expected, empty; and he saw at once that his little highness was not only prince consort, but also supreme judge in the kingdom. Two or three similar black-robed gentry, among whom was recognizable the noble duke who so narrowly escaped with his life under the swords of Sir Norman and Count L'Estrange. Before this solemn conclave stood a man who was evidently the prisoner under trial, and who wore the whitest and most frightened face Sir Norman thought he had ever beheld. The queen was lounging negligently back on her throne, paying very little attention to the solemn rites, occasionally gossiping with some of the snow-white sylphs beside her, and often yawning behind her pretty finger-tips, and evidently very much bored by it all.

The rest of the company were decorously seated in the crimson and gilded arm-chairs, some listening with interest to what was going on, others holding whispered tete-a-tetes, and all very still and respectful.

Sir Norman's interest was aroused to the highest pitch; he imprudently leaned forward too far, in order to hear and see, and lost his balance. He felt he was going, and tried to stop himself, but in vain; and seeing there was no help for it, he made a sudden spring, and landed right in the midst of the assembly.

CHAPTER XI. THE EXECUTION.

In an instant all was confusion. Everybody sprang to their feet—ladies shrieked in chorus, gentlemen swore and drew their swords, and looked to see if they might not expect a whole army to drop from the sky upon them, as they stood. No other battalion, however, followed this forlorn hope; and seeing it, the gentlemen took heart of grace and closed around the unceremonious intruder. The queen had sprung from her royal seat, and stood with her bright lips parted, and her brighter eyes dilating in speechless wonder. The bench, with the judge at their head, had followed her example, and stood staring with all their might, looking, truth to tell, as much startled by the sudden apparition as the fair sex. The said fair sex were still firing off little volleys of screams in chorus, and clinging desperately to their cavaliers; and everything, in a word, was in most admired disorder.

Tam O'Shanter's cry, “Weel done, Cutty sark!” could not have produced half such a commotion among his “hellish legion” as the emphatic debut of Sir Norman Kingsley among these human revelers. The only one who seemed rather to enjoy it than otherwise was the prisoner, who was quietly and quickly making off, when the malevolent and irrepressible dwarf espied him, and the one shock acting as a counter-irritant to the other, he bounced fleetly over the table, and grabbed him in his crab-like claws.

This brisk and laudable instance of self-command had a wonderful and inspiriting effect on the rest; and as he replaced the pale and palsied prisoner in his former position, giving him a vindictive shake and vicious kick with his royal boots as he did so, everybody began to feel themselves again. The ladies stopped screaming, the gentlemen ceased swearing, and more than one exclamation of astonishment followed the cries of terror.

“Sir Norman Kingsley! Sir Norman Kingsley!” rang from lip to lip of those who recognized him; and all drew closer, and looked at him as if they really could not make up their mind to believe their eyes. As for Sir Norman himself, that gentleman was destined literally, if not metaphorically, to fall on his legs that night, and had alighted on the crimson velvet-carpet, cat-like, on his feet. In reference to his feelings—his first was one of frantic disapproval of going down; his second, one of intense astonishment of finding himself there with unbroken bones; his third, a disagreeable conviction that he had about put his foot in it,

and was in an excessively bad fix; and last, but not least, a firm and rooted determination to make the beet of a bad bargain, and never say die.

His first act was to take off his plumed hat, and make a profound obeisance to her majesty the queen, who was altogether too much surprised to make the return politeness demanded, and merely stared at him with her great, beautiful, brilliant eyes, as if she would never have done.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” said Sir Norman, turning gracefully to the company; “I beg ten thousand pardons for this unwarrantable intrusion, and promise you, upon my honor, never to do it again. I beg to assure you that my coming here was altogether involuntary on my part, and forced by circumstances over which I had no control; and I entreat you will not mind me in the least, but go on with the proceeding, just as you did before. Should you feel my presence here any restraint, I am quite ready and willing to take my departure at any moment; and as I before insinuated, will promise, on the honor of a gentleman and a knight, never again to take the liberty of tumbling through the ceiling down on your heads.”

This reference to the ceiling seemed to explain the whole mystery; and everybody looked up at the corner whence he came from, and saw the flag that had been removed. As to his speech, everybody had listened to it with the greatest of attention; and sundry of the ladies, convinced by this time that he was flesh and blood, and no ghost, favored the handsome young knight with divers glances, not at all displeased or unadmiring. The queen sank back into her seat, keeping him still transfixed with her darkly-splendid eyes; and whether she admired or otherwise, no one could tell from her still, calm face. The prince consort's feelings—for such there could be no doubt he was—were involved in no such mystery; and he broke out into a hyena-like scream of laughter, as he recognized, upon a second look, his young friend of the Golden Crown.

“So you have come, have you?” he cried, thrusting his unlovely visage over the table, till it almost touched sir Norman's. “You have come, have you, after all I said?”

“Yes, sir I have come!” said Sir Norman, with a polite bow.

“Perhaps you don't know me, my dear young sir—your little friend, you know, of the Golden Crown.”

“Oh, I perfectly recognize you! My little friend,” said Sir Norman, with bland suavity, and unconsciously quoting Leoline, “once seen in not easy to be-forgotten.”

Upon this, his highness net up such another screech of mirth that it quite woke

an echo through the room; and all Sir Norman's friends looked grave; for when his highness laughed, it was a very bad sign.

“My little friend will hurt himself,” remarked Sir Norman, with an air of solicitude, “if he indulges in his exuberant and gleeful spirits to such an extent. Let me recommend you, as a well-wisher, to sit down and compose yourself.”

Instead of complying, however, the prince, who seemed blessed with a lively sense of the ludicrous, was so struck with the extreme funniness of the young man's speech, that he relaxed into another paroxysm of levity, shriller and more unearthly, if possible, than any preceding one, and which left him so exhausted, that he was forced to sink into his chair and into silence through sheer fatigue. Seizing this, the first opportunity, Miranda, with a glance of displeased dignity at Caliban, immediately struck in:

“Who are you, sir, and by what right do you dare to come here?”

Her tone was neither very sweet nor suave; but it was much pleasanter to be cross-examined by the owner of such a pretty face than by the ugly little monster, for the moment gasping and extinguished; and Sir Norman turned to her with alacrity, and a bow.

“Madame, I am Sir Norman Kingsley, very much at your service; and I beg to assure you I did not come here, but fell here, through that hole, if you perceive, and very much against my will.”

“Equivocation will not serve you in this case, sir,” said the queen, with an austere dignity. “And, allow me to observe, it is just probable you would not have fallen through that hole in our royal ceiling if you had kept away from it. You raised that flag yourself—did you not?”

“Madam, I fear I must say yes!”

“And why did you do so?” demanded her majesty, with far more sharp asperity than Sir Norman dreamed could ever come from such beautiful lips.

“The rumor of Queen Miranda's charms has gone forth; and I fear I must own that rumor drew me hither,” responded Sir Norman, inventing a polite little work of fiction for the occasion; “and, let me add, that I came to find that rumor had under-rated instead of exaggerated her majesty's said charms.”

Here Sir Norman, whose spine seemed in danger of becoming the shape of a rainbow, in excess of good breeding, made another genuflection before the queen, with his hand over the region of his heart. Miranda tried to look grave, and wear that expression of severe solemnity I am told queens and rich people always do; but, in spite of herself, a little pleased smile rippled over her face;

and, noticing it, and the bow and speech, the prince suddenly and sharply set up such another screech of laughter as no steamboat or locomotive, in the present age of steam, could begin to equal in ghastliness.

“Will your highness have the goodness to hold your tongue?” inquired the queen, with much the air and look of Mrs. Caudle, “and allow me to ask this stranger a few questions uninterrupted? Sir Norman Kingsley, how long have you been above there, listening and looking on?”

“Madame, I was not there five minutes when I suddenly, and to my great surprise, found myself here.”

“A lie!—a lie!” exclaimed the dwarf, furiously. “It is over two hours since I met you at the bar of the Golden Crown.”

“My dear little friend,” said Sir Norman, drawing his sword, and flourishing it within an inch of the royal nose, “just make that remark again, and my sword will cleave your pretty head, as the cimetar of Saladin clove the cushion of down! I earnestly assure you, madame, that I had but just knelt down to look, when I discovered to my dismay, that I was no longer there, but in your charming presence.”

“In that case, my lords and gentlemen,” said the queen, glancing blandly round the apartment, “he has witnessed nothing, and, therefore, merits but slight punishment.”

“Permit me, your majesty,” said the duke, who had read the roll of death, and who had been eyeing Sir Norman sharply for some time, “permit me one moment! This is the very individual who slew the Earl of Ashley, while his companion was doing for my Lord Craven. Sir Norman Kingsley,” said his grace, turning, with awful impressiveness to that young person, “do you know me?”

“Quite as well as I wish to,” answered Sir Norman, with a cool and rather contemptuous glance in his direction. “You look extremely like a certain highwayman, with a most villainous countenance, I encountered a few hours back, and whom I would have made mince most of if he had not been coward enough to fly. Probably you may be the name; you look fit for that, or anything else.”

“Cut him down!” “Dash his brains out!” “Run him through!” “Shoot him!” were a few of the mild and pleasant insinuations that went off on every side of him, like a fierce volley of pop-guns; and a score of bright blades flashed blue and threatening on every side; while the prince broke out into another shriek of laughter, that rang high over all.

Sir Norman drew his own sword, and stood on the defence, breathed one thought to Leoline, gave himself up for lost; but before quite doing so—to use a phrase not altogether as original as it might be—“determined to sell his life as dearly as possible.” Angry eyes and fierce faces were on every hand, and his dreams of matrimony and Leoline seemed about to terminate then and there, when luck came to his side, in the shape of her most gracious majesty the queen. Springing to her feet, she waved her sceptre, while her black eyes flashed as fiercely as the best of them, and her voice rang out like a trumpet-tone.

“Sheathe your swords, my lords, and back every man of you! Not one hair of his head shall fall without my permission; and the first who lays hands on him until that consent is given, shall die, if I have to shoot him myself! Sir Norman Kingsley, stand near, and fear not. At his peril, let one of them touch you!”

Sir Norman bent on one knee, and raised the gracious hand to his lips. At the fierce, ringing, imperious tone, all involuntarily fell back, as if they were accustomed to obey it; and the prince, who seemed to-night in an uncommonly facetious mood, laughed again, long and shrill.

“What are your majesty's commands?” asked the discomfited duke, rather sulkily. “Is this insulting interloper to go free?”

“That is no affair of yours, my lord duke!” answered the spirited voice of the queen. “Be good enough to finish Lord Gloucester's trial; and until then I will be responsible for the safekeeping of Sir Norman Kingsley.”

“And after that, he is to go free eh, your majesty?” said the dwarf, laughing to that extent that he ran the risk of rupturing an artery.

“After that, it shall be precisely as I please!” replied the ringing voice; while the black eyes flashed anything but loving glances upon him. “While I am queen here, I shall be obeyed; when I am queen no longer, you may do as you please! My lords” (turning her passionate, beautiful face to the hushed audience), “am I or am I not sovereign here!”

“Madame, you alone are our sovereign lady and queen!”

“Then, when I condescend to command, you shall obey! Do you, your highness, and you, lord duke, go on with the Earl of Gloucester's trial, and I will be the stranger's jailer.”

“She is right,” said the dwarf, his fierce little eyes gleaming with a malignant light; “let us do one thing before another; and after we have settled Gloucester here, we will attend to this man's case. Guards keep a sharp eye on your new prisoner. Ladies and gentlemen, be good enough to resume your seats. Now, your grace, continue the trial.”

“Where did we leave off?” inquired his grace, looking rather at a loss, and scowling vengeance dire at the handsome queen and her handsome protege, as he sank back in his chair of state.

“The earl was confessing his guilt, or about to do so. Pray, my lord,” said the dwarf, glaring upon the pallid prisoner, “were you not saying you had betrayed us to the king?”

A breathless silence followed the question—everybody seemed to hold his very breath to listen. Even the queen leaned forward and awaited the answer eagerly, and the many eyes that had been riveted on Sir Norman since his entrance, left him now for the first time and settled on the prisoner. A piteous spectacle that prisoner was—his face whiter than the snowy nymphs behind the throne, and so distorted with fear, fury, and guilt, that it looked scarcely human. Twice he opened his eyes to reply, and twice all sounds died away in a choking gasp.

“Do you hear his highness?” sharply inquired the lord high chancellor, reaching over the great seal, and giving the unhappy Earl of Gloucester a rap on the head with it, “Why do you not answer?”

“Pardon! Pardon!” exclaimed the earl, in a husky whisper. “Do not believe the tales they tell you of me. For Heaven's sake, spare my life!”

“Confess!” thundered the dwarf, striking the table with his clinched fist, until all the papers thereon jumped spasmodically into the air-“confess at once, or I shall run you through where you stand!”

The earl, with a perfect screech of terror, flung himself flat upon his face and hands before the queen, with such force, that Sir Norman expected to see his countenance make a hole in the floor.

“O madame! spare me! spare me! spare me! Have mercy on me as you hope for mercy yourself!”

She recoiled, and drew back her very garments from his touch, as if that touch was pollution, eyeing him the while with a glance frigid and pitiless as death.

“There is no mercy for traitors!” she coldly said. “Confess your guilt, and expect no pardon from me!”

“Lift him up!” shouted the dwarf, clawing the air with his hands, as if he could have clawed the heart out of his victim's body; “back with him to his place, guards, and see that he does not leave it again!”

Squirming, and writhing, and twisting himself in their grasp, in very uncomfortable and eel-like fashion, the earl was dragged back to his place, and

forcibly held there by two of the guards, while his face grew so ghastly and convulsed that Sir Norman turned away his head, and could not bear to look at it.

“Confess!” once more yelled the dwarf in a terrible voice, while his still more terrible eyes flashed sparks of fire—“confess, or by all that's sacred it shall be tortured out of you. Guards, bring me the thumb-screws, and let us see if they will not exercise the dumb devil by which our ghastly friend is possessed!”

“No, no, no!” shrieked the earl, while the foam flew from his lips. “I confess! I confess! I confess!”

“Good! And what do you confess?” said the duke blandly, leaning forward, while the dwarf fell back with a yell of laughter at the success of his ruse.

“I confess all—everything—anything! only spare my life!”

“Do you confess to having told Charles, King of England, the secrets of our kingdom and this place?” said the duke, sternly rapping down the petition with a roll of parchment.

The earl grew, if possible, a more ghastly white. “I do—I must! but oh! for the love of—”

“Never mind love,” cut in the inexorable duke, “it is a subject that has nothing whatever to do with the present case. Did you or did you not receive for the aforesaid information a large sum of money?”

“I did; but my lord, my lord, spare—”

“Which sum of money you have concealed,” continued the duke, with another frown and a sharp rap. “Now the question is, where have you concealed it?”

“I will tell you, with all my heart, only spare my life!”

“Tell us first, and we will think about your life afterward. Let me advise you as a friend, my lord, to tell at once, and truthfully,” said the duke, toying negligently with the thumb-screws.

“It is buried at the north corner of the old wall at the head of Bradshaw's grave. You shall have that and a thousandfold more if you'll only pardon—”

“Enough!” broke in the dwarf, with the look and tone of an exultant demon. “That is all we want! My lord duke, give me the death-warrant, and while her majesty signs it, I will pronounce his doom!”

The duke handed him a roll of parchment, which he glanced critically over, and handed to the queen for her autograph. That royal lady spread the vellum on her knee, took the pen and affixed her signature as coolly as if she were inditing a sonnet in an album. Then his highness, with a face that fairly scintillated with demoniac delight, stood up and fixed his eyes on the ghastly prisoner, and spoke

in a voice that reverberated like the tolling of a death-bell through the room.

“My Lord of Gloucester, you have been tried by a council of your fellow-peers, presided over by her royal self, and found guilty of high treason. Your sentence is that you be taken hence, immediately, to the block, and there be beheaded, in punishment of your crime.”

His highness wound up this somewhat solemn speech, rather inconsistently, bursting out into one of his shrillest peals of laughter; and the miserable Earl of Gloucester, with a gasping, unearthly cry, fell back in the arms of the attendants. Dead and oppressive silence reigned; and Sir Norman, who half believed all along the whole thing was a farce, began to feel an uncomfortable sense of chill creeping over him, and to think that, though practical jokes were excellent things in their way, there was yet a possibility of carrying them a little too far. The disagreeable silence was first broken by the dwarf, who, after gloating for a moment over his victim's convulsive spasms, sprang nimbly from his chair of dignity and held out his arm for the queen. The queen arose, which seemed to be a sign for everybody else to do the same, and all began forming themselves in a sort of line of march.

“What is to be done with this other prisoner, your highness?” inquired the duke, making a poke with his forefinger at Sir Norman. “Is he to stay here, or is he to accompany us?”

His highness turned round, and putting his face close up to Sir Norman's favored him with a malignant grin.

“You'd like to come, wouldn't you, my dear young friend?”

“Really,” said Sir Norman, drawing back and returning the dwarf's stare with compound interest, “that depends altogether on the nature of the entertainment; but, at the same time, I'm much obliged to you for consulting my inclinations.”

This reply nearly overset his highness's gravity once more, but he checked his mirth after the first irresistible squeal; and finding the company were all arranged in the order of going, and awaiting his sovereign pleasure, he turned.

“Let him come,” he said, with his countenance still distorted by inward merriment; “It will do him good to see how we punish offenders here, and teach him what he is to expect himself. Is your majesty ready?”

“My majesty has been ready and waiting for the last five minutes,” replied the lady, over-looking his proffered hand with grand disdain, and stepping lightly down from her throne.

Her rising was the signal for the unseen band to strike up a grand triumphant

“Io paean,” though, had the “Rogue's March” been a popular melody in those times, it would have suited the procession much more admirably. The queen and the dwarf went first, and a vivid contrast they were—she so young, so beautiful, so proud, so disdainfully cold; he so ugly, so stunted, so deformed, so fiendish. After them went the band of sylphs in white, then the chancellor, archbishop, and embassadors; next the whole court of ladies and gentlemen; and after them Sir Norman, in the custody of two of the soldiers. The condemned earl came last, or rather allowed himself to be dragged by his four guards; for he seemed to have become perfectly palsied and dumb with fear. Keeping time to the triumphant march, and preserving dismal silence, the procession wound its way along the room and through a great archway heretofore hidden by the tapestry now lifted lightly by the nymphs. A long stone passage, carpeted with crimson and gold, and brilliantly illuminated like the grand saloon they had left, was thus revealed, and three similar archways appeared at the extremity, one to the right and left, and one directly before them. The procession passed through the one to the left, and Sir Norman started in dismay to find himself in the most gloomy apartment he had ever beheld in his life. It was all covered with black—walls, ceiling, and floor were draped in black, and reminded him forcibly of La Masque's chamber of horrors, only this was more repellant. It was lighted, or rather the gloom was troubled, by a few spectral tapers of black wax in ebony candlesticks, that seemed absolutely to turn black, and make the horrible place more horrible. There was no furniture—neither couch, chair, nor table nothing but a sort of stage at the upper end of the room, with something that looked like a seat upon it, and both were shrouded with the same dismal drapery. But it was no seat; for everybody stood, arranging themselves silently and noiselessly around the walls, with the queen and the dwarf at their head, and near this elevation stood a tall, black statue, wearing a mask, and leaning on a bright, dreadful, glittering axe. The music changed to an unearthly dirge, so weird and blood-curdling, that Sir Norman could have put his hands over his ear-drums to shut out the ghastly sound. The dismal room, the voiceless spectators, the black spectre with the glittering axe, the fearful music, struck a chill to his inmost heart.

Could it be possible they were really going to murder the unhappy wretch? and could all those beautiful ladies—could that surpassingly beautiful queen, stand there serenely unmoved, to witness such a crime? While he yet looked round in horror, the doomed man, already apparently almost dead with fear, was dragged forward by his guards. Paralyzed as he was, at sight of the stage which he knew to be the scaffold, he uttered shriek after shriek of frenzied despair, and struggled like a madman to get free. But as well might Laocoon have struggled

in the folds of the serpent; they pulled him on, bound him hand and foot, and held his head forcibly down on the block.

The black spectre moved—the dwarf made a signal—the glittering axe was raised—fell—a scream was cut in two—a bright jet of blood spouted up in the soldiers faces, blinding them; the axe fell again, and the Earl of Gloucester was minus that useful and ornamental appendage, a head.

It was all over so quickly, that Sir Norman could scarcely believe his horrified senses, until the deed was done. The executioner threw a black cloth over the bleeding trunk, and held up the grizzly head by the hair; and Sir Norman could have sworn the features moved, and the dead eyes rolled round the room.

“Behold!” cried the executioner, striking the convulsed face with the palm of his open hand, “the fate of all traitors!”

“And of all spies!” exclaimed the dwarf, glaring with his fiendish eyes upon the appalled Sir Norman. “Keep your axe sharp and bright, Mr. Executioner, for before morning dawns there is another gentleman here to be made shorter by a head.”

CHAPTER XII. DOOM.

“Let us go,” said the queen, glancing at the revolting sight, and turning away with a shudder of repulsion. “Faugh! The sight of blood has made me sick.”

“And taken away my appetite for supper,” added a youthful and elegant beauty beside her. “My Lord Gloucester was hideous enough when living, but, mon Dieu! he is ten times more so when dead!”

“Your ladyship will not have the same story to tell of yonder stranger, when he shares the same fate in an hour or two!” said the dwarf, with a malicious grin; “for I heard you remarking upon his extreme beauty when he first appeared.”

The lady laughed and bowed, and turned her bright eyes upon Sir Norman.

“True! It is almost a pity to cut such a handsome head off—is it not? I wish I had a voice in your highness's council, and I know what I should do.”

“What, Lady Mountjoy?”

“Entreat him to swear fealty, and become one of us; and—”

“And a bridegroom for your ladyship?” suggested the queen, with a curling lip. “I think if Sir Norman Kingsley knew Lady Mountjoy as well as I do, he would even prefer the block to such a fate!”

Lady Mountjoy's brilliant eyes shone like two angry meteors; but she merely bowed and laughed; and the laugh was echoed by the dwarf in his shrillest falsetto.

“Does your highness intend remaining here all night?” demanded the queen, rather fiercely. “If not, the sooner we leave this ghastly place the better. The play is over, and supper is waiting.”

With which the royal virago made an imperious motion for her attendant sprites in gossamer white to precede her, and turned with her accustomed stately step to follow. The music immediately changed from its doleful dirge to a spirited measure, and the whole company flocked after her, back to the great room of state. There they all paused, hovering in uncertainty around the room, while the queen, holding her purple train up lightly in one hand, stood at the foot of the throne, glancing at them with her cold, haughty and beautiful eyes. In their wandering, those same darkly-splendid eyes glanced and lighted on Sir Norman, who, in a state of seeming stupor at the horrible scene he had just witnessed, stood near the green table, and they sent a thrill through him with their

wonderful resemblance to Leoline's. So vividly alike were they, that he half doubted for a moment whether she and Leoline were not really one; but no—Leoline never could have had the cold, cruel heart to stand and witness such a horrible sight. Miranda's dark, piercing glance fell as haughtily and disdainfully on him as it had on the rest; and his heart sank as he thought that whatever sympathy she had felt for him was entirely gone. It might have been a whim, a woman's caprice, a spirit of contradiction, that had induced her to defend him at first. Whatever it was, and it mattered not now, it had completely vanished. No face of marble could have been colder, or stonier, or harder, than hers, as she looked at him out of the depths of her great dark eyes; and with that look, his last lingering hope of life vanished.

“And now for the next trial!” exclaimed the dwarf, briskly breaking in upon his drab-colored meditations, and bustling past. “We will get it over at once, and have done with it!”

“You will do no such thing!” said the imperious voice of the queenly shrew. “We will have neither trials nor anything else until after supper, which has already been delayed four full minutes. My lord chamberlain, have the goodness to step in and see that all is in order.”

One of the gilded and decorated gentlemen whom sir Norman had mistaken for ambassadors stepped off, in obedience, through another opening in the tapestry—which seemed to be as extensively undermined with such apertures as a cabman's coat with capes—and, while he was gone, the queen stood drawn up to her full height, with her scornful face looking down on the dwarf. That small man knit up his very plain face into a bristle of the sourest kinks, and frowned sulky disapproval at an order which he either would not, or dared not, countermand. Probably the latter had most to do with it, as everybody looked hungry and mutinous, and a great deal more eager for their supper than the life of Sir Norman Kingsley.

“Your majesty, the royal banquet is waiting,” insinuated the lord high chamberlain, returning, and bending over until his face and his shoe buckles almost touched.

“And what is to be done with this prisoner, while we are eating it?” growled the dwarf, looking drawn swords at his liege lady.

“He can remain here under care of the guards, can he not?” she retorted sharply. “Or, if you are afraid they are not equal to taking care of him, you had better stay and watch him yourself.”

With which answer, her majesty sailed majestically away, leaving the

gentleman addressed to follow or not, as he pleased. It pleased him to do so, on the whole; and he went after her, growling anathemas between his royal teeth, and evidently in the same state of mind that induces gentlemen in private life to take sticks to their aggravating spouses, under similar circumstances. However, it might not be just the thing, perhaps, for kings and queens to take broom-sticks to settle their little differences of opinion, like common Christians; and so the prince peaceably followed her, and entered the salle a manger with the rest, and Sir Norman and his keepers were left in the hall of state, monarchs of all they surveyed. Notwithstanding he knew his hours were numbered, the young knight could not avoid feeling curious, and the tapestry having been drawn aside, he looked through the arch with a good deal of interest.

The apartment was smaller than the one in which he stood—though still very large, and instead of being all crimson and gold, was glancing and glittering with blue and silver. These azure hangings were of satin, instead of velvet, and looked quite light and cool, compared to the hot, glowing place where he was. The ceiling was spangled over with silver stars, with the royal arms quartered in the middle, and the chairs were of white, polished wood, gleaming like ivory, and cushioned with blue satin. The table was of immense length, as it had need to be, and flashed and sparkled in the wax lights with heaps of gold and silver plate, cut-glass, and precious porcelain. Golden and crimson wines shone in the carved decanters; great silver baskets of fruit were strewn about, with piles of cakes and confectionery—not to speak of more solid substantials, wherein the heart of every true Englishman delighteth. The queen sat in a great, raised chair at the head, and helped herself without paying much attention to anybody, and the remainder were ranged down its length, according to their rank—which, as they were all pretty much dukes and duchesses, was about equal.

The spirits of the company—depressed for a moment by the unpleasant little circumstance of seeing one of their number beheaded—seemed to revive under the spirituous influence of sherry, sack, and burgundy; and soon they were laughing, and chatting, and hobnobbing, as animatedly as any dinner-party Sir Norman had ever seen. The musicians, too, appeared to be in high feather, and the merriest music of the day assisted the noble banqueters' digestion.

Under ordinary circumstances, it was rather a tantalizing scene to stand aloof and contemplate; and so the guards very likely felt; but Sir Norman's thoughts were of that room in black, the headsman's axe, and Leoline. He felt he would never see her again—never see the sun rise that was to shine on their bridal; and he wondered what she would think of him, and if she was destined to fall into the hands of Lord Rochester or Count L'Estrange. As a general thing, our young

friend was not given to melancholy moralizing, but in the present case, with the headsman's axe poised like the sword of Damocles above him by a single hair, he may be pardoned for reflecting that this world is all a fleeting show, and that he had got himself into a scrape, to which the plague was a trifle. And yet, with nervous impatience, he wished the dinner and his trial were over, his fate sealed, and his life ended at once, since it was to be ended soon. For the fulfillment of the first wish, he had not long to wait; the feast, though gay and grand, was of the briefest, and they could have scarcely been half an hour gone when they were all back.

Everybody seemed in better humor, too, after the refection, but the queen and the dwarf—the former looked colder, and harder, and more like a Labrador iceberg tricked out in purple velvet, than ever, and his highness was grinning from ear to ear—which was the very worst possible sign. Not even her majesty could make the slightest excuse for delaying the trial now; and, indeed, that eccentric lady seemed to have no wish to do so, had she the power, but seated herself in silent disdain of them all, and dropping her long lashes over her dark eyes, seemed to forget there was anybody in existence but herself.

His highness and his nobles took their stations of authority behind the green table, and summoned the guards to lead the prisoner up before them, which was done; while the rest of the company were fluttering down into their seats, and evidently about to pay the greatest attention. The cases in this midnight court seemed to be conducted on a decidedly original plan, and with an easy rapidity that would have electrified any other court, ancient or modern. Sir Norman took his stand, and eyed his judges with a look half contemptuous, half defiant; and the proceedings commenced by the dwarf a leaning forward and breaking into a roar of laughter, right in his face.

“My little friend I warned you before not to be so facetious,” said Sir Norman, regarding him quietly; “a rush of mirth to the brain will certainly be the death of you one of these day.”

“No levity, young man!” interposed the lord chancellor, rebukingly; “remember, you are addressing His Royal Highness Prince Caliban, Spouse, and Consort of Her Most Gracious Majesty, Miranda!”

“Indeed! Then all I have to say, is, that her majesty has very bad taste in the selection of a husband, unless, indeed, her wish was to marry the ugliest man in the world, as she herself is the most beautiful of women!”

Her majesty took not the slightest notice of this compliment, not so much as a flatter of her drooping eye-lashes betrayed that she even heard it, but his

highness laughed until he was perfectly hoarse.

“Silence!” shouted the duke, shocked and indignant at this glaring disrespect, “and answer truthfully the questions put to you. Your name, you say, is Sir Norman Kingsley?”

“Yes. Has your grace any objection to it?”

His grace waved down the interruption with a dignified wave of the hand, and went on with severe judicial dignity.

“You are the same who shot Lord Ashley between this and the city, some hours ago?”

“I had the pleasure of shooting a highwayman there, and my only regret is, I did not perform the same good office by his companion, in the person of your noble self, before you turned and fled.”

A slight titter ran round the room, and the duke turned crimson.

“These remarks are impertinent, and not to the purpose. You are the murderer of Lord Ashley, let that suffice. Probably you were on your way hither when you did the deed?”

“He was,” said the dwarf, vindictively. “I met him at the Golden Crown but a short time after.”

“Very well, that is another point settled, and either of them is strong enough to seal his death warrant. You came here as a spy, to see and hear and report—probably you were sent by King Charles?”

“Probably—just think as you please about it!” said Sir Norman, who knew his case was as desperate as it could be, and was quite reckless what he answered.

“You admit that you are a spy, then?”

“No such thing. I have owned nothing. As I told you before, you are welcome to put what construction you please on my actions.”

“Sir Norman Kingsley, this is nonsensical equivocation! You own you came to hear and see?”

“Well!”

“Well, hearing and seeing constitute spying, do they not? Therefore, you are a spy.”

“I confess it looks like it. What next?”

“Need you ask What is the fate of all spies?”

“No matter what they are in other places, I am pretty certain what they are here!”

“And that is?”

“A room in black, and a chop with an axe—the Earl of Gloucester's fate, in a word!”

“You have said it! Have you any reason why such a sentence should not be pronounced on you?”

“None; pronounce it as soon as you like.”

“With the greatest pleasure!” said the duke, who had been scrawling on another ominous roll of vellum, and now passed it to the dwarf. “I never knew anyone it gave me more delight to condemn. Will your highness pass that to her majesty for signature, and pronounce his sentence.”

His highness, with a grin of most exquisite delight, did as directed; and Sir Norman looked steadfastly at the queen as she received it. One of the gauzy nymphs presented it to her, kneeling, and she took it with a look half bored, half impatient, and lightly scrawled her autograph. The long, dark lashes did not lift; no change passed over the calm, cold face, as icily placid as a frozen lake in the moonlight—evidently the life or death of the stranger was less than nothing to her. To him she, too, was as nothing, or nearly so; but yet there was a sharp jarring pain at his heart, as he saw that fair hand, that had saved him once, so coolly sign his death warrant now. But there was little time left for to watch her; for, as she pushed it impatiently away, and relapsed into her former proud listlessness, the dwarf got up with one of his death's-head grins, and began:

“Sir Norman Kingsley, you have been tried and convicted as a spy, and the paid-hireling of the vindictive and narrow-minded Charles; and the sentence of this court, over which I have the honor to preside, is, that you be taken hence immediately to the place of execution, and there lose your head by the axe!”

“And a mighty small loss it will be!” remarked the duke to himself, in a sort of parenthesis, as the dwarf concluded his pleasant observation by thrusting himself forward across the table, after his rather discomposing fashion, and breaking out into one of his diabolical laughter-claps.

The queen, who had been sitting passive, and looking as if she were in spirit a thousand miles away, now started up with sharp suddenness, and favored his highness with one of her fieriest fiery glances.

“Will your highness just permit somebody else to have a voice in that matter? How many more trials are to come on tonight?”

“Only one,” replied the duke, glancing over a little roll which he held; “Lady Castlemaine's, for poisoning the Duchess of Sutherland.”

“And what is my Lady Castlemaine's fate to be?”

“The same as our friend's here, in all probability,” nodding easily, not to say playfully, at Sir Norman.

“And how long will her trial last?”

“Half an hour, or thereabouts. There are some secrets in the matter that have to be investigated, and which will require some time.”

“Then let all the trials be over first, and all the beheadings take place together. We don't choose to take the trouble of traveling to the Black Chamber just to see his head chopped off, and then have the same journey to undergo half an hour after, for a similar purpose. Call Lady Castlemaine, and let this prisoner be taken to one of the dungeons, and there remain until the time for execution. Guards, do you hear? Take him away!”

The dwarf's face grew black as a thunder-cloud, and he jumped to his feet and confronted the queen with a look so intensely ugly that no other earthly face could have assumed it. But that lady merely met it with one of cold disdain and aversion, and, keeping her dark bright eyes fixed chillingly upon him, waved her white hand, in her imperious way, to the guards. Those warlike gentlemen knew better than to disobey her most gracious majesty when she happened to be, like Mrs. Joe Gargary, on the “rampage,” which, if her flashing eye and a certain expression about her handsome mouth spoke the truth, must have been twenty hours out of the twenty-four. As the soldiers approached to lead him away, Sir Norman tried to catch her eye; but in vain, for she kept those brilliant optics most unwinkingly fixed on the dwarf's face.

“Call Lady Castlemaine,” commanded the duke, as Sir Norman with his guards passed through the doorway leading to the Black Chamber. “Your highness, I presume, is ready to attend to her case.”

“Before I attend to hers or any one else's case,” said the dwarf, hopping over the table like an overgrown toad, “I will first see that this guest of ours is properly taken care, of, and does not leave us without the ceremony of saying good-bye.”

With which, he seized one of the wax candles, and trotted, with rather unprincely haste, after Sir Norman and his conductors. The young knight had been led down the same long passage he had walked through before; but instead of entering the chamber of horrors, they passed through the centre arch, and found themselves in another long, vaulted corridor, dimly lit by the glow of the outer one. It was as cold and dismal a place, Sir Norman thought, as he had ever seen; and it had an odor damp and earthy, and of the grave. It had two or three

great, ponderous doors on either side, fastened with huge iron bolts; and before one of these his conductors paused. Just as they did so, the glimmer of the dwarf's taper pierced the gloom, and the next moment, smiling from ear to ear, he was by their side.

“Down with the bars!” he cried. “This is the one for him—the strongest and safest of them all. Now, my dashing courtier, you will see how tenderly your little friend provides for his favorites!”

If Sir Norman made any reply, it was drowned in the rattle and clank of the massive bars, and is hopelessly lost to posterity. The huge door swung back; but nothing was visible but a sort of black velvet pall, and effluvia much stronger than sweet. Involuntarily he recoiled as one of the guards made a motion for him to enter.

“I Shove him in! shove him in!” shrieked the dwarf, who was getting so excited with glee that he was dancing about in a sort of jig of delight. “In with him—in with him! If he won't go peaceably, kick him in head-foremost!”

“I would strongly advise them not to try it,” said Sir Norman, as he stepped into the blackness, “if they have any regard for their health! It does not make much difference after all, my little friend, whether I spend the next half-hour in the inky blackness of this place or the blood-red grandeur of your royal court. My little friend, until we meet again, permit me to say, au revoir.”

The dwarf laughed in his pleasant way, and pushed the candle cautiously inside the door.

“Good-by for a little while, my dear young sir, and while the headsmen is sharpening his axe, I'll leave you to think about your little friend. Lest you should lack amusement, I'll leave you a light to contemplate your apartment; and for fear you may get lonesome, these two gentlemen will stand outside your door, with their swords drawn, till I come back. Good-by, my dear young sir—good-bye!”

The dungeon-door swung to with a tremendous bang Sir Norman was barred in his prison to await his doom and the dwarf was skipping along the passage with sprightliness, laughing as he went.

CHAPTER XIII. ESCAPED.

Probably not one of you; my dear friends, who glance graciously over this, was ever shut up in a dungeon under expectation of bearing the unpleasant operation of decapitation within half an hour. It never happened to myself, either, that I can recollect; so, of course, you or I personally can form no idea what the sensation may be like; but in this particular case, tradition saith Sir Norman Kingsley's state of mind was decidedly depressed. As the door shut violently, he leaned against it, and listened to his jailers place the great bars into their sockets, and felt he was shut in, in the dreariest, darkest, dismalest, disagreeablest place that it had ever been his misfortune to enter. He thought of Leoline, and reflected that in all probability she was sleeping the sleep of the just—perhaps dreaming of him, and little knowing that his head was to be cut off in half an hour.

In course of time morning would come—it was not likely the ordinary course of nature would be cut off because he was; and Leoline would get up and dress herself, and looking a thousand times prettier than ever, stand at the window and wait for him. Ah! she might wait—much good would it do her; about that time he would probably be—where? It was a rather uncomfortable question, but easily answered, and depressed him to a very desponding degree indeed.

He thought of Ormiston and La Masque—no doubt they were billing and cooing in most approved fashion just then, and never thinking of him; though, but for La Masque and his own folly, he might have been half married by this time. He thought of Count L'Estrange and Master Hubert, and become firmly convinced, if one did not find Leoline the other would; and each being equally bad, it was about a toss up in agony which got her.

He thought of Queen Miranda, and of the adage, “put no trust in princes,” and sighed deeply as he reflected what a bad sign of human nature it was—more particularly such handsome human nature—that she could, figuratively speaking, pat him on the back one moment, and kick him to the scaffold the next. He thought, dejectedly, what a fool he was ever to have come back; or even having come back, not to have taken greater pains to stay up aloft, instead of pitching abruptly head-foremost into such a select company without an invitation. He thought, too, what a cold, damp, unwholesome chamber they had lodged him in, and how apt he would be to have a bad attack of ague and miasmatic fever, if they would only let him live long enough to enjoy those blessings. And this

having brought him to the end of his melancholy meditation, he began to reflect how he could best amuse himself in the interim, before quitting this vale of tears. The candle was still blinking feebly on the floor, shedding tears of wax in its feeble prostration, and it suddenly reminded him of the dwarf's advice to examine his dark bower of repose. So he picked it up and snuffed it with his fingers, and held it aloof, much as Robinson Crusoe held the brand in the dark cavern with the dead goat.

In the velvet pall of blackness before alluded to, its small, wan ray pierced but a few inches, and only made the darkness visible. But Sir Norman groped his way to the wall, which he found to be all over green and noisome slime, and broken out into a cold, clammy perspiration, as though it were at its last gasp. By the aid of his friendly light, for which he was really much obliged—a fact which, had his little friend known, he would not have left it—he managed to make the circuit of his prison, which he found rather spacious, and by no means uninhabited; for the walls and floor were covered with fat, black beetles, whole families of which interesting specimens of the insect-world he crunched remorselessly under foot, and massacred at every step; and great, depraved-looking rats, with flashing eyes and sinister-teeth, who made frantic dives and rushes at him, and bit at his jack-boots with fierce, fury. These small quadrupeds reminded him forcibly of the dwarf, especially in the region of the eyes and the general expression of countenance; and he began to reflect that if the dwarf's soul (supposing him to possess such an article as that, which seemed open to debate) passed after death into the body of any other animal, it would certainly be into that of a rat.

He had just come to this conclusion, and was applying the flame of the candle to the nose of an inquisitive beetle, when it struck him he heard voices in altercation outside his door. One, clear, ringing, and imperious, yet withal feminine, was certainly not heard for the first time; and the subdued and respectful voices that answered, were those of his guards.

After a moment, he heard the sound of the withdrawing bolts, and his heart beat fast. Surely, his half-hour had not already expired; and if it had, would she be the person to conduct him to death? The door opened; a puff of wind extinguished his candle, but not until he had caught the glimmer of jewels, the shining of gold, and the flutter of long, black hair; and then some one came in. The door was closed; the bolts shot back!—and he was alone with Miranda, the queen.

There was no trouble about recognising her, for she carried in her hand a small lamp, which she held up between them, that its rays might fall directly on both

faces. Each was rather white, perhaps, and one heart was going faster than it had ever gone before, and that one was decidedly not the queen's. She was dressed exactly as he had seen her, in purple and ermine, in jewels and gold; and strangely out of place she looked there, in her splendid dress and splendid beauty, among the black beetles and rats. Her face might have been a dead, blank wall, or cut out of cold, white stone, for all it expressed; and as she lightly held up her rich robes in one hand, and in the other bore the light, the dark, shining eyes were fixed on his face, and were as barren of interest, eagerness, compassion, tenderness, or any other feeling, as the shining, black glass ones of a wax doll. So they stood looking at each other for some ten seconds or so, and then, still looking full at him, Miranda spoke, and her voice was as clear and emotionless as her eyes,

"Well, Sir Norman Kingsley, I have come to see you before you die."

"Madame," he stammered, scarcely knowing what he said, "you are kind."

"Am I? Perhaps you forget I signed your death-warrant."

"Probably it would have been at the risk of your own life to refuse?"

"Nothing of the kind! Not one of them would hurt a hair of my head if I refused to sign fifty death-warrants! Now, am I kind?"

"Very likely it would have amounted to the same thing in the end—they would kill me whether you signed it or not; so what does it matter?"

"You are mistaken! They would not kill you; at least, not tonight, if I had not signed it. They would have let you live until their next meeting, which will be this night week; and I would have incurred neither risk nor danger by refusing."

Sir Norman glanced round the dungeon and shrugged his shoulders.

"I do not know that that prospect is much more inviting than the present one. Even death is preferable to a week's imprisonment in a place like this."

"But in the meantime you might have escaped."

"Madame, look at this stone floor, that stone roof, these solid walls, that barred and massive door; reflect that I am some forty feet under ground—cannot perform impossibilities, and then ask yourself how?"

"Sir Norman, have you ever heard of good fairies visiting brave knights and setting them free?"

Sir Norman smiled.

"I am afraid the good fairies and brave knights went the way of all flesh with King Arthur's round table; and even if they were in existence, none of them would take the trouble to limp down so far to save such an unlucky dog as I."

“Then you forgive me for what I have done?”

“Your majesty, I have nothing to forgive.”

“Bah!” she said, scornfully. “Do not mock me here. My majesty, forsooth! you have but fifteen minutes to live in this world, Sir Norman; and if you have no better way of spending them, I will tell you a strange story—my own, and all about this place.”

“Madame, there is nothing in the world I would like so much to hear.”

“You shall hear it, then, and it may beguile the last slow moments of time before you go out into eternity.”

She set her lamp down on the floor among the rats and beetles, and stood watching the small, red flame a moment with a gloomy, downcast eye; and Sir Norman, gazing on the beautiful darkening face, so like and yet so unlike Leoline, stood eagerly awaiting what was to come.

Meantime, the half-hour sped. In the crimson court the last trial was over, and Lady Castlemaine, a slender little beauty of eighteen stood condemned to die.

“Now for our other prisoner!” exclaimed the dwarf with sprightly animation; “and while I go to the cell, you, fair ladies, and you my lord, will seek the black chamber and await our coming there.”

Ordering one of his attendants to precede him with a light, the dwarf skipped jauntily away, to gloat over his victim. He reached the dungeon door, which the guards, with some trepidation in their countenance, as they thought of what his highness would say when he found her majesty locked in with the prisoner, threw open.

“Come forth, Sir Norman Kingsley!” shouted the dwarf, rushing in. “Come forth and meet your doom!”

But no Sir Norman Kingsley obeyed the pleasant invitation, and a dull echo from the darkness alone answered him. There was a lamp burning on the floor, and near it lay a form, shining and specked with white in the gloom. He made for it between fear and fury, but there was something red and slippery on the ground, in which his foot slipped, and he fell. Simultaneously there was a wild cry from the two guards and the attendant, that was echoed by a perfect screech of rage from the dwarf, as on looking down he beheld Queen Miranda lying on the floor in the pool of blood, and apparently quite dead, and Sir Norman Kingsley gone.

CHAPTER XIV. IN THE DUNGEON.

The interim between Miranda setting down her lamp on the dungeon floor among the rats and the beetles, and the dwarf's finding her bleeding and senseless, was not more than twenty minutes, but a great deal may be done in twenty minutes judiciously expended, and most decidedly it was so in the present case. Both rats and beetles paused to contemplate the flickering lamp, and Miranda paused to contemplate them, and Sir Norman paused to contemplate her, for an instant or so in silence. Her marvelous resemblance to Leoline, in all but one thing, struck him more and more—there was the same beautiful transparent colorless complexion, the same light, straight, graceful figure, the same small oval delicate features; the same profuse waves of shining dark hair, the same large, dark, brilliant eyes; the same, little, rosy pretty mouth, like one of Correggio's smiling angels. The one thing wanting was expression—in Leoline's face there was a kind of childlike simplicity; a look half shy, half fearless, half solemn in her wonderful eyes; but in this, her prototype, there was nothing shy or solemn; all was cold, hard, and glittering, and the brooding eyes were full of a dull, dusky fire. She looked as hard and cold and bitter, as she was beautiful; and Sir Norman began to perplex himself inwardly as to what had brought her here. Surely not sympathy, for nothing wearing that face of stone, could even know the meaning of such a word. While he looked at her, half wonderingly, half pityingly, half tenderly—a queer word that last, but the feeling was caused by her resemblance to Leoline—she had been moodily watching an old gray rat, the patriarch of his tribe, who was making toward her in short runs, stopping between each one to stare at her, out of his unpleasantly bright eyes. Suddenly, Miranda shut her teeth, clenched her hands, and with a sort of fierce suppressed ejaculation, lifted her shining foot and planted it full on the rat's head. So sudden, so fierce, and so strong, was the stamp, that the rat was crushed flat, and uttered a sharp and indignant squeal of expostulation, while Sir Norman looked at her, thinking she had lost her wits. Still she ground it down with a fiercer and stronger force every second; and with her eyes still fixed upon it, and blazing with reddish black flame, she said, in a sort of fiery hiss:

“Look at it! The ugly, loathsome thing! Did you ever see anything look more like him?”

There must have been some mysterious rapport between them, for he

understood at once to whom the solitary personal pronoun referred.

“Certainly, in the general expression of countenance there is rather a marked resemblance, especially in the region of the teeth and eyes.”

“Except that the rat's eyes are a thousand times handsomer,” she broke in, with a derisive laugh.

“But as to shape,” resumed Sir Norman, eyeing the excited and astonished little animal, still shrilly squealing, with the glance of a connoisseur, “I confess I do not see it! The rat is straight and shapely—which his highness, with all reverence be it said—is not, but rather the reverse, if you will not be offended at me for saying so.”

She broke into a short laugh that had a hard, metallic ring, and then her face darkened, blackened, and she ground the foot that crushed the rat fiercer, and with a sort of passionate vindictiveness, as if she had the head of the dwarf under her heel.

“I hate him! I hate him!” she said, through her clenched teeth and though her tone was scarcely above a whisper, it was so terrible in its fiery earnestness that Sir Norman thrilled with repulsion. “Yes, I hate him with all my heart and soul, and I wish to heaven I had him here, like this rat, to trample to death under my feet!”

Not knowing very well what reply to make to this strong and heartfelt speech, which rather shocked his notions of female propriety, Sir Norman stood silent, and looked reflectively after the rat, which, when she permitted it at last to go free, limped away with an ineffably sneaking and crest-fallen expression on his hitherto animated features. She watched it, too, with a gloomy eye, and when it crawled into the darkness and was gone, she looked up with a face so dark and moody that it was almost sullen.

“Yes, I hate him!” she repeated, with a fierce moodiness that was quite dreadful, “yes, I hate him! and I would kill him, like that rat, if I could! He has been the curse of my whole life; he has made life cursed to me; and his heart's blood shall be shed for it some day yet, I swear!”

With all her beauty there was something so horrible in the look she wore, that Sir Norman involuntarily recoiled from her. Her sharp eyes noticed it, and both grew red and fiery as two devouring flames.

“Ah! you, too, shrink from me, would you? You, too, recoil in horror! Ingrate! And I have come to save your life!”

“Madame, I recoil not from you, but from that which is tempting you to utter

words like these. I have no reason to love him of whom you speak—you, perhaps, have even less; but I would not have his blood, shed in murder, on my head, for ten thousand worlds! Pardon me, but you do not mean what you say."

"Do I not? That remains to be seen! I would not call it murder plunging a knife into the heart of a demon incarnate like that, and I would have done it long ago and he knows it, too, if I had the chance!"

"What has he done to you to make you do bitter against him?"

"Bitter! Oh, that word is poor and pitiful to express what I feel when his name is mentioned. Loathing and hatred come a little nearer the mark, but even they are weak to express the utter—the—" She stopped in a sort of white passion that choked her very words.

"They told me he was your husband," insinuated Sir Norman, unutterably repelled.

"Did they?" she said, with a cold sneer, "he is, too—at least as far as church and state can make him; but I am no more his wife at heart than I am Satan's. Truly of the two I should prefer the latter, for then I should be wedded to something grand—a fallen angel; as it is, I have the honor to be wife to a devil who never was an angel?"

At this shocking statement Sir Norman looked helplessly round, as if for relief; and Miranda, after a moment's silence, broke into another mirthless laugh.

"Of all the pictures of ugliness you ever saw or heard of, Sir Norman Kingsley, do tell me if there ever was one of them half so repulsive or disgusting as that thing?"

"Really," said Sir Norman, in a subdued tone, "he is not the most prepossessing little man in the world; but, madame, you do look and speak in a manner quite dreadful. Do let me prevail on you to calm yourself, and tell me your story, as you promised."

"Calm myself!" repeated the gentle lady, in a tone half snappish, half harsh, "do you think I am made of iron, to tell you my story and be calm? I hate him! I hate him! I would kill him if I could: and if you, Sir Norman, are half the man I take you to be, you will rid the world of the horrible monster before morning dawns!"

"My dear lady, you seem to forget that the case is reversed, and that he is going to rid the world of me," said Sir Norman, with a sigh.

"No, not if you do as I tell you; and when I have told you how much cause I have to abhor him, you will agree with me that killing him will be no murder!

Oh, if there is One above who rules this world, and will judge us all, why, why does He permit such monsters to live?”

“Because He is more merciful than his creatures,” replied Sir Norman, with calm reverence,—“though His avenging hand is heavy on this doomed city. But, madame, time is on the wing, and the headsman will be here before your story is told.”

“Ah, that story! How am I to tell it, I wonder, two words will comprise it all—sin and misery—misery and sin! For, buried alive here, as I am—buried alive, as I've always been—I know what both words mean; they have been branded on heart and brain in letters of fire. And that horrible monstrosity is the cause of all—that loathsome, misshapen, hideous abortion has banned and cursed my whole life! He is my first recollection. As far back as I can look through the dim eye of childhood's years, that horrible face, that gnarled and twisted trunk, those devilish eyes glare at me like the eyes and face of a wild beast. As memory grows stronger and more vivid, I can see that same face still—the dwarf! the dwarf! the dwarf!—Satan's true representative on earth, darkening and blighting ever passing year. I do not know where we lived, but I imagine it to have been one of the vilest and lowest dens in London, though the rooms I occupied were, for that matter, decent and orderly enough. Those rooms the daylight never entered, the windows were boarded up within, and fastened by shutters without, so that of the world beyond I was as ignorant as a child of two hours old. I saw but two human faces, his”—she seemed to hate him too much even to pronounce his name—“and his housekeeper's, a creature almost as vile as himself, and who is now a servant here; and with this precious pair to guard me I grew up to be fifteen years old. My outer life consisted of eating, sleeping, reading—for the wretch taught me to read—playing with my dogs and birds, and listening to old Margery's stories. But there was an inward life, fierce and strong, as it was rank and morbid, lived and brooded over alone, when Margery and her master fancied me sleeping in idiotic content. How were they to know that the creature they had reared and made ever had a thought of her own—ever wondered who she was, where she came from, what she was destined to be, and what lay in the great world beyond? The crooked little monster made a great mistake in teaching me to read, he should have known that books sow seed that grow up and flourish tall and green, till they become giants in strength. I knew enough to be certain there was a bright and glad world without, from which they shut me in and debarred me; and I knew enough to hate them both for it, with a strong and heartfelt hatred, only second to what I feel now.”

She stopped for a moment, and fixed her dark, gloomy eyes on the swarming

floor, and shook off, with out a shudder, the hideous things that crawled over her rich dress. She had scarcely looked at Sir Norman since she began to speak, but he had done enough looking for them both, never once taking his eyes from the handsome darkening face. He thought how strangely like her story was to Leoline's—both shut in and isolated from the outer world. Verily, destiny seemed to have woven the woof and warp of their fates wonderfully together, for their lives were as much the same as their faces. Miranda, having shook off her crawling acquaintances, watched them glancing along the foul floor in the darkness, and went moodily on.

“It was three years ago when I was fifteen years old, as I told you, that a change took place in my life. Up to that time, that miserable dwarf was what people would call my guardian, and did not trouble me much with his heavenly company. He was a great deal from our house, sometimes absent for weeks together; and I remember I used to envy the freedom with which he came and went, far more than I ever wondered where he spent his precious time. I did not know then that he belonged to the honorable profession of highwaymen, with variations of coining when travelers were few and money scarce. He was then, and is still, at the head of a formidable gang, over whom he wields most desperate authority—as perhaps you have noticed during the brief and pleasant period of your acquaintance.”

“Really, madam, it struck me that your authority over them was much more despotic than his,” said Sir Norman, in all sincerity, feeling called upon to give the—well, I'd rather not repeat the word, which is generally spelled with a d and a dash—his due.

“No thanks to him for that! He would make me a slave now, as he did then, if he dared, but he has found that, poor, trodden worm as I was, I had life enough left to turn and sting.”

“Which you do with a vengeance! Oh! you're a Tartar!” remarked Sir Norman to himself. “The saints forefend that Leoline should be like you in temper, as she is in history and face; for if she is, my life promises to be a pleasant one.”

“This rascally crew of cut-throats, whom his villainous highness headed,” said Miranda, “were an almost immense number then, being divided in three bodies —London cut-purses, Hounslow Heath highwaymen, and assistant-coiners, but all owning him for their lord and master. He told me all this himself, one day when, in an after-dinner and most gracious mood, he made a boasting display of his wealth and greatness; told me I was growing up very pretty indeed, and that I was shortly to be raised to the honor and dignity, and bliss of being his wife.

“I fancy I must have had a very vague idea of what that one small word meant, and was besides in an unusually contented and peaceful state of mind, or I should, undoubtedly, have raised one of his cut-glass decanters and smashed in his head with it. I know how I should receive such an assertion from him now, but I think I took it then with a resignation, he must have found mighty edifying; and when he went on to tell me that all this richness and greatness were to be shared by me when that celestial time came, I think I rather liked the idea than otherwise. The horrible creature seemed to have woke up that day, for the first time, and all of a sudden, to a conviction that I was in a fair way to become a woman, and rather a handsome one, and that he had better make sure of me before any accident interfered to take me from him. Full of this laudable notion, he became a daily visitor of mine from thenceforth, and made the discovery, simultaneously with myself, that the oftener he came the less favor he found in my sight. I had, before, tacitly disliked him, and shrank with a natural repulsion from his dreadful ugliness; but now, from negative dislike, I grew to positive hate. The utter loathing and abhorrence I have had for him ever since, began then —I grew dimly and intuitively conscious of what he would make me, and shrank from my fate with a vague horror not to be told in words. I became strong in my fearful dread of it. I told him I detested, abhorred, loathed, hated him; that he might keep his riches, greatness, and ungainly self for those who wanted him; they were temptations too weak to move me.

“Of course, there was raving, and storming, threatening, terrible looks and denunciations, and I quailed and shrank like a coward, but was obstinate still. Then as a dernier resort, he tried another bribe—the glorious one of liberty, the one he knew would conquer me, and it did. He promised me freedom—if I married him, I might go out into the great unknown world, fetterless and free; and I, O! fool that I was! consented. Not that my object was to stay with him one instant longer her my prison doors were opened; no, I was not quite so besotted as that—once out, and the little demon might look for me with last year's partridges. Of course, those demoniac eyes read my heart like an open book; and when I pronounced the fatal 'yes,' he laughed in that delightful way of his own, which will probably be the last thing you will hear when you lay your head under the axe.

“I don't know who the clergyman who married us was; but he was a clergyman: there can be no doubt about that. It was three days after, and for the first time in my fifteen years of life, I stood in sunshine, and daylight, and open air. We drove to the cathedral—for it was in St. Paul's the sacrilege was committed. I never could have walked there, I was so stunned, and giddy, and

bewildered. I never thought of the marriage—I could think of nothing but the bright, crashing, sun-shiny world without, till I was led up before the clergyman, with much the air, I suppose, of one walking in her sleep. He was a very young man, I remember, and looked from the dwarf to me, and from me to the dwarf, in a great state of fear and uncertainty, but evidently not daring to refuse. Margery and one of his gang were our only attendants, and there, in God's temple, the deed was done, and I was made the miserable thing I am to-day."

The suppressed passion, rising and throbbing like a white flame in her face and eyes, made her stop for a moment, breathing hard. Looking up she met Sir Norman's gaze, and as if there was something in its quiet, pitying tenderness that mesmerized her into calm, she steadily and rapidly went on.

"I awoke to a new life, after that; but not to one of freedom and happiness. I was as closely, even more closely, guarded than ever; and I found, when too late, that I had bartered myself, soul and body, for an empty promise. The only difference was, that I saw more new faces; for the dwarf began to bring his confederates and subordinates to the house, and would have me dressed up and displayed to them, with a demoniac pride that revolted me beyond everything else, if I were a painted puppet or an overgrown wax doll. Most of the precious crew of scoundrels had wives of their own and these began to be brought with them of an evening; and then, what with dancing, and music, and cards, and feasting, we had quite a carnival of it till morning.

"I liked this part of the business excessively well at first, and I was flattered and fooled to the top of my bent, and made from the first, the reigning belle and queen. There was more policy in that than admiration, I fancy; for the dwarf was all-powerful among them and dreaded accordingly, and I was the dwarf's pet and plaything, and all-powerful with him. The hideous creature had a most hideous passion for me then, and I could wind him round my finger as easily as Delilah and Samson; and by his command and their universal consent, the mimicry of royalty was begun, and I was made mistress and sovereign head, even over the dwarf himself. It was a queer whim; but that crooked slug was always taking such odd notions into his head, which nobody there dared laugh at. The band were bound together by a terrible oath, women and all; but they had to take another oath then, that of allegiance to me.

"It quite turned my brain at first; and my eyes were so dazzled by the pitiful glistening of the pageant, the sham splendor of the sham court, and the half-mocking, half-serious homage paid me, that I could see nothing beyond the shining surface, and the blackness, and corruption, and horror within, were altogether lost upon me. This feeling increased when, as months and months

went by, they were added to the mock peers of the Midnight Court, real nobles from that of St. Charles. I did not know then that they were ruined gamesters, vicious profligates, and desperate broken-down *rous*, who would have gone to pandemonium itself, nightly, for the mad license and lawless excesses they could indulge in here to their heart's content. But I got tired of it all, after a time: my eyes began slowly to open, and my heart—at least, what little of that article I ever had—turned sick with horror within me at what I had done. The awful things I saw, the fearful deeds that were perpetrated, would curdle your very blood with horror, were I to relate them. You have seen a specimen yourself, in the cold-blooded murder of that wretch half an hour ago; and his is not the only life crying for vengeance on these men. The slightest violation of their oath was punished, and the doom of traitors and informers was instant death, whether male or female. The sham trials and executions always took place in presence of the whole court, to strike a salutary terror into them, and never occurred but once a week, when the whole band regularly met. My power continued undiminished; for they knew either the dwarf or I must be supreme; and though the queen was bad, the prince was worse. The said prince would willingly have pulled me down from my eminence, and have mounted it himself; but that he was probably restrained by a feeling that law-makers should not be law-breakers, and that, if he set the example, there would be no end to the insubordination and rebellion that would follow."

"Were you living here or in London then?" inquired Sir Norman, taking an advantage of a pause, employed by Miranda in shaking off the crawling beetles.

"Oh, in London! We did not come here until the outbreak of the plague—that frightened them, especially the female portion, and they held a scared meeting, and resolved that we should take up our quarters somewhere else. This place being old and ruined, and deserted and with all sorts of evil rumors hanging about it, was hit upon; and secretly, by night, these mouldering old vaults were fitted up, and the goods and chattels of the royal court removed. And here I, too, was brought by night under the dwarf's own eye; for he well knew I would have risked a thousand plagues to escape from him. And here I have been ever since, and here the weekly revels are still held, and may for years to come, unless something is done to-night to prevent it.

"The night before these weekly anniversaries they all gather; but during the rest of the time I am alone with Margery and the dwarf, and have learned more secrets about this place than they dream of. For the rest, there is little need of explanation—the dwarf and his crew have industriously circulated the rumor that it is haunted; and some of those white figures you saw with me, and who, by the

way, are the daughters of these robbers, have been shown on the broken battlements, as if to put the fact beyond doubt.

“Now, Sir Norman, that is all—you have heard my whole history as far as I know it; and nothing remains but to tell you what you must see yourself, that I am mad for revenge, and must have it, and you must help me!”

Her eyes were shining with the fierce red fire he had seen in them before, and the white face wore a look so deadly and diabolical that, with all its beauty, it was absolutely repulsive. He took a step from her—for in each of those gleaming eyes sat a devil.

“You must help me!” she persisted. “You—you, Sir Norman! For many a day I have been waiting for a chance like this, and until now I have waited in vain. Alone, I want physical strength to kill him, and I dare not trust any one else. No one was ever cast among us before as you have been; and now, condemned to die, you must be desperate, and desperate men will do desperate things. Fate, Destiny, Providence—whatever you like—has thrown you in my way, and help me you must and shall!”

“Madame, madame I what are you saying? How can I help you?”

“There is but one way—this!”

She held up in the pale ray of the lamp, something she drew from the folds of her dress, that glistened blue, and bright, and steelly in the gloom.

“A dagger!” he exclaimed, with a shudder, and a recoil. “Madame, are you talking of murder?”

“I told you!” she said, through her closed teeth, and with her eyes flaming like fire, “that ridding the earth of that fiend incarnate would be a good deed, and no murder! I would do it myself if I could take him off his guard; but he never is that with me; and then my arm is not strong enough to reach his black heart through all that mass of brawn, and blood, and muscle. No, Sir Norman, Doom has allotted it to you—obey, and I swear to you, you shall go free; refuse—and in ten minutes your head will roll under the executioner's axe!”

“Better that than the freedom you offer! Madame, I cannot murder!”

“Coward!” she passionately cried; “you fear to do it, and yet you have but a life to lose, and that is lost to you now!”

Sir Norman raised his head; and even in the darkness she saw the haughty flush that crimsoned his face.

“I fear no man living; but, madame, I fear One who is higher than man!”

“But you will die if you refuse; and I repeat, again and again, there is no risk.

These guards will not let you out; but there are more ways of leaving a room than through the door, and I can lead you up behind the tapestry to where he is standing, and you can stab him through the back, and escape with me! Quick, quick, there is no time to lose!”

“I cannot do it!” he said, resolutely, drawing back and folding his arms. “In short, I will not do it!”

There was such a terrible look in the beautiful eyes, that he half expected to see her spring at him like a wild cat, and bury the dagger in his own breast. But the rule of life works by contraries: expect a blow and you will get a kiss, look for an embrace, and you will be startled by a kick. When the virago spoke, her voice was calm, compared with what it had been before, even mild.

“You refuse! Well, a willful man must have him way; and since you are so qualmish about a little bloodletting, we must try another plan. If I release you—for short as the time is, I can do it—will you promise me to go direct to the king this very night, and inform him of all you've seen and heard here?”

She looked at him with an eagerness that was almost fierce; and in spite of her steady voice, there was something throbbing and quivering, deadly and terrible, in her upturned face. The form she looked at was erect and immovable, the eyes were quietly resolved, the mouth half-pityingly, half-sadly smiling.

“Are you aware, dear lady, what the result of such a step would be?”

“Death!” she said, coldly.

“Death, transportation, or life-long imprisonment to them all—misery and disgrace to many a noble house; for some I saw there were once friends of mine, with families I honor and respect. Could I bring the dwarf and his attendant imps to Tyburn, and treat them to a hempen cravat, I would do it without remorse—though the notion of being informer, even then, would not be very pleasant; but as it is, I cannot be the death of one without ruining all, and as I told you, some of those were once my friends. No, madame, I cannot do it. I have but once to die and I prefer death here, to purchasing life at such a price.”

There was a short silence, during which they gazed into each other's eyes ominously, and one was about as colorless as the other.

“You refuse?” she coldly said.

“I must! But if you can save my life, as you say, why not do it, and fly with me? You will find me the truest and most grateful of friends, while life remains.”

“You are very kind; but I want no friendship, Sir Norman—nothing but

revenge! As to escaping, I could have done that any time since we came here, for I have found out a secret means of exit from each of these vaults, that they know nothing of. But I have staid to see him dead at my feet—if not by my hand, at least by my command; and since you will not do it, I will make the attempt myself. Farewell, Sir Norman Kingsley; before many minutes you will be a corpse, and your blood be upon yourself!”

She gave him a glance as coldly fierce as her dagger's glance, and turned to go, when he stepped hastily forward, and interposed:

“Miranda—Miranda—you are crazed! Stop and tell me what you intend to do.”

“What you feared to attempt,” she haughtily replied; “Sheathe this dagger in his demon heart!”

“Miranda, give me the dagger. You must not, you shall not, commit such a crime!”

“Shall not?” she uttered scornfully. “And who are you that dares to speak to me like this? Stand aside, coward, and let me pass!”

“Pardon me, but I cannot, while you hold that dagger. Give it to me, and you shall go free; but while you hold it with this intention, for your own sake, I will detain you till some one comes.”

She uttered a low, fierce cry, and struck at him with it, but he caught her hand, and with sudden force snatched it from her. In doing so he was obliged to hold it with its point toward her, and struggling for it in a sort of frenzy, as he raised the hand that held it, she slipped forward and it was driven half-way to the hilt in her side. There was a low, grasping cry—a sudden clasping of both hands over her heart, a sway, a reel, and she fell headlong prostrate on the loathsome floor.

Sir Norman stood paralyzed. She half raised herself on her elbow, drew the dagger from the wound, and a great jet of blood shot up and crimsoned her hands. She did not faint—there seemed to be a deathless energy within her that chained life strongly in its place—she only pressed both hands hard over the wound, and looked mournfully and reproachfully up in his face. Those beautiful, sad, solemn eyes, void of everything savage and fierce, were truly Leoline's eyes now.

Through all his first shock of horror, another thing dawned on his mind; he had looked on this scene before. It was the second view in La Masque's caldron, and but one remained to be verified.

The next instant, he was down on his knees in a paroxysm of grief and

despair.

“What have I done? what have I done?” was his cry.

“Listen!” she said, faintly raising one finger. “Do you hear that?”

Distant steps were echoing along the passage. Yes; he heard them, and knew what they were.

“They are coming to lead you to death!” she said, with some of her old fire; “but I will baffle them yet. Take that lamp—go to the wall yonder, and in that corner, near the floor, you will see a small iron ring. Pull it—it does not require much force—and you will find an opening leading through another vault; at the end there is a broken flight of stairs, mount them, and you will find yourself in the same place from which you fell. Fly, fly! There is not a second to lose!”

“How can I fly? how can I leave you dying here?”

“I am not dying!” she wildly cried, lifting both hands from the wound to push him away, while the blood flowed over the floor. “But we will both die if you stay. Go-go-go!”

The footsteps had paused at his door. The bolts were beginning to be withdrawn. He lifted the lamp, flew across his prison, found the ring, and took a pull at it with desperate strength. Part of what appeared to be the solid wall drew out, disclosing an aperture through which he could just squeeze sideways. Quick as thought he was through, forgetting the lamp in his haste. The portion of the wall slid noiselessly back, just as the prison door was thrown open, and the dwarfs voice was heard, socially inviting him, like Mrs. Bond's ducks, to come and be killed.

Some people talk of darkness so palpable that it may be felt, and if ever any one was qualified to tell from experience what it felt like, Sir Norman was in that precise condition at that precise period. He groped his way through the blind blackness along what seemed an interminable distance, and stumbled, at last, over the broken stairs at the end. With some difficult, and at the serious risk of his jugular, he mounted them, and found himself, as Miranda had stated, in a place he knew very well. Once here he allowed no grass to grow under his feet; and, in five minutes after, to his great delight, he found himself where he had never hoped to be again—in the serene moonlight and the open air, fetterless and free.

His horse was still where he had left him, and in a twinkling he was on his back, and dashing away to the city, to love—to Leoline!

CHAPTER XV. LEOLINE'S VISITORS.

If things were done right—but they are not and, never will be, while this whirligig world of mistakes spins round, and all Adam's children, to the end of the chapter, will continue sinning to-day and repenting to-morrow, falling the next and bewailing it the day after. If Leoline had gone to bed directly, like a good, dutiful little girl, as Sir Norman ordered her, she would have saved herself a good deal of trouble and tears; but Leoline and sleep were destined to shake hands and turn their backs on each other that night. It was time for all honest folks to be in bed, and the dark-eyed beauty knew it too, but she had no notion of going, nevertheless. She stood in the centre of the room, where he had left her, with a spot like a scarlet roseberry on either cheek; a soft half-smile on the perfect mouth, and a light unexpressibly tender and dreamy, in those artesian wells of beauty—her eyes. Most young girls of green and tender years, suffering from “Love's young dream,” and that sort of thing, have just that soft, shy, brooding look, whenever their thoughts happen to turn to their particular beloved; and there are few eyes so ugly that it does not beautify, even should they be as cross as two sticks. You should have seen Leoline standing in the centre of her pretty room, with her bright rose-satin glancing and glittering, and flowing over rug and mat; with her black waving hair clustering and curling like shining floss silk; with a rich white shimmer of pearls on the pale smooth forehead and large beautiful arms. She did look irresistibly bewitching beyond doubt; and it was just as well for Sir Norman's peace of mind that he did not see her, for he was bad enough without that. So she stood thinking tenderly of him for a half-hour or so, quite undisturbed by the storm; and how strange it was that she had risen up that very morning expecting to be one man's bride, and that she should rise up the next, expecting to be another's. She could not realize it at all; and with a little sigh—half pleasure, half presentiment—she walked to the window, drew the curtain, and looked out at the night. All was peaceful and serene; the moon was full to overflowing, and a great deal of extra light ran over the brim; quite a quantity of stars were out, and were winking pleasantly down at the dark little planet below, that went round, and round, with grim stoicism, and paid no attention to anybody's business but its own. She saw the heaps of black, charred ashes that the rush of rain had quenched; she saw the still and empty street; the frowning row of gloomy houses opposite, and the man on guard before one of them. She had watched that man all day, thinking, with a sick

shudder, of the plague-stricken prisoners he guarded, and reading its piteous inscription, “Lord have mercy on us!” till the words seemed branded on her brain. While she looked now, an upper window was opened, a night-cap was thrust out and a voice from its cavernous depths hailed the guard.

“Robert! I say, Robert!”

“Well!” said Robert, looking up.

“Master and missus be gone at last, and the rest won't live till morning.”

“Won't they?” said Robert, phlegmatically; “what a pity! Get 'em ready, and I'll stop the dead-cart when it comes round.”

Just as he spoke, the well-known rattle of wheels, the loud ringing of the bell, and the monotonous cry of the driver, “Bring out your dead! bring out your dead!” echoed on the pale night's silence; and the pest-cart came rumbling and jolting along with its load of death. The watchman hailed the driver, according to promise, and they entered the house together, brought out one long, white figure, and then another, and threw them on top of the ghastly heap.

“We'll have three more for you in on hour of so—don't forget to come round,” suggested the watchman.

“All right!” said the driver, as he took his place, whipped his horse, rang his bell, and jogged along nonchalantly to the plague-pit.

Sick at heart, Leoline dropped the curtain, and turned round to see somebody else standing at her elbow. She had been quite alone when she looked out; she was alone no longer; there had been no noise, yet some one had entered, and was standing beside her. A tall figure, all in black, with its sweeping velvet robes spangled with stars of golden rubies, a perfect figure of incomparable grace and beauty. It had worn a cloak that had dropped lightly from its shoulders, and lay on the floor and the long hair streamed in darkness over shoulder and waist. The face was masked, the form stood erect and perfectly motionless, and the scream of surprise and consternation that arose to Leoline's lips died out in wordless terror. Her noiseless visitor perceived it, and touching her arm lightly with one little white hand, said in her sweetest and most exquisite of tones:

“My child, do not tremble so, and do not look so deathly white. You know me, do you not?”

“You are La Masque!” said Leoline trembling with nervous dread.

“I am, and no stranger to you; though perhaps you think so. Is it your habit every night to look out of your window in full dress until morning?”

“How did you enter?” asked Leoline, her curiosity overcoming for a moment

even her fear.

“Through the door. Not a difficult thing, either, if you leave it wide open every night, as it is this.”

“Was it open?” said Leoline, in dismay. “I never knew it.”

“Ah! then it was not you who went out last. Who was it?”

“It was—was—” Leoline's cheeks were scarlet; “it was a friend!”

“A somewhat late hour for one's friends to visit,” said La Masque, sarcastically; “and you should learn the precaution of seeing them to the door and fastening it after them.”

“Rest assured, I shall do so for the future,” said Leoline, with a look that would have reminded Sir Norman of Miranda had he seen it. “I scarcely expected the honor of any more visits, particularly from strangers to-night.”

“Civil, that! Will you ask me to sit down, or am I to consider myself an unseasonable intruder, and depart?”

“Madame, will you do me the honor to be seated. The hour, as you say, is somewhat unseasonable, and you will oblige me by letting me know to what I am indebted for the pleasure of this visit, as quickly as possible.”

There was something quite dignified about Mistress Leoline as she swept rustling past La Masque, sank into the pillowy depths of her lounge, and motioned her visitor to a seat with a slight and graceful wave of her hand. Not but that in her secret heart she was a good deal frightened, for something under her pink satin corsage was going pit-a-pat at a wonderful rate; but she thought that betraying such a feeling would not be the thing. Perhaps the tall, dark figure saw it, and smiled behind her mask; but outwardly she only leaned lightly against the back of the chair, and glanced discreetly at the door.

“Are you sure we are quite alone?”

“Quite:”

“Because,” said La Masque, in her low, silvery tones, “what I have come to say is not for the ears of any third person living:”

“We are entirely alone, madame,” replied Leoline, opening her black eyes very wide. “Prudence is gone, and I do not know when she will be back.”

“Prudence will never come back,” said La Masque, quietly.

“Madame!”

“My dear, do not look so shocked—it is not her fault. You know she deserted you for fear of the plague.”

“Yes, yes!”

“Well, that did not save her; nay, it even brought on what she dreaded so much. Your nurse is plague-stricken, my dear, and lies ill unto death in the pest-house in Finsbury Fields.”

“Oh, dreadful!” exclaimed Leoline, while every drop of blood fled from her face. “My poor, poor old nurse!”

“Your poor, poor old nurse left you without much tenderness when she thought you dying of the same disease,” said La Masque, quietly.

“Oh, that is nothing. The suddenness, the shock drove her to it. My poor, dear Prudence.”

“Well, you can do nothing for her now,” said La Masque, in a tone of slight impatience. “Prudence is beyond all human aid, and so—let her rest in peace. You were carried to the plague-pit yourself, for dead, were you not?”

“Yes,” answered the pale lips, while she shivered all over at the recollection.

“And was saved by—by whom were you saved, my dear?”

“By two gentlemen.”

“Oh, I know that; what were their names?”

“One was Mr. Ormiston, the other was,” hesitating and blushing vividly, “Sir Norman Kingsley.”

La Masque leaned across her chair, and laid one dainty finger lightly on the girl's hot cheek.

“And for which is that blush, Leoline?”

“Madame, was it only to ask me questions you came here?” said Leoline, drawing proudly back, though the hot red spot grew hotter and redder; “if so, you will excuse my declining to answer any more.”

“Child, child!” said La Masque, in a tone so strangely sad that it touched Leoline, “do not be angry with me. It is no idle curiosity that sent me here at this hour to ask impertinent questions, but a claim that I have upon you, stronger than that of any one else in the world.”

Leoline's beautiful eyes opened wider yet.

“A claim upon me! How? Why? I do not understand.”

“All in good time. Will you tell me something of your past history, Leoline?”

“Madame Masque, I have no history to tell. All my life I have lived alone with Prudence; that in the whole of it in nine words.”

La Masque half laughed.

“Short, sharp, and decisive. Had you never father or mother?”

“There is a slight probability I may have had at some past period,” said Leoline, sighing; “but none that I ever knew.”

“Why does not Prudence tell you?”

“Prudence is only my nurse, and says she has nothing to tell. My parents died when I was an infant, and left me in her care—that is her story.”

“A likely one enough, and yet I see by your face that you doubt it.”

“I do doubt it! There are a thousand little outward things that make me fancy it is false, and an inward voice that assures me it is so.”

“Then let me tell you that inward voice tells falsehoods, for I know that your father and mother are both dead these fourteen years!”

Leoline's great black eyes were fixed on her face with a look so wild and eager, that La Masque laid her hand lightly and soothingly on her shoulder.

“Don't look at me with such a spectral face! What is there so extraordinary in all I have said?”

“You said you knew my father and mother.”

“No such thing! I said I knew they were dead, but the other fact is true also; I did know them when living!”

“Madame, who are you? Who were they?”

“I? Oh, I am La Masque, the sorceress, and they—they were Leoline's father and mother!” and again La Masque slightly laughed.

“You mock me, madame!” cried Leoline, passionately. “You are cruel—you are heartless! If you know anything, in Heaven's name tell me—if not, go and leave me in peace!”

“Thank you! I shall do that presently; and as to the other—of course I shall tell you; what else do you suppose I have come for to-night? Look here! Do you see this?”

She drew out from some hidden pocket in her dress a small and beautifully-wrought casket of ivory and silver, with straps and clasps of silver, and a tiny key of the same.

“Well!” asked Leoline, looking from it to her, with the blank air of one utterly bewildered,

“In this casket, my dear, there is a roll of papers, closely written, which you are to read as soon as I leave you. Those papers contain your whole history—do you understand?”

She was looking so white, and staring so hard and so hopelessly, that there was need of the question. She took the casket and gazed at it with a perplexed air.

“My child, have your thoughts gone wool-gathering? Do you not comprehend what I have said to you! Your whole history is hid in that box?”

“I know!” said Leoline, slowly, and with her eyes again riveted to the black mask. “But; madame, who are you?”

“Have I not told you? What a pretty inquisitor it is! I am La Masque—your friend, now; something more soon, as you will see when you read what I have spoken of. Do not ask me how I have come by it—you will read all about it there. I did not know that I would give it to you to-night, but I have a strange foreboding that it is destined to be my last on earth. And, Leoline my child, before I leave you, let me hear you say you will not hate me when you read what is there.”

“What have you done to me? Why should I hate you?”

“Ah! you will find that all out soon enough. Do content me, Leoline—let me hear you say; `La Masque, whatever you've done to me, however you have wronged me, I will forgive you!' Can you say that?”

Leoline repeated it simply, like a little child. La Masque took her hand, held it between both her own, leaned over and looked earnestly in her face.

“My little Leoline! my beautiful rosebud! May Heaven bless you and grant you a long and happy life with—shall I say it, Leoline?”

“Please—no!” whispered Leoline, shyly.

La Masque softly patted the little tremulous hand.

“We are both saying the name now in our hearts, my dear, so it is little matter whether our lips repeat it or not. He is worthy, of you, Leoline, and your life will be a happy one by his side; but there is another.” She paused and lowered her voice. “When have you seen Count L'Estrange?”

“Not since yesterday, madame.”

“Beware of him! Do you know who he is, Leoline?”

“I know nothing of him but his name.”

“Then do not seek to know,” said La Masque, emphatically. “For it is a secret you would tremble to hear. And now I must leave you. Come with me to the door, and fasten it as soon as I go out, lest you should forget it altogether.”

Leoline, with a dazed expression, thrust the precious little casket into the

bosom of her dress, and taking up the lamp, preceded her visitor down stairs. At the door they paused, and La Masque, with her hand on her arm, repeated, in a low, earnest voice,

“Leoline, beware of Count L'Estrange, and become Lady Kingsley as soon as you can.”

“I will hear that name to-morrow!” thought Leoline, with a glad little thrill at her heart, as La Masque flitted out into the moonlight.

Leoline closed and locked the door, driving the bolts into their sockets, and making all secure. “I defy any one to get in again tonight!” she said, smiling at her own dexterity; and lamp in hand, she ran lightly up stairs to read the long unsolved riddle.

So eager was she, that she had crossed the room, laid the lamp on the table, and sat down before it, ere she became aware that she was not alone. Some one was leaning against the mantel, his arm on it, and his eyes do her, gazing with an air of incomparable coolness and ease. It was a man this time—something more than a man,—a count, and Count L'Estrange, at that!

Leoline sprang to her feet with a wild scream, a cry full of terror, amaze, and superstitious dread; and the count raised his band with a self-possessed smile.

“Pardon, fair Leoline, if I intrude! But have I not a right to come at all hours and visit my bride?”

“Leoline is no bride of yours!” retorted that young lady, passionately, her indignation overpowering both fear and surprise. “And, what is more, never will be! Now, sir!”

“So my little bird of paradise can fire up, I see! As to your being my bride, that remains to be seen. You promised to be tonight, you know!”

“Then I'll recall that promise. I have changed my mind.”

“Well, that's not very astonishing; it is but the privilege of your sex! Nevertheless, I'm afraid I must insist on your becoming Countess L'Estrange, and that immediately!”

“Never, sir! I will die first!”

“Oh, no! We could not spare such a bright little beauty out of this ugly world! You will live, and live for me!”

“Sir!” cried Leoline, white with passion, and her black eyes blazing with a fire that would have killed him, could fiery glances slay! “I do not know how you have entered here; but I do know, if you are a gentleman, you will leave me instantly! Go sir! I never wish to see you again!”

“But when I wish to see you so much, my darling Leoline,” said the count, with provoking indifference, “what does a little reluctance on your part signify? Get your hood and mantle, my love—my horse awaits us without—and let us fly where neither plague nor mortal man will interrupt our nuptials!”

“Will no one take this man away?” she cried, looking helplessly round, and wringing her hands.

“Certainly not, my dear—not even Sir Norman Kingsley! George, I am afraid this pretty little vixen will not go peaceably; you had better come in!”

With a smile on his face, he took a step toward her. Shrieking wildly, she darted across the room, and made for the door, just as somebody else was entering it. The next instant, a shawl was thrown over her head, her cries smothered in it, and she was lifted in a pair of strong arms, carried down stairs, and out into the night.

CHAPTER XVI. THE THIRD VISION.

Presentiments are strange things. From the first moment Sir Norman entered the city, and his thoughts had been able to leave Miranda and find themselves wholly on Leoline, a heavy foreboding of evil to her had oppressed him. Some danger, he was sure, had befallen her during his absence—how could it be otherwise with the Earl of Rochester and Count L'Estrange both on her track? Perhaps, by this time, one or other had found her, and alone and unaided she had been an easy victim, and was now borne beyond his reach forever. The thought goaded him and his horse almost to distraction; for the moment it struck him, he struck spurs into his horse, making that unoffending animal jump spasmodically, like one of those prancing steeds Miss Bonheur is fond of depicting. Through the streets he flew at a frantic rate, growing more excited and full of apprehension the nearer he came to old London Bridge; and calling himself a select litany of hard names inwardly, for having left the dear little thing at all.

“If I find her safe and well,” thought Sir Norman, emphatically, “nothing short of an earthquake or dying of the plague will ever induce me to leave her again, until she is Lady Kingsley, and in the old manor of Devonshire. What a fool, idiot, and ninny I must have been, to have left her as I did, knowing those two sleuth-hounds were in full chase! What are all the Mirandas and midnight queens to me, if Leoline is lost?”

That last question was addressed to the elements in general; and as they disdained reply, he cantered on furiously, till the old house by the river was reached. It was the third time that night he had paused to contemplate it, and each time with very different feelings; first, from simple curiosity; second, in an ecstasy of delight, and third and last, in an agony of apprehension. All around was peaceful and still; moon and stars sailed serenely through a sky of silver and snow; a faint cool breeze floated up from the river and fanned his hot and fevered forehead; the whole city lay wrapped in stillness as profound and deathlike as the fabled one of the marble prince in the Eastern tale—nothing living moved abroad, but the lonely night-guard keeping their dreary vigils before the plague-stricken houses, and the ever-present, ever-busy pest-cart, with its mournful bell and dreadful cry.

As far as Sir Norman could see, no other human being but himself and the solitary watchman, so often mentioned, were visible. Even he could scarcely be

said to be present; for, though leaning against the house with his halberd on his shoulder, he was sound asleep at his post, and far away in the land of dreams. It was the second night of his watch; and with a good conscience and a sound digestion, there is no earthly anguish short of the toothache, strong enough to keep a man awake two nights in succession. So sound were his balmy slumbers in his airy chamber, that not even the loud clatter of Sir Norman's horse's hoofs proved strong enough to arouse him; and that young gentleman, after glancing at him, made up his mind to try to find out for himself before arousing him to seek information.

Securing his horse, he looked up at the house with wistful eyes, and saw that the solitary light still burned in her chamber. It struck him now how very imprudent it was to keep that lamp burning; for if Count L'Estrange saw it, it was all up with Leoline—and there was even more to be dreaded from him than from the earl. How was he to find out whether that illuminated chamber had a tenant or not? Certainly, standing there staring till doomsday would not do it; and there seemed but two ways, that of entering the house at once or arousing the man. But the man was sleeping so soundly that it seemed a pity to awake him for a trifle; and, after all, there could be no great harm or indiscretion in his entering to see if his bride was safe. Probably Leoline was asleep, and would know nothing about it; or, even were she wide awake, and watchful, she was altogether too sensible a girl to be displeased at his anxiety about her. If she were still awake, and waiting for day-dawn, he resolved to remain with her and keep her from feeling lonesome until that time came—if she were asleep, he would steal out softly again, and keep guard at her door until morning.

Full of these praiseworthy resolutions, he tried the handle of the door, half expecting to find it locked, and himself obliged to effect an entrance through the window; but no, it yielded to his touch, and he went in. Hall and staircase were intensely dark, but he knew his way without a pilot this time, and steered clear of all shoals and quicksands, through the hall and up the stairs.

The door of the lighted room—Leoline's room—lay wide open, and he paused on the threshold to reconnoitre. He had gone softly for fear of startling her, and now, with the same tender caution, he glanced round the room. The lamp burned on the dainty dressing table, where undisturbed lay jewels, perfume bottles and other knickknacks. The cithern lay unmolested on the couch, the rich curtains were drawn; everything was as he had left it last—everything, but the pretty pink figure, with drooping eyes, and pearls in the waves of her rich, black hair. He looked round for the things she had worn, hoping she had taken them off and retired to rest, but they were not to be seen; and with a cold sinking of the heart,

he went noiselessly across the room, and to the bed. It was empty, and showed no trace of having been otherwise since he and the pest-cart driver had borne from it the apparently lifeless form of Leoline.

Yes, she was gone; and Sir Norman turned for a moment so sick with utter dread, that he leaned against one of the tall carved posts, and hated himself for having left her with a heartlessness that his worst enemy could not have surpassed. Then aroused into new and spasmodic energy by the exigency of the case, he seized the lamp, and going out to the hall, made the house ring from basement to attic with her name. No reply, but that hollow, melancholy echo that sounds so lugubriously through empty houses, was returned; and he jumped down stairs with an impetuous rush, flinging back every door in the hall below with a crash, and flying wildly from room to room. In solemn grim repose they lay; but none of them held the bright figure in rose-satin he sought. And he left them in despair, and went back to her chamber again.

“Leoline! Leoline! Leoline!” he called, while he rushed impetuously up stairs, and down stairs, and in my lady's chamber; but Leoline answered not—perhaps never would answer more! Even “hoping against hope,” he had to give up the chase at last—no Leoline did that house hold; and with this conviction despairingly impressed on his mind, Sir Norman Kingsley covered his face with his hands, and uttered a dismal groan.

Yet, forlorn as was the case, he groaned but once, “only that and nothing more;” there was no time for such small luxuries as groaning and tearing his hair, and boiling over with wrath and vengeance against the human race generally, and those two diabolical specimens of it, the Earl of Rochester and Count L'Estrange, particularly. He plunged head foremost down stairs, and out of the door. There he was impetuously brought up all standing; for somebody stood before it, gazing up at the gloomy front with as much earnestness as he had done himself, and against this individual he rushed recklessly with a shock that nearly sent the pair of them over into the street.

“Sacr-r-re!” cried a shrill voice, in tones of indignant remonstrance. “What do you mean, monsieur? Are you drunk, or crazy, that you come running head foremost into peaceable citizens, and throwing them heels uppermost on the king's highway! Stand off, sir! And think yourself lucky that I don't run you through with my dirk for such an insult!”

At the first sound of the outraged treble tones, Sir Norman had started back and glared upon the speaker with much the same expression of countenance as an incensed tiger. The orator of the spirited address had stooped to pick up his plumed cap, and recover his centre of gravity, which was considerably knocked

out of place by the unexpected collision, and held forth with very flashing eyes, and altogether too angry to recognize his auditor. Sir Norman waited until he had done, and then springing at him, grabbed him by the collar.

“You young hound!” he exclaimed, fairly lifting him off his feet with one hand, and shaking him as if he would have wriggled him out of hose and doublet. “You infernal young jackanapes! I'll run you through in less than two minutes, if you don't tell me where you have taken her.”

The astonishment, not to say consternation, of Master Hubert for that small young gentleman and no other it was—on thus having his ideas thus shaken out of him, was unbounded, and held him perfectly speechless, while Sir Norman glared at him and shook him in a way that would have instantaneously killed him if his looks were lightning. The boy had recognized his aggressor, and after his first galvanic shock, struggled like a little hero to free himself, and at last succeeded by an artful spring.

“Sir Norman Kingsley,” he cried, keeping a safe yard or two of pavement between him and that infuriated young knight, “have you gone mad, or what, is Heaven's name, is the meaning of all this?”

“It means,” exclaimed Sir Norman, drawing his sword, and flourishing it within an inch of the boy's curly head,—“that you'll be a dead page in less than half a minute, unless you tell me immediately where she has been taken to.”

“Where who has been taken to?” inquired Hubert, opening his bright and indignant black eyes in a way that reminded Sir Norman forcibly of Leoline. “Pardon, monsieur, I don't understand at all.”

“You young villain! Do you mean to stand up there and tell me to my face that you have not searched for her, and found her, and have carried her off?”

“Why, do you mean the lady we were talking of, that was saved from the river?” asked Hubert, a new light dawning upon him.

“Do I mean the lady we were talking of?” repeated Sir Norman, with another furious flourish of his sword. “Yes, I do mean the lady we were talking of; and what's more—I mean to pin you where you stand, against that wall, unless you tell me, instantly, where she has been taken.”

“Monsieur!” exclaimed the boy, raising his hands with an earnestness there was no mistaking, “I do assure you, upon my honor, that I know nothing of the lady whatever; that I have not found her; that I have never set eyes on her since the earl saved her from the river.”

The earnest tone of truth would, in itself, almost have convinced Sir Norman,

but it was not that, that made him drop his sword so suddenly. The pale, startled face; the dark, solemn eyes, were so exactly like Leoline's, that they thrilled him through and through, and almost made him believe, for a moment, he was talking to Leoline herself.

“Are you—are you sure you are not Leoline?” he inquired, almost convinced, for an instant, by the marvelous resemblance, that it was really so.

“I? Positively, Sir Norman, I cannot understand this at all, unless you wish to enjoy yourself at my expense.”

“Look here, Master Hubert!” said Sir Norman with a sudden change of look and tone. “If you do not understand, I shall just tell you in a word or two how matters are, and then let me hear you clear yourself. You know the lady we were talking about, that Lord Rochester picked up afloat, and sent you in search of?”

“Yes—yes.”

“Well,” went on Sir Norman, with a sort of grim stoicism. “After leaving you, I started on a little expedition of my own, two miles from the city, from which expedition I returned ten minutes ago. When I left, the lady was secure and safe in this house; when I came back, she was gone. You were in search of her—had told me yourself you were determined on finding her, and having her carried off; and now, my youthful friend, put this and that together,” with a momentary returning glare, “and see what it amounts to!”

“It amounts to this:” retorted his youthful friend, stoutly, “that I know nothing whatever about it. You may make out a case of strong circumstantial evidence against me; but if the lady has been carried off, I have had no hand in it.”

Again Sir Norman was staggered by the frank, bold gaze and truthful voice, but still the string was in a tangle somewhere.

“And where have you been ever since?” he began severely, and with the air of a lawyer about to go into a rigid cross-examination.

“Searching for her,” was the prompt reply.

“Where?”

“Through the streets; in the pest-houses, and at the plague-pit.”

“How did you find out she lived here?”

“I did not find it out. When I became convinced she was in none of the places I have mentioned, I gave up the search in despair, for to-night, and was returning to his lordship to report my ill success.”

“Why, then, were you standing in front of her house, gaping at it with all the eyes in your head, as if it were the eighth wonder of the world?”

“Monsieur has not the most courteous way of asking questions, that I ever heard of; but I have no particular objection to answer him. It struck me that, as Mr. Ormiston brought the lady up this way, and as I saw you and he haunting this place so much to-night, I thought her residence was somewhere here, and I paused to look at the house as I went along. In fact, I intended to ask old sleepy-head, over there, for further particulars, before I left the neighborhood, had not you, Sir Norman, run bolt into me, and knocked every idea clean out of my head.”

“And you are sure you are not Leoline?” said Sir Norman, suspiciously.

“To the best of my belief, Sir Norman, I am not,” replied Hubert, reflectively.

“Well, it is all very strange, and very aggravating,” said Sir Norman, sighing, and sheathing his sword. “She is gone, at all events; no doubt about that—and if you have not carried her off, somebody else has.”

“Perhaps she has gone herself,” insinuated Hubert.

“Bah! Gone herself!” said Sir Norman, scornfully. “The idea is beneath contempt: I tell you, Master Fine-feathers, the lady and I were to be married bright and early to-morrow morning, and leave this disgusting city for Devonshire. Do you suppose, then, she would run out in the small hours of the morning, and go prancing about the streets, or eloping with herself?”

“Why, of course, Sir Norman, I can't take it upon myself to answer positively; but, to use the mildest phrase, I must say the lady seems decidedly eccentric, and capable of doing very queer things. I hope, however, you believe me; for I earnestly assure you, I never laid eyes on her but that once.”

“I believe you,” said Sir Norman, with another profound and broken-hearted sigh, “and I'm only too sure she has been abducted by that consummate scoundrel and treacherous villain, Count L'Estrange.”

“Count who?” said Hubert, with a quick start, and a look of intense curiosity. “What was the name?”

“L'Estrange—a scoundrel of the deepest dye! Perhaps you know him?”

“No,” replied Hubert, with a queer, half musing smile, “no; but I have a notion I have heard the name. Was he a rival of yours?”

“I should think so! He was to have been married to the lady this very night!”

“He was, eh! And what prevented the ceremony?”

“She took the plague!” said Sir Norman, strange to say, not at all offended at the boy's familiarity. “And would have been thrown into the plague-pit but for me. And when she recovered she accepted me and cast him off!”

“A quick exchange! The lady's heart must be most flexible, or unusually large, to be able to hold so many at once.”

“It never held him!” said Sir Norman, frowning; “she was forced into the marriage by her mercenary friends. Oh! if I had him here, wouldn't I make him wish the highwaymen had shot him through the head, and done for him, before I would let him go!”

“What is he like—this Count L'Estrange?” said Hubert, carelessly.

“Like the black-hearted traitor and villain he is!” replied Sir Norman, with more energy than truth; for he had caught but passing glimpses of the count's features, and those showed him they were decidedly prepossessing; “and he slinks along like a coward and an abductor as he is, in a slouched hat and shadowy cloak. Oh! if I had him here!” repeated Sir Norman, with vivacity; “wouldn't I—”

“Yes, of course you would,” interposed Hubert, “and serve him right, too! Have you made any inquiries about the matter—for instance, of our friend sleeping the sleep of the just, across there?”

“No—why?”

“Why, it seems to me, if she's been carried off before he fell asleep, he has probably heard or seen something of it; and I think it would not be a bad plan to step over and inquire.”

“Well, we can try,” said Sir Norman, with a despairing face; “but I know it will end in disappointment and vexation of spirit, like all the rest!”

With which dismal view of things, he crossed the street side by side with his jaunty young friend. The watchman was still enjoying the balmy, and snoring in short, sharp snorts, when Master Hubert remorselessly caught him by the shoulder, and began a series of shakes and pokes, and digs, and “hallos!” while Sir Norman stood near and contemplated the scene with a pensive eye. At last while undergoing a severe course of this treatment the watchman was induced to open his eyes on this mortal life, and transfix the two beholders with, an intensely vacant and blank share.

“Hey?” he inquired, helplessly. “What was you a saying of, gentlemen? What is it?”

“We weren't a saying of anything as yet,” returned Hubert; “but we mean to, shortly. Are you quite sure you are wide awake?”

“What do you want?” was the cross question, given by way of answer. “What do you come bothering me for at such a rate, all night, I want to know?”

“Keep civil, friend, we wear swords,” said Hubert, touching, with dignity, the hilt of the little dagger he carried; “we only want to ask you a few questions. First, do you see that house over yonder?”

“Oh! I see it!” said the man gruffly; “I am not blind!”

“Well who was the last person you saw come out of that house?”

“I don't know who they was!” still more gruffly. “I ain't got the pleasure of their acquaintance!”

“Did you see a young lady come out of it lately?”

“Did I see a young lady?” burst out the watchman, in a high key of aggrieved expostulation. “How many more times this blessed night am I to be asked about that young lady. First and foremost, there comes two young men, which this here is one of them, and they bring out the young lady and have her hauled away in the dead-cart; then comes along another and wants to know all the particulars, and by the time he gets properly away, somebody else comes and brings her back like a drowned rat. Then all sorts of people goes in and out, and I get tired looking at them, and then fall asleep, and before I've been in that condition about a minute, you two come punching me and waken me up to ask questions about her! I wish that young lady was in Jerico—I do!” said the watchman, with a smothered growl.

“Come, come, my man!” said Hubert, slapping him soothingly on the shoulder. “Don't be savage, if you can help it! This gentleman has a gold coin in some of his pockets, I believe, and it will fall to you if you keep quiet and answer decently. Tell me how many have been in that house since the young lady was brought back like a drowned rat?”

“How many?” said the man, meditating, with his eyes fixed on Sir Norman's garments, and he, perceiving that, immediately gave him the promised coin to refresh his memory, which it did with amazing quickness. “How many—oh—let me see; there was the young man that brought her in, and left her there, and came out again, and went away. By-and-by, he came back with another, which I think this as gave me the money is him. After a little, they came out, first the other one, then this one, and went off; and the next that went in was a tall woman in black, with a mask on, and right behind her there came two men; the woman in the mask came out after a while; and about ten minutes after, the two men followed, and one of them carried something in his arms, that didn't look unlike a lady with her head in a shawl. Anything wrong, sir?” as Sir Norman gave a violent start and caught Hubert by the arm.

“Nothing! Where did they carry her to? What did they do with her? Go on! go

on!”

“Well,” said the watchman, eyeing the speaker curiously, “I'm going to. They went along, down to the river, both of them, and I saw a boat shove off, shortly after, and that something, with its head in a shawl, lying as peaceable as a lamb, with one of the two beside it. That's all—I went asleep about then, till you two were shaking me and waking me up.”

Sir Norman and Hubert looked at each other, one between despair and rage, the other with a thoughtful, half-inquiring air, as if he had some secret to tell, and was mentally questioning whether it was safe to do so. On the whole, he seemed to come to the conclusion, that a silent tongue maketh a wise head, and nodding and saying “Thank you!” to the watchman, he passed his arm through Sir Norman's, and drew him back to the door of Leoline's house.

“There is a light within,” he said, looking up at it; “how comes that?”

“I found the lamp burning, when I returned, and everything undisturbed. They must have entered noiselessly, and carried her off without a struggle,” replied Sir Norman, with a sort of groan.

“Have you searched the house—searched it well?”

“Thoroughly—from top to bottom!”

“It seems to me there ought to be some trace. Will you come back with me and look again?”

“It is no use; but there is nothing else I can do; so come along!”

They entered the house, and Sir Norman led the page direct to Leoline's room, where the light was.

“I left her here when I went away, and here the lamp was burning when I came back: so it must have been from this room she was taken.”

Hubert was gazing slowly and critically round, taking note of everything. Something glistened and flashed on the floor, under the mantel, and he went over and picked it up.

“What have you there?” asked Sir Norman in surprise; for the boy had started so suddenly, and flushed so violently, that it might have astonished any one.

“Only a shoe-buckle—a gentleman's—do you recognize it?”

Though he spoke in his usual careless way, and half-hummed the air of one of Lord Rochester's love songs, he watched him keenly as he examined it. It was a diamond buckle, exquisitely set, and of great beauty and value; but Sir Norman knew nothing of it.

“There are initials upon it—see there!” said Hubert, pointing, and still watching him with the same powerful glance. “The letters C. S. That can't stand for Count L'Estrange.”

“Who then can it stand for?” inquired Sir Norman, looking at him fixedly, and with far more penetration than the court page had given him credit for. “I am certain you know.”

“I suspect!” said the boy, emphatically, “nothing more; and if it is as I believe, I will bring you news of Leoline before you are two hours older.”

“How am I to know you are not deceiving me, and will not betray her into the power of the Earl of Rochester—if, indeed, she be not in his power already.”

“She is not in it, and never will be through me! I feel an odd interest in this matter, and I will be true to you, Sir Norman—though why I should be, I really don't know. I give you my word of honor that I will do what I can to find Leoline and restore her to you; and I have never yet broken my word of honor to any man,” said Hubert, drawing himself up.

“Well, I will trust you, because I cannot do anything better,” said Sir Norman, rather dolefully; “but why not let me go with you?”

“No, no! that would never do! I must go alone, and you must trust me implicitly. Give me your hand upon it.”

They shook hands silently, went down stairs, and stood for a moment at the door.

“You'll find me here at any hour between this and morning,” said Sir Norman. “Farewell now, and Heaven speed you!”

The boy waved his hand in adieu, and started off at a sharp pace. Sir Norman turned in the opposite direction for a short walk, to cool the fever in his blood, and think over all that had happened. As he went slowly along, in the shadow of the houses, he suddenly tripped up over something lying in his path, and was nearly precipitated over it.

Stooping down to examine the stumbling-block, it proved to be the rigid body of a man, and that man was Ormiston, stark and dead, with his face upturned to the calm night-sky.

CHAPTER XVII. THE HIDDEN FACE

When Mr. Malcolm Ormiston, with his usual good sense and penetration, took himself off, and left Leoline and Sir Norman tete-a-tete, his steps turned as mechanically as the needle to the North Pole toward La Masque's house. Before it he wandered, around it he wandered, like an uneasy ghost, lost in speculation about the hidden face, and fearfully impatient about the flight of time. If La Masque saw him hovering aloof and unable to tear himself away, perhaps it might touch her obdurate heart, and cause her to shorten the dreary interval, and summon him to her presence at once. Just then some one opened the door, and his heart began to beat with anticipation; some one pronounced his name, and, going over, he saw the animated bag of bones—otherwise his lady-love's vassal and porter.

“La Masque says,” began the attenuated lackey, and Ormiston's heart nearly jumped out of his mouth, “that she can't have anybody hanging about her house like its shadow; and she wants you to go away, and keep away, till the time comes she has mentioned.”

So saying the skeleton shut the door, and Ormiston's heart went down to zero. There being nothing for it but obedience, however, he slowly and reluctantly turned away, feeling in his bones, that if ever he came to the bliss and ecstasy of calling La Masque Mrs. Ormiston, the gray mare in his stable would be by long odds the better horse. Unintentionally his steps turned to the water-side, and he descended the flight of stairs, determined to get into a boat and watch the illumination from the river.

Late as was the hour, the Thames seemed alive with ferries and barges, and their numerous lights danced along the surface like fire-flies over a marsh. A gay barge, gilded and cushioned, was going slowly past; and as he stood directly under the lamp, he was recognized by a gentleman within it, who leaned over and hailed him,

“Ormiston! I say, Ormiston!”

“Well, my lord,” said Ormiston, recognizing the handsome face and animated voice of the Earl of Rochester.

“Have you any engagement for the next half-hour? If not, do me the favor to take a seat here, and watch London in flames from the river.”

“With all my heart,” said Ormiston, running down to the water's edge, and leaping into the boat. “With all this bustle of life around here, one would think it were noonday instead of midnight.”

“The whole city is astir about these fires. Have you any idea they will be successful?”

“Not the least. You know, my lord, the prediction runs, that the plague will rage till the living are no longer able to bury the dead.”

“It will soon come to that,” said the earl shuddering slightly, “if it continues increasing much longer as it does now daily. How do the bills of mortality run to-day?”

“I have not heard. Hark! There goes St. Paul's tolling twelve.”

“And there goes a flash of fire—the first among many. Look, look! How they spring up into the black darkness.”

“They will not do it long. Look at the sky, my lord.”

The earl glanced up at the midnight sky, of a dull and dingy red color, except where black and heavy clouds were heaving like angry billows, all dingy with smoke and streaked with bars of fiery red.

“I see! There is a storm coming, and a heavy one! Our worthy burghers and most worshipful Lord Mayor will see their fires extinguished shortly, and themselves sent home with wet jackets.”

“And for weeks, almost month, there has not fallen a drop of rain,” remarked Ormiston, gravely.

“A remarkable coincidence, truly. There seems to be a fatality hanging over this devoted city.”

“I wonder your lordship remains?”

The earl shrugged his shoulders significantly.

“It is not so easy leaving it as you think, Mr. Ormiston; but I am to turn my back to it to-morrow for a brief period. You are aware, I suppose, that the court leaves before daybreak for Oxford.”

“I believe I have heard something of it—how long to remain?”

“Till Charles takes it into his head to come back again,” said the earl, familiarly, “which will probably be in a week or two. Look at that sky, all black and scarlet; and look at those people—I scarcely thought there were half the number left alive in London.”

“Even the sick have come out to-night,” said Ormiston. “Half the pest-stricken

in the city have left their beds, full of newborn hope. One would think it were a carnival."

"So it is—a carnival of death! I hope, Ormiston," said the earl, looking at him with a light laugh, "the pretty little white fairy we rescued from the river is not one of the sick parading the streets."

Ormiston looked grave.

"No, my lord, I think she is not. I left her safe and secure."

"Who is she, Ormiston?" coaxed the earl, laughingly. "Pshaw, man! don't make a mountain out of a mole-hill! Tell me her name!"

"Her name is Leoline."

"What else?"

"That is just what I would like to have some one tell me. I give you my honor, my lord, I do not know."

The earl's face, half indignant, half incredulous, wholly curious, made Ormiston smile.

"It is a fact, my lord. I asked her her name, and she told me Leoline—a pretty title enough, but rather unsatisfactory."

"How long have you known her?"

"To the best of my belief," said Ormiston, musingly, "about four hours."

"Nonsense!" cried the earl, energetically. "What are you telling me, Ormiston? You said she was an old friend."

"I beg your pardon, my lord, I said no such thing. I told you she had escaped from her friends, which was strictly true."

"Then how the demon had you the impudence to come up and carry her off in that style? I certainly had a better right to her than you—the right of discovery; and I shall call upon you to deliver her up!"

"If she belonged to me I should only be too happy to oblige your lordship," laughed Ormiston; "but she is at present the property of Sir Norman Kingsley, and to him you must apply."

"Ah! His inamorata, is she? Well, I must say his taste is excellent; but I should think you ought to know her name, since you and he are noted for being a modern Damon and Pythias."

"Probably I should, my lord, only Sir Norman, unfortunately, does not know himself."

The earl's countenance looked so utterly blank at this announcement, that

Ormiston was forced to throw in a word of explanation.

“I mean to say, my lord, that he has fallen in love with her; and, judging from appearances, I should say his flame is not altogether hopeless, although they have met to-night for the first time.”

“A rapid passion. Where have you left her, Ormiston?”

“In her own house, my lord,” Ormiston replied, smiling quietly to himself.

“Where is that?”

“About a dozen yards from where I stood when you called me.”

“Who are her family?” continued the earl, who seemed possessed of a devouring curiosity.

“She has none that I know of. I imagine Mistress Leoline is an orphan. I know there was not a living soul but ourselves in the house I brought her to.”

“And you left her there alone?” exclaimed the earl, half starting up, as if about to order the boatman to row back to the landing.

Ormiston looked at his excited face with a glance full of quiet malice.

“No, my lord, not quits; Sir Norman Kingsley was with her!”

“Oh!” said the earl, smiling back with a look of chagrin. “Then he will probably find out her name before he comes away. I wonder you could give her up so easily to him, after all your trouble!”

“Smitten, my lord?” inquired Ormiston, maliciously.

“Hopelessly!” replied the earl, with a deep sigh. “She was a perfect little beauty; and if I can find her, I warn Sir Norman Kingsley to take care! I have already sent Hubert out in search of her; and, by the way,” said the earl, with a sudden increase of animation, “what a wonderful resemblance she bears to Hubert—I could almost swear they were one and the same!”

“The likeness is marvelous; but I should hate to take such an oath. I confess I am somewhat curious myself; but I stand no chance of having it gratified before to-morrow, I suppose.”

“How those fires blaze! It is much brighter than at noon-day. Show me the house in which Leoline lies?”.

Ormiston easily pointed it out, and showed the earl the light still burning in her window.

“It was in that room we found her first, dead of the plague!”

“Dead of the what?” cried the earl, aghast.

“Dead of the plague! I'll tell your lordship how it was,” said Ormiston, who

forthwith commend and related the story of their finding Leoline; of the resuscitation at the plague-pit; of the flight from Sir Norman's house, and of the delirious plunge into the river, and miraculous cure.

“A marvelous story,” commented the earl, much interested. “And Leoline seems to have as many lives as a cat! Who can she be—a princess in disguise—eh, Ormiston?”

“She looks fit to be a princess, or anything else; but your lordship knows as much about her, now, as I do.”

“You say she was dressed as a bride—how came that?”

“Simply enough. She was to be married to-night, had she not taken the plague instead.”

“Married? Why, I thought you told me a few minutes ago she was in love with Kingsley. It seems to me, Mr. Ormiston, your remarks are a trifle inconsistent,” said the earl, in a tone of astonished displeasure.

“Nevertheless, they are all perfectly true. Mistress Leoline was to be married, as I told you; but she was to marry to please her friends, and not herself. She had been in the habit of watching Kingsley go past her window; and the way she blushed, and went through the other little motions, convinces me that his course of true love will ran as smooth as this glassy river runs at present.”

“Kingsley is a lucky fellow. Will the discarded suitor have no voice in the matter; or is he such a simpleton as to give her up at a word?”

Ormiston laughed.

“Ah! to be sure; what will the count say? And, judging from some things I've heard, I should say he is violently in love with her.”

“Count who?” asked Rochester. “Or has he, like his ladylove, no other name?”

“Oh, no! The name of the gentleman who was so nearly blessed for life, and missed it, is Count L'Estrange!”

The earl had been lying listlessly back, only half intent upon his answer, as he watched the fire; but now he sprang sharply up, and stared Ormiston full in the face.

“Count what did you say?” was his eager question, while his eyes, more eager than his voice, strove to read the reply before it was repeated.

“Count L'Estrange. You know him, my lord?” said Ormiston, quietly.

“Ah!” said the earl. And then such a strange meaning smile went wandering about his face. “I have not said that! So his name is Count L'Estrange? Well, I

don't wonder now at the girl's beauty."

The earl sank back to his former nonchalant position and fell for a moment or two into deep musing; and then, as if the whole thing struck him in a new and ludicrous light, he broke out into an immoderate fit of laughter. Ormiston looked at him curiously.

"It is my turn to ask questions, now, my lord. Who is Count L'Estrange?"

"I know of no such person, Ormiston. I was thinking of something else! Was it Leoline who told you that was her lover's name?"

"No; I heard it by mere accident from another person. I am sure, if Leoline is not a personage in disguise, he is."

"And why do you think so?"

"An inward conviction, my lord. So you will not tell me who he is?"

"Have I not told you I know of no such person as Count L'Estrange? You ought to believe me. Oh, here it comes."

This last was addressed to a great drop of rain, which splashed heavily on his upturned face, followed by another and another in quick succession.

"The storm is upon us," said the earl, sitting up and wrapping his cloak closer around him, "and I am for Whitehall. Shall we land you, Ormiston, or take you there, too?"

"I must land," said Ormiston. "I have a pressing engagement for the next half-hour. Here it is, in a perfect deluge; the fires will be out in five minutes."

The barge touched the stairs, and Ormiston sprang out, with "Good-night" to the earl. The rain was rushing along, now, in torrents, and he ran upstairs and darted into an archway of the bridge, to seek the shelter. Some one else had come there before him, in search of the same thing; for he saw two dark figures standing within it as he entered.

"A sudden storm," was Ormiston's salutation, "and a furious one. There go the fires—hiss and splutter. I knew how it would be."

"Then Saul and Mr. Ormiston are among the prophets?"

Ormiston had heard that voice before; it was associated in his mind with a slouched hat and shadowy cloak; and by the fast-fading flicker of the firelight, he saw that both were here. The speaker was Count L'Estrange; the figure beside him, slender and boyish, was unknown.

"You have the advantage of me, sir," he said affecting ignorance. "May I ask who you are?"

“Certainly. A gentlemen, by courtesy and the grace of God.”

“And your name?”

“Count L'Estrange, at your service.”

Ormiston lifted his cap and bowed, with a feeling somehow, that the count was a man in authority.

“Mr. Ormiston assisted in doing a good deed, tonight, for a friend of mine,” said the count.

“Will he add to that obligation by telling me if he has not discovered her again, and brought her back?”

“Do you refer to the fair lady in yonder house?”

“So she is there? I thought so, George,” said the count, addressing himself to his companion. “Yes, I refer to her, the lady you saved from the river. You brought her there?”

“I brought her there,” replied Ormiston.

“She is there still?”

“I presume so. I have heard nothing to the contrary.”

“And alone?”

“She may be, now. Sir Norman Kingsley was with her when I left her,” said Ormiston, administering the fact with infinite relish.

There was a moment's silence. Ormiston could not see the count's face; but, judging from his own feelings, he fancied its expression must be sweet. The wild rush of the storm alone broke the silence, until the spirit again moved the count to speak.

“By what right does Sir Norman Kingsley visit her?” he inquired, in a voice betokening not the least particle of emotion.

“By the best of rights—that of her preserver, hoping soon to be her lover.”

There was an other brief silence, broken again by the count, in the same composed tone:

“Since the lady holds her levee so late, I, too, must have a word with her, when this deluge permits one to go abroad without danger of drowning.”

“It shown symptoms of clearing off, already,” said Ormiston, who, in his secret heart, thought it would be an excellent joke to bring the rivals face to face in the lady's presence; “so you will not have long to wait.”

To which observation the count replied not; and the three stood in silence, watching the fury of the storm.

Gradually it cleared away; and as the moon began to straggle out between the rifts in the clouds, the count saw something by her pale light that Ormiston saw not. That latter gentleman, standing with his back to the house of Leoline, and his face toward that of La Masque, did not observe the return of Sir Norman from St. Paul's, nor look after him as he rode away. But the count did both; and ten minutes after, when the rain had entirely ceased, and the moon and stars got the better of the clouds in their struggle for supremacy, he beheld La Masque flitting like a dark shadow in the same direction, and vanishing in at Leoline's door. The same instant, Ormiston started to go.

“The storm has entirely ceased,” he said, stepping out, and with the profound air of one making a new discovery, “and we are likely to have fine weather for the remainder of the night—or rather, morning. Good night, count.”

“Farewell,” said the count, as he and, his companion came out from the shadow of the archway, and turned to follow La Masque.

Ormiston, thinking the hour of waiting had elapsed, and feeling much more interested in the coming meeting than in Leoline or her visitors, paid very little attention to his two acquaintances. He saw them, it is true, enter Leoline's house, but at the same instant, he took up his post at La Masque's doorway, and concentrated his whole attention on that piece of architecture. Every moment seemed like a week now; and before he had stood at his post five minutes, he had worked himself up into a perfect fever of impatience. Sometimes he was inclined to knock and seek La Masque in her own home; but as often the fear of a chilling rebuke paralyzed his hand when he raised it. He was so sure she was within the house, that he never thought of looking for her elsewhere; and when, at the expiration of what seemed to him a century or two, but which in reality was about a quarter of an hour, there was a soft rustling of drapery behind him, and the sweetest of voices sounded in his ear, it fairly made him bound.

“Here again, Mr. Ormiston? Is this the fifth or sixth time I've found you in this place to-night?”

“La Masque!” he cried, between joy and surprise. “But surely, I was not totally unexpected this time?”

“Perhaps not. You are waiting here for me to redeem my promise, I suppose?”

“Can you doubt it? Since I knew you first, I have desired this hour as the blind desire sight.”

“Ah! And you will find it as sweet to look back upon as you have to look forward to,” said La Masque, derisively. “If you are wise for yourself, Mr. Ormiston, you will pause here, and give me back that fatal word.”

“Never, madame! And surely you will not be so pitilessly cruel as to draw back, now?”

“No, I have promised, and I shall perform; and let the consequences be what they may, they will rest upon your own head. You have been warned, and you still insist.”

“I still insist!”

“Then let us move farther over here into the shadow of the houses; this moonlight is so dreadfully bright!”

They moved on into the deep shadow, and there was a pulse throbbing in Ormiston's head and heart like the beating of a muffed drum. They paused and faced each other silently.

“Quick, madame!” cried Ormiston, hoarsely, his whole face flushed wildly.

His strange companion lifted her hand as if to remove the mask, and he saw that it shook like an aspen. She made one motion as though about to lift it, and then recoiled, as if from herself, in a sort of horror.

“My God! What is this man urging me to do? How can I ever fulfill that fatal promise?”

“Madame, you torture me!” said Ormiston, whose face showed what he felt. “You must keep your promise; so do not drive me wild waiting. Let me—”

He took a step toward her, as if to lift the mask himself, but she held out both arms to keep him off.

“No, no, no! Come not near me, Malcolm Ormiston! Fated man, since you will rush on your doom, Look! and let the sight blast you, if it will!”

She unfastened her mask, raised it, and with it the profusion of long, sweeping black hair.

Ormiston did look—in much the same way, perhaps, that Zulinka looked at the Veiled Prophet. The next moment there was a terrible cry, and he fell headlong with a crash, as if a bullet had whined through his heart.

CHAPTER XVIII. THE INTERVIEW.

I am not aware whether fainting was as much the fashion among the fair sex, in the days (or rather the nights) of which I have the honor to hold forth, as at the present time; but I am inclined to think not, from the simple fact that Leoline, though like John Bunyan, “grievously troubled and tossed about in her mind,” did nothing of the kind. For the first few moments, she was altogether too stunned by the suddenness of the shock to cry out or make the least resistance, and was conscious of nothing but of being rapidly borne along in somebody's arms. When this hazy view of things passed away, her new sensation was, the intensely uncomfortable one of being on the verge of suffocation. She made one frantic but futile effort to free herself and scream for help, but the strong arms held her with most loving tightness, and her cry was drowned in the hot atmosphere within the shawl, and never passed beyond it. Most assuredly Leoline would have been smothered then and there, had their journey been much longer; but, fortunately for her, it was only the few yards between her house and the river. She knew she was then carried down some steps, and she heard the dip of the oars in the water, and then her bearer paused, and went through a short dialogue with somebody else—with Count L'Estrange, she rather felt than knew, for nothing was audible but a low murmur. The only word she could make out was a low, emphatic “Remember!” in the count's voice, and then she knew she was in a boat, and that it was shoved off, and moving down the rapid river. The feeling of heat and suffocation was dreadful and as her abductor placed her on some cushions, she made another desperate but feeble effort to free herself from the smothering shawl, but a hand was laid lightly on hers, and a voice interposed.

“Lady, it is quite useless for you to struggle, as you are irrevocably in my power, but if you will promise faithfully not to make any outcry, and will submit to be blindfolded, I shall remove this oppressive muffling from your head. Tell me if you will promise.”

He had partly raised the shawl, and a gush of free air came revivingly in, and enabled Leoline to gasp out a faint “I promise!” As she spoke, it was lifted off altogether, and she caught one bright fleeting glimpse of the river, sparkling and silvery in the moonlight; of the bright blue sky, gemmed with countless stars, and of some one by her side in the dress of a court-page, whose face was

perfectly unknown to her. The next instant, a bandage was bound tightly over her eyes, excluding every ray of light, while the strange voice again spoke apologetically,

“Pardon, lady, but it is my orders! I am commanded to treat you with every respect, but not to let you see where you are borne to.”

“By what right does Count L'Estrange commit this outrage!” began Leoline, almost as imperiously as Miranda herself, and making use of her tongue, like a true woman, the very first moment it was at her disposal. “How dare he carry me off in this atrocious way? Whoever you are, sir, if you have the spirit of a man, you will bring me directly back to my own house.”

“I am very sorry, lady, but I have received orders that must be obeyed! You must come with me, but you need fear nothing; you will be as safe and secure as in your own home.”

“Secure enough, no doubt!” said Leoline, bitterly. “I never did like Count L'Estrange, but I never knew he was a coward and a villain till now!”

Her companion made no reply to this forcible address, and there was a moment's indignant silence on Leoline's part, broken only by the dip of the oars, and the rippling of the water. Then,

“Will you not tell me, at least, where you are taking me to?” haughtily demanded Leoline.

“Lady, I cannot! It was to prevent you knowing, that you have been blindfolded.”

“Oh! your master has a faithful servant, I see! How long am I to be kept a prisoner?”

“I do not know.”

“Where is Count L'Estrange?”

“I cannot tell.”

“Where am I to see him?”

“I cannot say.”

“Ha!” said Leoline, with infinite contempt, and turning her back upon him she relapsed into gloomy silence. It had all been so sudden, and had taken her so much by surprise, that she had not had time to think of the consequences until now. But now they came upon her with a rush, and with dismal distinctness; and most distinct among all was, what would Sir Norman say! Of course, with all a lover's impatience, he would be at his post by sunrise, would come to look for his bride, and find himself sold! By that time she would be far enough away,

perhaps a melancholy corpse (and at this dreary passage in her meditations, Leoline sighed profoundly), and he would never know what had become of her, or how much and how long she had loved him. And this hateful Count L'Estrange, what did he intend to do with her? Perhaps go so far as to make her marry him, and imprison her with the rest of his wives; for Leoline was prepared to think the very worst of the count, and had not the slightest doubt that he already had a harem full of abducted wives, somewhere. But no—he never could do that, he might do what he liked with weaker minds, but she never would be a bride of his while the plague or poison was to be had in London. And with this invincible determination rooted fixedly, not to say obstinately, in her mind, she was nearly pitched overboard by the boat suddenly landing at some unexpected place. A little natural scream of terror was repressed on her lips by a hand being placed over them, and the determined but perfectly respectful tones of the person beside her speaking.

“Remember your promise, lady, and do not make a noise. We have arrived at our journey's end, and if you will take my arm, I will lead you along, instead of carrying you.”

Leoline was rather surprised to find the journey so short, but she arose directly, with silence and dignity—at least with as much of the latter commodity as could be reasonably expected, considering that boats on water are rather unsteady things to be dignified in—and was led gently and with care out of the swaying vessel, and up another flight of stairs. Then, in a few moments, she was conscious of passing from the free night air into the closer atmosphere of a house; and in going through an endless labyrinth of corridors, and passages, and suites of rooms, and flights of stairs, until she became so extremely tired, that she stopped with spirited abruptness, and in the plainest possible English, gave her conductor to understand that they had gone about far enough for all practical purposes. To which that patient and respectful individual replied that he was glad to inform her they had but a few more steps to go, which the next moment proved to be true, for he stopped and announced that their promenade was over for the night.

“And I suppose I may have the use of my eyes at last?” inquired Leoline, with more haughtiness than Sir Norman could have believed possible so gentle a voice could have expressed.

For reply, her companion rapidly untied the bandage, and withdrew it with a flourish. The dazzling brightness that burst upon her, so blinded her, that for a moment she could distinguish nothing; and when she looked round to contemplate her companion, she found him hurriedly making his exit, and

securely locking the door.

The sound of the key turning in the lock gave her a most peculiar sensation, which none but those who have experienced it can properly understand. It is not the most comfortable feeling in the world to know you are a prisoner, even if you have no key turned upon you but the weather, and your jailer be a high east wind and lashing rain. Leoline's prison and jailer were something worse; and, for the first time, a chill of fear and dismay crept icily to the core of her heart. But Leoline had something of Miranda's courage, as well as her looks and temper; so she tried to feel as brave as possible, and not think of her unpleasant predicament while there remained anything else to think about. Perhaps she might escape, too; and, as this notion struck her, she looked with eager anxiety, not unmixed with curiosity, at the place where she was. By this time, her eyes had been accustomed to the light, which proceeded from a great antique lamp of bronze, pendent by a brass chain from the ceiling; and she saw she was in a moderately sized and by no means splendid room. But what struck her most was, that everything had a look of age about it, from the glittering oak beams of the floor to the faded ghostly hangings on the wall. There was a bed at one end—a great spectral ark of a thing, like a mausoleum, with drapery as old and spectral as that on the walls, and in which she could no more have lain than in a moth-eaten shroud. The seats and the one table the room held were of the same ancient and weird pattern, and the sight of them gave her a shivering sensation not unlike an ague chill. There was but one door—a huge structure, with shining panels, securely locked; and escape from that quarter was utterly out of the question. There was one window, hung with dark curtains of tarnished embroidery, but in pushing them aside, she met only a dull blank of unlighted glass, for the shutters were firmly secured without. Altogether, she could not form the slightest idea where she was; and, with a feeling of utter despair, she sat down on one of the queer old chairs, with much the same feeling as if she were sitting in a tomb.

What would Sir Norman say? What would he ever think of her, when he found her gone. And what was destined to be her fate in this dreadful out-of-the-way place? She would have cried, as most of her sex would be tempted to do in such a situation, but that her dislike and horror of Count L'Estrange was a good deal stronger than her grief, and turned her tears to sparks of indignant fire. Never, never, never! would she be his wife! He might kill her a thousand times, if he liked, and she wouldn't yield an inch. She did not mind dying in a good cause; she could do it but once. And with Sir Norman despising her, as she felt he must do, when he found her run away, she rather liked the idea than otherwise. Mentally, she bade adieu to all her friends before beginning to prepare

for her melancholy fate—to her handsome lover, to his gallant friend Ormiston, to her poor nurse, Prudence, and to her mysterious visitor, La Masque.

La Masque! Ah! that name awoke a new chord of recollection—the casket, she had it with her yet. Instantly, everything was forgotten but it and its contents; and she placed a chair directly under the lamp, drew it out, and looked at it. It was a pretty little bijou itself, with its polished ivory surface, and shining clasps of silver. But the inside had far more interest for her than the outside, and she fitted the key and unlocked it with a trembling hand. It was lined with azure velvet, wrought with silver thread, in dainty wreathe of water lilies; and in the bottom, neatly folded, lay a sheet of foolscap. She opened it with nervous haste; it was a common sheet enough, stamped with fool's cap and bells, that showed it belonged to Cromwell's time. It was closely written, in a light, fair hand, and bore the title “Leoline's History.”

Leoline's hand trembled so with eagerness, she could scarcely hold the paper; but her eye rapidly ran from line to line, and she stopped not till she reached the end. While she read, her face alternately flushed and paled, her eyes dilated, her lips parted; and before she finished it, there came over all a look of the most unutterable horror. It dropped from her powerless fingers as she finished; and she sank back in her chair with such a ghastly paleness, that it seemed absolutely like the lividness of death.

A sudden and startling noise awoke her from her trance of horror—some one trying to get in at the window! The chill of terror it sent through every vein acted as a sort of counter-irritant to the other feeling, and she sprang from her chair and turned her face fearfully toward the sounds. But in all her terror she did not forget the mysterious sheet of foolscap, which lay, looking up at her, on the floor; and she snatched it up, and thrust it and the casket out of sight. Still the sounds went on, but softly and cautiously; and at intervals, as if the worker were afraid of being heard. Leoline went back, step by step, to the other extremity of the room, with her eyes still fixed on the window, and on her face a white terror, that left her perfectly colorless.

Who could it be? Not Count L'Estrange, for he would surely not need to enter his own house like a burglar—not Sir Norman Kingsley, for he could certainly not find out her abduction and her prison so soon, and she had no other friends in the whole wide world to trouble themselves about her. There was one, but the idea of ever seeing her again was so unspeakably dreadful, that she would rather have seen the most horrible spectre her imagination could conjure up, than that tall, graceful, rich-robed form.

Still the noises perseveringly continued; there was the sound of withdrawing

bolts, and then a pale ray of moonlight shot between the parted curtains, shoving the shutters had been opened. Whiter and whiter Leoline grew, and she felt herself growing cold and rigid with mortal fear. Softly the window was raised, a hand stole in and parted the curtains, and a pale face and two great dark eyes wandered slowly round the room, and rested at last on her, standing, like a galvanized corpse, as far from the window as the wall would permit. The hand was lifted in a warning gesture, as if to enforce silence; the window was raised still higher, a figure, lithe and agile as a cat, sprang lightly into the room, and standing with his back to her, re-closed the shutters, re-shut the window, and re-drew the curtains, before taking the trouble to turn round.

This discreet little manoeuvre, which showed her visitor was human, and gifted with human prudence, re-assured Leoline a little; and, to judge by the reverse of the medal, the nocturnal intruder was nothing very formidable after all. But the stranger did not keep her long in suspense; while she stood gazing at him, as if fascinated, he turned round, stepped forward, took off his cap, made her a courtly bow, and then straightening himself up, prepared, with great coolness, to scrutinize and be scrutinized.

Well might they look at each other; for the two faces were perfectly the same, and each one saw himself and herself as others saw them. There was the same coal-black, curling hair; the same lustrous dark eyes; the same clear, colorless complexion, the same delicate, perfect features; nothing was different but the costume and the expression. That latter was essentially different, for the young lady's betrayed amazement, terror, doubt, and delight all at once; while the young gentleman's was a grand, careless surprise, mixed with just a dash of curiosity.

He was the first to speak; and after they had stared at each other for the space of five minutes, he described a graceful sweep with his hand, and held forth in the following strain,

“I greatly fear, fair Leoline, that I have startled you by my sudden and surprising entrance; and if I have been the cause of a moment's alarm to one so perfectly beautiful, I shall hate myself for ever after. If I could have got in any other way, rest assured I would not have risked my neck and your peace of mind by such a suspicious means of ingress as the window; but if you will take the trouble to notice, the door is thick, and I am composed of too solid flesh to whisk through the keyhole; so I had to make my appearance the best way I could.”

“Who are you?” faintly asked Leoline.

“Your friend, fair lady, and Sir Norman Kingsley's.”

Hubert looked to see Leoline start and blush, and was deeply gratified to see her do both; and her whole pretty countenance became alive with new-born hope, as if that name were a magic talisman of freedom and joy.

“What is your name, and who are you?” she inquired, in a breathless sort of way, that made Hubert look at her a moment in calm astonishment.

“I have told you your friend; christened at some remote period, Hubert. For further particulars, apply to the Earl of Rochester, whose page I am.”

“The Earl of Rochester's page!” she repeated, in the same quick, excited way, that surprised and rather lowered her in that good youth's opinion, for giving way to any feelings so plebeian. “It is—it must be the same!”

“I have no doubt of it,” said Hubert. “The same what?”

“Did you not come from France—from Dijon, recently?” went on Leoline, rather inappositely, as it struck her hearer.

“Certainly I came from Dijon. Had I the honor of being known to you there?”

“How strange! How wonderful!” said Leoline, with a paling cheek and quickened breathing. “How mysterious those things turn out I Thank Heaven that I have found some one to love at last!”

This speech, which was Greek, algebra, high Dutch, or thereabouts, to Master Hubert, caused him to stare to such an extent, that when he came to think of it afterward, positively shocked him. The two great, wondering dark eyes transfixing her with so much amazement, brought Leoline to a sense of her talking unfathomable mysteries, quite incomprehensible to her handsome auditor. She looked at him with a smile, held out her hand; and Hubert received a strange little electric thrill, to see that her eyes were full of tears. He took the hand and raised it to his lips, wondering if the young lady, struck by his good looks, had conceived a rash and inordinate attack of love at first sight, and was about to offer herself to him and discard Sir Norman for ever. From this speculation, the sweet voice aroused him.

“You have told me who you are. Now, do you know who I am?”

“I hope so, fairest Leoline. I know you are the most beautiful lady in England, and to-morrow will be called Lady Kingsley!”

“I am something more,” said Leoline, holding his hand between both hers, and bending near him; “I am your sister!”

The Earl of Rochester's page must have had good blood in his veins; for never was there duke, grandee, or peer of the realm, more radically and unaffectedly nonchalant than he. To this unexpected announcement he listened with most

dignified and well-bred composure, and in his secret heart, or rather vanity, more disappointed than otherwise, to find his first solution of her tenderness a great mistake. Leoline held his hand tight in hers, and looked with loving and tearful eyes in his face.

“Dear Hubert, you are my brother—my long-unknown brother, and I love you with my whole heart!”

“Am I?” said Hubert. “I dare say I am, for they all say we look as much alike as two peas. I am excessively delighted to hear it, and to know that you love me. Permit me to embrace my new relative.”

With which the court page kissed Leoline with emphasis, while she scarcely knew whether to laugh, cry, or be provoked at his composure. On the whole, she did a little of all three, and pushed him away with a halt pout.

“You insensible mortal! How can you stand there and hear that you have found a sister with so much indifference?”

“Indifferent? Not I! You have no idea how wildly excited I am!” said Hubert, in a voice not betokening the slightest emotion. “How did you find it out, Leoline?”

“Never mind! I shall tell you that again. You don't doubt it, I hope?”

“Of course not! I knew from the first moment I set eyes on you, that if you were not my sister, you ought to be! I wish you'd tell me all the particulars, Leoline.”

“I shall do so as soon as I am out of this; but how can I tell you anything here?”

“That's true!” said Hubert, reflectively. “Well, I'll wait. Now, don't you wonder how I found you out, and came here?”

“Indeed I do. How was it, Hubert?”

“Oh, well, I don't know as I can altogether tell you; but you see, Sir Norman Kingsley being possessed of an inspiration that something was happening to you, came to your house a short time ago, and, as he suspected, discovered that you were missing. I met him there, rather depressed in his mind about it, and he told me—beginning the conversation, I must say, in a very excited manner,” said Hubert, parenthetically, as memory recalled the furious shaking he had undergone—“and he told me he fancied you were abducted, and by one Count L'Estrange. Now I had a hazy idea who Count L'Estrange was, and where he would be most apt to take you to; and so I came here, and after some searching, more inquiring, and a few unmitigated falsehoods (you'll regret to hear),

discovered you were locked up in this place, and succeeded in getting in through the window. Sir Norman is waiting for me in a state of distraction so now, having found you, I will go and relieve his mind by reporting accordingly."

"And leave me here?" cried Leoline, in affright, "and in the power of Count L'Estrange? Oh! no, no! You must take me with you, Hubert!"

"My dear Leoline, it is quite impossible to do it without help, and without a ladder. I will return to Sir Norman; and when the darkness comes that precedes day-dawn, we will raise the ladder to your window, and try to get you out. Be patient—only wait an hour or two, and then you will be free."

"But, O Hubert, where am I? What dreadful place it this?"

"Why, I do not know that this is a very dreadful place; and most people consider it a sufficiently respectable house; but, still, I would rather see my sister anywhere else than in it, and will take the trouble of kidnapping her out of it as quickly as possible."

"But, Hubert, tell me—do tell me, who is Count L'Estrange?" Hubert laughed.

"Cannot, really, Leoline! at least, not until to-morrow, and you are Lady Kingsley."

"But, what if he should come here to-night?"

"I do not think there is much danger of that, but whether he does or not, rest assured you shall be free to-morrow! At all events, it is quite impossible for you to escape with me now; and even as it is, I run the risk of being detected, and made a prisoner, myself. You must be patient and wait, Leoline, and trust to Providence and your brother Hubert!"

"I must, I suppose!" said Leoline, sighing, "and you cannot take me away until day-dawn."

"Quite impossible; and then all this drapery of yours will be ever so much in the way. Would you object to garments like these?" pointing to his doublet and hose. "If you would not, I think I could procure you a fit-out."

"But I should, though!" said Leoline, with spirit "and most decidedly, too! I shall wear nothing of the kind, Sir Page!"

"Every one to her fancy!" said Hubert, with a French shrug, "and my pretty sister shall have hers in spite of earth, air, fire, and water! And now, fair Leoline, for a brief time, adieu, and au revoir!"

"You will not fail me!" exclaimed Leoline, earnestly, clasping her hands.

"If I do, it shall be the last thing I will fail in on earth; for if I am alive by to-morrow morning, Leoline shall be free!"

“And you will be careful—you will both be careful!”

“Excessively careful! Now then.”

The last two words were addressed to the window which he noiselessly opened as he spoke. Leoline caught a glimpse of the bright free moonlight, and watched him with desperate envy; but the next moment the shutters were closed, and Hubert and the moonlight were both gone.

CHAPTER XIX. HUBERT'S WHISPER.

Sir Norman Kingsley's consternation and horror on discovering the dead body of his friend, was only equalled by his amazement as to how he got there, or how he came to be dead at all. The livid face, up turned to the moonlight, was unmistakably the face of a dead man—it was no swoon, no deception, like Leoline's; for the blue, ghastly paleness that marks the flight of the soul from the body was stamped on every rigid feature. Yet, Sir Norman could not realize it. We all know how hard it is to realize the death of a friend from whom we have but lately parted in full health and life, and Ormiston's death was so sudden. Why, it was not quite two hours since they had parted in Leoline's house, and even the plague could not carry off a victim as quickly as this.

“Ormiston! Ormiston!” he called, between grief and dismay, as he raised him in his arms, with his hand over the stilled heart; but Ormiston answered not, and the heart gave no pulsation beneath his fingers. He tore open his doublet, as the thought of the plague flashed through his mind, but no plague-spot was to be seen, and it was quite evident, from the appearance of the face, that he had not died of the distemper, neither was there any wound or mark to show that he had met his end violently. Yet the cold, white face was convulsed, as if he had died in throes of agony, the hands were clenched, till the nails sank into the flesh; and that was the only outward sign or token that he had suffered in expiring.

Sir Norman was completely at a loss, and half beside himself, with a thousand conflicting feelings of sorrow, astonishment, and mystification. The rapid and exciting events of the night had turned his head into a mental chaos, as they very well might, but he still had commonsense enough left to know that something must be done about this immediately. He knew the best place to take Ormiston was to the nearest apothecary's shop, which establishments were generally open, and filled, the whole livelong night, by the sick and their friends. As he was meditating whether or not to call the surly watchman to help him carry the body, a pest-cart came, providentially, along, and the driver-seeing a young man bending over a prostrate form-guessed at once what was the matter, and came to a halt.

“Another one!” he said, coming leisurely up, and glancing at the lifeless form with a very professional eye. “Well, I think there is room for another one in the cart; so bear a hand, friend, and let us have him out of this.”

“You are mistaken!” said Sir Norman sharply, “he has not died of the plague. I am not even certain whether he is dead at all.”

The driver looked at Sir Norman, then stooped down and touched Ormiston's icy face, and listened to hear him breathe. He stood up after a moment, with some thing like a small laugh.

“If he's alive,” he said, turning to go, “then I never saw any one dead! Good night, sir, I wish you joy when you bring him to.”

“Stay!” exclaimed the young man, “I wish you to assist me in bringing him to yonder apothecary's shop, and you may have this for your pains.”

“This” proved to be a talisman of alacrity; for the man pocketed it, and briskly laid hold of Ormiston by the feet, while Sir Norman wrapped his cloak reverently about him and took him by the shoulders. In this style his body was conveyed to the apothecary's shop which they found half full of applicants for medicine, among whom their entrance with the corpse produced no greater sensation than a momentary stare. The attire and bearing of Sir Norman proving him to be something different from their usual class of visitors, bringing one of the drowsy apprentices immediately to his side, inquiring what were his orders.

“A private room, and your master's attendance directly,” was the authoritative reply.

Both were to be had; the former, a hole in the wall behind the shop; the latter, a pallid, cadaverous-looking person, with the air of one who had been dead a week, thought better of it and rose again. There was a long table in the aforesaid hole in the wall, bearing a strong family likeness to a dissecting-table; upon which the stark figure was laid, and the pest-cart driver disappeared. The apothecary held a mirror close to the face; applied his ear to the pulse and heart; held a pocket-mirror over his mouth, looked at it; shook his head; and set down the candle with decision.

“The man is dead, sir!” was his criticism, “dead as a door nail! All the medicine in the shop wouldn't kindle one spark of life in such ashes!”

“At least, try! Try something—bleeding for instance,” suggested Sir Norman.

Again the apothecary examined the body, and again he shook his head dolefully.

“It's no use, sir: but, if it will please, you can try.”

The right arm was bared; the lancet inserted, one or two black drops sluggishly followed and nothing more.

“It's all a waste of time, you see,” remarked the apothecary, wiping his

dreadful little weapon, “he's as dead as ever I saw anybody in my life! How did he come to his end, sir—not by the plague?”

“I don't know,” said Sir Norman, gloomily. “I wish you would tell me that.”

“Can't do it, sir; my skill doesn't extend that far. There is no plague-spot or visible wound or bruise on the person; so he must have died of some internal complaint—probably disease of the heart.”

“Never knew him to have such a thing,” said Sir Norman, sighing. “It is very mysterious and very dreadful, and notwithstanding all you have said, I cannot believe him dead. Can he not remain here until morning, at least?”

The starved apothecary looked at him out of a pair of hollow, melancholy eyes.

“Gold can do anything,” was his plaintive reply.

“I understand. You shall have it. Are you sure you can do nothing more for him?”

“Nothing whatever, sir; and excuse me, but there are customers in the shop, and I must leave, sir.”

Which he did, accordingly; and Sir Norman was left alone with all that remained of him who, two hours before, was his warm friend. He could scarcely believe that it was the calm majesty of death that so changed the expression of that white face, and yet, the longer he looked, the more deeply an inward conviction assured him that it was so. He chafed the chilling hands and face, he applied hartshorn and burnt feathers to the nostrils, but all these applications, though excellent in their way, could not exactly raise the dead to life, and, in this case, proved a signal failure. He gave up his doctoring, at last, in despair, and folding his arms, looked down at what lay on the table, and tried to convince himself that it was Ormiston. So absorbed was he in the endeavor, that he heeded not the passing moments, until it struck him with a shock that Hubert might even now be waiting for him at the trysting-place, with news of Leoline. Love is stronger than friendship, stronger than grief, stronger than death, stronger than every other feeling in the world; so he suddenly seized his hat, turned his back on Ormiston and the apothecary's shop, and strode off to the place he had quitted.

No Hubert was there, but two figures were passing slowly along in the moonlight, and one of them he recognized, with an impulse to spring at him like a tiger and strangle him. But he had been so shocked and subdued by his recent discovery, that the impulse which, half an hour before, would have been unhesitatingly obeyed, went for nothing, now; and there was more of reproach,

even, than anger in his voice, as he went over and laid his hand on the shoulder of one of them.

“Stay!” he said. “One word with you, Count L'Estrange. What have you done with Leoline!”

“Ah! Sir Norman, as I live!” cried the count wheeling round and lifting his hat. “Give me good even—or rather, good morning—Kingsley, for St. Paul's has long gone the midnight hour.”

Sir Norman, with his hand still on his shoulder, returned not the courtesy, and regarding the gallant count with a stern eye.

“Where is Leoline?” he frigidly repeated.

“Really,” said the count, with some embarrassment, “you attack me so unexpectedly, and so like a ghost or a highwayman—by the way I have a word to say to you about highwaymen, and was seeking you to say it.”

“Where is Leoline?” shouted the exasperated young knight, releasing his shoulder, and clutching him by the throat. “Tell me or, by Heaven! I'll pitch you neck and heels into the Thames!”

Instantly the sword of the count's companion flashed in the moonlight, and, in two seconds more, its blue blade would have ended the earthly career of Sir Norman Kingsley, had not the count quickly sprang back, and made a motion for his companion to hold.

“Wait!” he cried, commandingly, with his arm outstretched to each. “Keep off! George, sheathe your sword and stand aside. Sir Norman Kingsley, one word with you, and be it in peace.”

“There can be no peace between us,” replied that aggravated young gentleman, fiercely “until you tell me what has become of Leoline.”

“All in good time. We have a listener, and does it not strike you our conference should be private!”

“Public or private, it matters not a jot, so that you tell me what you've done with Leoline,” replied Sir Norman, with whom it was evident getting beyond this question was a moral and physical impossibility. “And if you do not give an account of yourself, I'll run you through as sure as your name is Count L'Estrange!”

A strange sort of smile came over the face of the count at this direful threat, as if he fancied in that case, he was safe enough; but Sir Norman, luckily, did not see it, and heard only the suave reply:

“Certainly, Sir Norman; I shall be delighted to do so. Let us stand over there in

the shadow of that arch; and, George, do you remain here within call."

The count blandly waved Sir Norman to follow, which Sir Norman did, with much the mein of a sulky lion; and, a moment after, both were facing each other within the archway.

"Well!" cried the young knight, impatiently; "I am waiting. Go on!"

"My dear Kingsley," responded the count, in his easy way, "I think you are laboring under a little mistake. I have nothing to go on about; it is you who are to begin the controversy."

"Do you dare to play with me?" exclaimed Sir Norman, furiously. "I tell you to take care how you speak! What have you done with Leoline?"

"That is the fourth or fifth time that you've asked me that question," said the count, with provoking indifference. "What do you imagine I have done with her?"

Sir Norman's feelings, which had been rising ever since their meeting, got up to such a height at this aggravating question, that he gave vent to an oath, and laid his hand on his sword; but the count's hand lightly interposed before it came out.

"Not yet, Sir Norman. Be calm; talk rationally. What do you accuse me of doing with Leoline?"

"Do you dare deny having carried her off?"

"Deny it? No; I am never afraid to father my own deeds."

"Ah!" said Sir Norman grinding his teeth. "Then you acknowledge it?"

"I acknowledge it—yes. What next?"

The perfect composure of his tone fell like a cool, damp towel on the fire of Sir Norman's wrath. It did not quite extinguish the flame, however—only quenched it a little—and it still hissed hotly underneath.

"And you dare to stand before me and acknowledge such an act?" exclaimed Sir Norman, perfectly astounded at the cool assurance of the man.

"Verily, yea," said the count, laughing. "I seldom take the trouble to deny my acts. What next?"

"There is nothing next," said Sir Norman, severely, "until we have come to a proper understanding about this. Are you aware, sir, that that lady is my promised bride?"

"No, I do not know that I am. On the contrary, I have an idea she is mine."

"She was, you mean. You know she was forced into consenting by yourself

and her nurse!”

“Still she consented; and a bond is a bond, and a promise a promise, all the world over.”

“Not with a woman,” said Sir Norman, with stern dogmatism. “It is their privilege to break their promise and change their mind sixty times an hour, if they choose. Leoline has seen fit to do both, and has accepted me in your stead; therefore I command you instantly to give her up!”

“Softly, my friend—softly. How was I to know all this?”

“You ought to have known it!” returned Sir Norman, in the same dogmatical way; “or if you didn't, you do now; so say no more about it. Where is she, I tell you?” repeated the young man, in a frenzy.

“Your patience one moment longer, until we see which of us has the best right to the lady. I have a prior claim.”

“A forced one. Leoline does not care a snap far you—and she loves me.”

“What extraordinary bad taste!” said the count, thoughtfully. “Did she tell you that?”

“Yes; she did tell me this, and a great deal more. Come—have done talking, and tell me where she is, or I'll—”

“Oh, no, you wouldn't!” said the count, teasingly. “Since matters stand in this light I'll tell you what I'll do. I acknowledge that I carried off Leoline, viewing her as my promised bride, and have sent her to my own home in the care of a trusty messenger, where I give you my word of honor, I have not been since. She is as safe there, and much safer than in her own house, until morning, and it would be a pity to disturb her at this unseasonable hour. When the morning comes, we will both go to her together—state our rival claims—and whichever one she decides on accepting, can have her, and end the matter at once.”

The count paused and meditated. This proposal was all very plausible and nice on the surface, but Sir Norman with his usual penetration and acuteness, looked farther than the surface, and found a flaw.

“And how am I to know,” he asked, doubtingly, “that you will not go to her to-night and spirit her off where I will never hear of either of you again?”

“In the very best way in the world: we will not part company until morning comes, are we at peace?” inquired the count, smiling and holding out but hand.

“Until then, we will have to be, I suppose,” replied Sir Norman, rather ungraciously taking the hand as if it were red-hot, and dropping it again. “And we are to stand here and rail at each other, in the meantime?”

“By no means! Even the most sublime prospect tires when surveyed too long. There is a little excursion which I would like you to accompany me on, if you have no objection.”

“Where to?”

“To the ruin, where you have already been twice to-night.”

Sir Norman stared.

“And who told you this fact, Sir Count?”

“Never mind; I have heard it. Would you object to a third excursion there before morning?”

Again Sir Norman paused and meditated. There was no use in staying where he was, that would bring him no nearer to Leoline, and nothing was to be gained by killing the count beyond the mere transitory pleasure of the thing. On the other hand, he had an intense and ardent desire to re-visit the ruin, and learn what had become of Miranda—the only draw-back being that, if they were found they would both be most assuredly beheaded. Then, again, there was Hubert.

“Well,” inquired the count, as Sir Norman looked up.

“I have no objection to go with you to the ruin,” was the reply, “only this; if we are seen there, we will be dead men two minutes after; and I have no desire to depart this life until I have had that promised interview with Leoline.”

“I have thought of that,” said the count, “and have provided for it. We may venture in the lion's den without the slightest danger: all that is required being your promise to guide us thither. Do you give it?”

“I do; but I expect a friend here shortly, and cannot start until he comes.”

“If you mean me by that, I am here,” said a voice at his elbow; and, looking round, he saw Hubert himself, standing there, a quiet listener and spectator of the scene.

Count L'Estrange looked at him with interest, and Hubert, affecting not to notice the survey, watched Sir Norman.

“Well,” was that individual's eager address, “were you successful?”

The count was still watching the boy so intently, that that most discreet youth was suddenly seized with a violent fit of coughing, which precluded all possibility of reply for at least five minutes; and Sir Norman, at the same moment, felt his arm receive a sharp and warning pinch.

“Is this your friend?” asked the count. “He is a very small one, and seems in a

bad state of health."

Sir Norman, still under the influence of the pinch, replied by an inaudible murmur, and looked with a deeply mystified expression, at Hubert.

"He bears a strong resemblance to the lady we were talking of a moment ago," continued the count—"is sufficiently like her, in fact, to be her brother; and, I see wears the livery of the Earl of Rochester."

"God spare you your eye-sight!" said Sir Norman, impatiently. "Can you not see, among the rest, that I have a few words to say to him in private? Permit us to leave you for a moment."

"There is no need to do so. I will leave you, as I have a few words to say to the person who is with me."

So saying the count walked away, and Hubert followed him with a most curious look.

"Now," cried Sir Norman, eagerly, "what news?"

"Good!" said the boy. "Leoline is safe!"

"And where?"

"Not far from here. Didn't he tell you?"

"The count? No—yes; he said she was at his house."

"Exactly. That is where she is," said Hubert, looking much relieved. "And, at present, perfectly safe."

"And did you see her?"

"Of course; and heard her too. She was dreadfully anxious to come with me; but that was out of the question."

"And how is she to be got away?"

"That I do not clearly see. We will have to bring a ladder, and there will be so much danger, and so little chance of success, that, to me it seems an almost hopeless task. Where did you meet Count L'Estrange?"

"Here; and he told me that he had abducted her, and held her a prisoner in his own house."

"He owned that did he? I wonder you were not fit to kill him?"

"So I was, at first, but he talked the matter over somehow."

And hereupon Sir Norman briefly and quickly rehearsed the substance of their conversation. Hubert listened to it attentively, and laughed as he concluded.

"Well, I do not see that you can do otherwise, Sir Norman, and I think it

would be wise to obey the count for to-night, at least. Then to-morrow—if things do not go on well, we can take the law in our own hands."

"Can we?" said Sir Norman, doubtfully, "I do wish you would tell me who this infernal count is, Hubert, for I am certain you know."

"Not until to-morrow—you shall know him then."

"To-morrow! to-morrow!" exclaimed Sir Norman, disconsolately. "Everything is postponed until to-morrow! Oh, here comes the count back again. Are we going to start now, I wonder?"

"Is your friend to accompany us on our expedition?" inquired the count, standing before them. "It shall be quite as you say, Mr. Kingsley."

"My friend can do as he pleases. What do you say, Hubert?"

"I should like to go, of all things, if neither of you have any objections."

"Come on, then," said the count, "we will find horses in readiness a short distance from this."

The three started together, and walked on in silence through several streets, until they reached a retired inn, where the count's recent companion stood, with the horses. Count L'Estrange whispered a few words to him, upon which he bowed and retired; and in an instant they were all in the saddle, and galloping away.

The journey was rather a silent one, and what conversation there was, was principally sustained by the count. Hubert's usual flow of pertinent chat seemed to have forsaken him, and Sir Norman had so many other things to think of—Leoline, Ormiston, Miranda, and the mysterious count himself—that he felt in no mood for talking. Soon, they left the city behind them; the succeeding two miles were quickly passed over, and the "Golden Crown," all dark and forsaken, now hove in sight. As they reached this, and cantered up the road leading to the ruin, Sir Norman drew rein, and said:

"I think our best plan would be, to dismount, and lead our horses the rest of the way, and not incur any unnecessary danger by making a noise. We can fasten them to these trees, where they will be at hand when we come out."

"Wait one moment," said the count, lifting his finger with a listening look. "Listen to that!"

It was a regular tramp of horses' hoofs, sounding in the silence like a charge of cavalry. While they looked, a troop of horsemen came galloping up, and came to a halt when they saw the count.

No words can depict the look of amazement Sir Norman's face wore; but

Hubert betrayed not the least surprise. The count glanced at his companions with a significant smile, and riding back, held a brief colloquy with him who seemed the leader of the horsemen. He rode up to them, smiling still, and saying, as he passed,

“Now then, Kingsley; lead on, and we will follow!”

“I go not one step further,” said Sir Norman, firmly, “until I know who I am leading. Who are you, Count L'Estrange?”

The count looked at him, but did not answer. A warning hand—that of Hubert—grasped Sir Norman's arm; and Hubert's voice whispered hurriedly in his ear:

“Hush, for God's sake! It is the king!”

CHAPTER XX. AT THE PLAGUE-PIT.

The effect of the whisper was magical. Everything that had been dark before, became clear as noonday; and Sir Norman sat absolutely astounded at his own stupidity in not having found it out for himself before. Every feature, notwithstanding the disguise of wig and beard, became perfectly familiar; and even through the well-assumed voice, he recognized the royal tones. It struck him all at once, and with it the fact of Leoline's increased danger. Count L'Estrange was a formidable rival, but King Charles of England was even more formidable.

Thought is quick—quicker than the electric telegraph or balloon traveling; and in two seconds the whole stated things, with all the attendant surprises and dangers, danced before his mind's eye like a panorama; and he comprehended the past, the present, and the future, before Hubert had uttered the last word of his whisper. He turned his eyes, with a very new and singular sensation, upon the quondam count, and found that gentlemen looking very hard at him, with, a preternaturally grave expression of countenance. Sir Norman knew well as anybody the varying moods of his royal countship, and, notwithstanding his general good nature, it was not safe to trifle with him at all times; so he repressed every outward sign of emotion whatever, and resolved to treat him as Count L'Estrange until he should choose to sail under his own proper colors.

“Well,” said the count, with unruffled eagerness, “and so you decline to go any further Sir Norman?”

Hubert's eye was fixed with a warning glance upon him, and Sir Norman composedly answered

“No, count; I do not absolutely decline; but before I do go any further, I should like to know by what right do you bring all these men here, and what are your intentions in so doing.”

“And if I refuse to answer?”

“Then I refuse to move a step further in the business!” said Sir Norman, with decision.

“And why, my good friend? You surely can have no objection to anything that can be done against highwaymen and cut-throats.”

“Right! I have no objections, but others may.”

“Whom do you mean by others?”

“The king, for instance. His gracious majesty is whimsical at times; and who knows that he may take it into his royal head to involve us somehow with them. I know the adage, 'put not your trust in princes.'”

“Very good,” said the count, with a slight and irrepressible smile; “your prudence is beyond all praise! But I think, in this matter I may safely promise to stand between you and the king's wrath. Look at those horsemen beyond you, and see if they do not wear the uniform of his majesty's own body-guard.”

Sir Norman looked, and saw the dazzling of their splendid equipments glancing and glistening in the moonbeams.

“I see. Then you have the royal permission for all this?”

“You have said it. Now, most scrupulous of men, proceed!”

“Look there!” exclaimed Hubert, suddenly pointing to a corner of the rain. “Someone has seen us, and is going now to give the alarm.”

“He shall miss it, though!” said Sir Norman, detecting, at the same instant, a dark figure getting through the broken doorway; and striking spurs into his horse, he was instantaneously beside it, out of the saddle, and had grasped the retreater by the shoulder.

“By your leave!” exclaimed Sir Norman. “Not quite so fast! Stand out here in the moonlight, until I see who you are.”

“Let me go!” cried the man, grappling with his opponent. “I know who you are, and I swear you'll never see moonlight or sunlight again, if you do not instantly let me go.”

Sir Norman recognized the voice with a perfect shout of delight.

“The duke, by all that's lucky! O, I'll let you go: but not until the hangman gets hold of you. Villain and robber, you shall pay for your misdeeds now!”

“Hold!” shouted the commanding voice of Count L'Estrange. “Cease, Sir Norman Kingsley! there is no time, and this is no person for you to scoff with. He is our prisoner, and shall show us the nearest way into this den of thieves. Give me your sword, fellow, and be thankful I do not make you shorter by a head with it.”

“You do not know him!” cried Sir Norman; in vivid excitement. “I tell you this is the identical scoundrel who attempted to rob and murder you a few hours ago.”

“So much the better! He shall pay for that and all his other shortcomings, before long! But, in the meantime, I order him to bring us before the rest of this

outlawed crew.”

“I shall do nothing of the kind,” said the duke, sullenly.

“Just as you please. Here, my men, two of you take hold of this scoundrel, and dispatch him at once.”

The guard had all dismounted; and two of them came forward with edifying obedience, to do as they were told.

The effect upon the duke was miraculous. Instantly he started up, with an energy perfectly amazing:

“No, no, no! I'll do it! Come this way, gentlemen, and I'll bring you direct into their midst. O good Lord! whatever will become of us?”

This last frantic question was addressed to society in general, but Sir Norman felt called upon to answer:

“That's very easily told, my man. If you and the rest of your titled associates receive your deserts (as there is no doubt you will) from the gracious hand of our sovereign lord, the king, the strongest rope and highest gallows at Tyburn will be your elevated destiny.”

The duke groaned dismally, and would have come to a halt to beg mercy on the spot, had not Hubert given him a probe in, the ribs with the point of his dagger, that sent him on again, with a distracted howl.

“Why, this is a perfect Hades!” said the count, as he stumbled after, in the darkness. “Are you sure we are going right, Kingsley?”

The inquiry was not unnatural, for the blackness was perfectly Tartarian, and the soldiers behind were knocking their tall shins against all sorts of obstacles as they groped blindly along, invoking from them countless curses, not loud, but deep.

“I don't know whether we are or not,” said Sir Norman significantly; “only, God help him if we're not! Where are you taking us to, you black-looking bandit?”

“I give you my word of honor, gentlemen,” said an imploring voice in the darkness, “that I'm leading you, by the nearest way, to the Midnight Court. All I ask of you in return is, that you will let me enter before you; for if they find that I lead you in, my life will not be worth a moment's purchase.”

“As if it ever was worth it,” said Sir Norman, contemptuously. “On with you, and be thankful I don't save your companions the trouble, by making an end of you where you stand.”

“Rush along, old fellow,” suggested Hubert, giving him another poke with his

dagger, that drew forth a second doleful howl.

Notwithstanding the darkness, Sir Norman discovered that they were being led in a direction exactly opposite that by which he had previously effected an entrance. They were in the vault, he knew, by the darkness, though they had descended no staircase, and he was just wondering if their guide was not meditating some treachery by such a circuitous route, when suddenly a tumult of voices, and uproar, and confusion, met his ear. At the same instant, their guide opened a door, revealing a dark passage, illuminated by a few rays of light, and which Sir Norman instantly recognized as that leading to the Black Chamber. Here again the duke paused, and turned round to them with a wildly-imploring face.

“Gentlemen, I do conjure you to let me enter before you do! I tell you they will murder me the very instant they discover I have led you here!”

“That would be a great pity!” said the count; “and the gallows will be cheated of one of its brightest ornaments! That is your den of thieves, I suppose, from which all this uproar comes?”

“It is. And as I have guided you safely to it, surely I deserve this trifling boon.”

“Trifling, do you call it,” interposed Sir Norman, “to let you make your escape, as you most assuredly will do the moment you are out of our sight! No, no; we are too old birds to be caught with such chaff; and though the informer always gets off scot-free, your services deserve no such boon; for we could have found our way without your help! On with you, Sir Robber; and if your companions do kill you, console yourself with the thought that they have only anticipated the executioner by a few days!”

With a perfectly heart-rending groan, the unfortunate duke walked on; but when they reached the archway directly before the room, he came to an obstinate halt, and positively refused to go a step farther. It was death, anyway, and he resisted with the courage of desperation, feeling he might as well die there as go in and be assassinated by his confederates, and not even the persuasive influence of Hubert's dagger could prevail on him to budge an inch farther.

“Stay, then!” said the count, with perfect indifference. “And, soldiers, see that he does not escape! Now, Kingsley, let us just have a glimpse of what is going on within.”

Though the party had made considerable noise in advancing, and had spoken quite loudly in their little animated discussion with the duke, so great was the turmoil and confusion within, that it was not heeded, or even heard. With very

different feelings from those with which he had stood there last, Sir Norman stepped forward and stood beside the count, looking at the scene within.

The crimson court was in a state of “most admired disorder,” and the confusion of tongues was equal to Babel. No longer were they languidly promenading, or lolling in the cushioned chairs; but all seemed running to and fro in the wildest excitement, which the grandest duke among them seemed to share equally with the terrified white sylphs. Everybody appeared to be talking together, and paying no attention whatever to the sentiments of their neighbors. One universal centre of union alone seemed to exist, and that was the green, judicial table near the throne, upon which, while all tongues ran, all eyes turned. For some minutes, neither of the beholders could make out why, owing to the crowd (principally of the ladies) pressing around it; but Sir Norman guessed, and thrilled through with a vague sensation of terror, lest it should prove to be the dead body of Miranda. Skipping in and out among the females he saw the dwarf, performing a sort of war dance of rage and frenzy; twining both hands in his wig, as if he would have torn it out by the roots, and anon tearing at somebody else's wig, so that everybody backed off when he came near them.

“Who is that little fiend?” inquired the count; “and what have they got there at the and of the room, pray?”

“That little fiend is the ringleader here, and is entitled Prince Caliban. Regarding your other question,” said Sir Norman, with a faint thrill, “there was a table there when I saw it last, but I am afraid there is something worse now.”

“Could ever any mortal conceive of such a scene,” observed the count to himself; “look at that little picture of ugliness; how he hops about like a dropsical bull-frog. Some of those women are very pretty, too, and outshine more than one court-beauty that I have seen. Upon my word, it is the most extraordinary spectacle I ever heard of. I wonder what they've got that's so attractive down there?”

At the same moment, a loud voice within the circle abruptly exclaimed

“She revives, she revives! Back, back, and give her air!”

Instantly, the throng swayed and fell back; and the dwarf, with a sort of yell (whether of rage or relief, nobody knew), swept them from side to side with a wave of his long arms, and cleared a wide vacancy for his own especial benefit. The action gave the count an opportunity of gratifying his curiosity. The object of attraction was now plainly visible. Sir Norman's surmises had been correct. The green table of the parliament-house of the midnight court had been converted, by the aid of cushions and pillows, into an extempore couch; and

half-buried in their downy depths lay Miranda, the queen. The sweeping robe of royal purple, trimmed with ermine, the circlets of jewels on arms, bosom, and head, she still wore, and the beautiful face was whiter than fallen snow. Yet she was not dead, as Sir Norman had dreaded; for the dark eyes were open, and were fixed with an unutterable depth of melancholy on vacancy. Her arms lay helplessly by her side, and someone, the court physician probably, was bending over her and feeling her pulse.

As the count's eyes fell upon her, he started back, and grasped Sir Norman's arm with consternation.

“Good heavens, Kingsley!” he cried; “it is Leoline, herself!”

In his excitement he had spoken so loud, that in the momentary silence that followed the physician's direction, his voice had rung through the room, and drew every eye upon them.

“We are seen, we are seen!” shouted Hubert, and as he spoke, a terrible cry idled the room. In an instant every sword leaped from its scabbard, and the shriek of the startled women rang appallingly out on the air. Sir Norman drew his sword, too; but the count, with his eyes yet fixed on Miranda, still held him by the arm, and excitedly exclaimed,

“Tell me, tell me, is it Leoline?”

“Leoline! No—how could it be Leoline? They look alike, that's all. Draw your sword, count, and defend yourself; we are discovered, and they are upon us!”

“We are upon them, you mean, and it is they who are discovered,” said the count, doing as directed, and stepping boldly in. “A pretty hornet's nest is this we have lit upon, if ever there was one.”

Side by side with the count, with a dauntless step and eye, Sir Norman entered, too; and, at sight of him a burst of surprise and fury rang from lip to lip. There was a yell of “Betrayed, betrayed!” and the dwarf, with a face so distorted by fiendish fury that it was scarcely human, made a frenzied rush at him, when the clear, commanding voice of the count rang like a bugle blast through the assembly,

“Sheathe your swords, the whole of you, and yield yourselves prisoners. In the king's name, I command you to surrender.”

“There is no king here but I!” screamed the dwarf, gnashing his teeth, and fairly foaming with rage. “Die; traitor and spy! You have escaped me once, but your hour is come now.”

“Allow me to differ from you,” said Sir Norman, politely, as he evaded the

blindly-frantic lunge of the dwarf's sword, and inserted an inch or two of the point of his own in that enraged little prince's anatomy. “So far from my hour having come—if you will take the trouble to reflect upon it—you will find it is the reverse, and that my little friend's brief and brilliant career is rapidly drawing to a close.”

At these bland remarks, and at the sharp thrust that accompanied them, the dwarfs previous war-dance of anxiety was nothing to the horn-pipe of exasperation he went through when Sir Norman ceased. The blood was raining from his side, and from the point of his adversary's sword, as he withdrew it; and, maddened like a wild beast at the sight of his own blood, he screeched, and foamed, and kicked about his stout little legs, and gnashed his teeth, and made grabs at his wig, and lashed the air with his sword, and made such desperate pokes with it, at Sir Norman and everybody else who came in his way, that, for the public good, the young knight run him through the sword-arm, and, in spite of all his distracted didos, captured him by the help of Hubert, and passed him over to the soldiers to cheer and keep company with the duke.

This brisk little affair being over, Sir Norman had time to look about him. It had all passed in so short a space, and the dwarf had been so desperately frantic, that the rest had paused involuntarily, and were still looking on. Missing the count, he glanced around the room, and discovered him standing on Miranda's throne, looking over the company with the cool air of a conqueror. Miranda, aroused, as she very well might be by all this screaming and fighting, had partly raised herself upon her elbow, and was looking wildly about her. As her eye fell on Sir Norman, she sat fairly erect, with a cry of exultation and joy.

“You have come, you have come, as I knew you would,” she excitedly cried, “and the hour of retribution is at hand!”

At the words of one who, a few moments before, they had supposed to be dead, an awestruck silence fell; and the count, taking advantage of it, waved his hand, and cried,

“Yield yourselves prisoners, I command you! The royal guards are without; and the first of you who offers the slightest resistance will die like a dog! Ho, guards! enter, and seize your prisoners!”

Quick as thought the room was full of soldiers! but the rest of the order was easier said than obeyed. The robbers, knowing their doom was death, fought with the fury of desperation, and a short, wild, and terrible conflict ensued. Foremost in the melee was Sir Norman and the count; while Hubert, who had taken possession of the dwarf's sword, fought like a young lion. The shrieks of

the women were heart-rending, as they all fled, precipitately, into the blue dining-room; and, crouching in corners, or flying distractedly about—true to their sex—made the air resound with the most lamentable cries. Some five or six, braver than the rest, alone remained; and more than one of these actually mixed in the affray, with a heroism worthy a better cause. Miranda, still sitting erect, and supported in the arms of a kneeling and trembling sylph in white, watched the conflict with terribly-exultant eyes, that blazed brighter and brighter with the lurid fire of vengeful joy at every robber that fell.

“Oh, that I were strong enough to wield a sword!” was her fierce aspiration every instant; “if I could only mix in that battle for five minutes, I could die with a happy heart!”

Had she been able to wield a sword for five minutes, according to her wish, she would probably have wielded it from beginning to end of the battle; for it did not last much longer than that. The robbers fought with fury and ferocity; but they had been taken by surprise, and were overpowered by numbers, and obliged to yield.

The crimson court was indeed crimson now; for the velvet carpeting was dyed a more terrible red, and was slippery with a rain of blood! A score of dead and dying lay groaning on the ground; and the rest, beaten and bloody, gave up their swords and surrendered.

“You should have done this at first!” said the count, coolly wiping his blood-stained weapon, and replacing it in its sheath; “and, by so doing, saved some time and more bloodshed. Where are all the fair ladies, Kingsley, I saw here when we entered first?”

“They fled like a flock of frightened deer,” said Hubert, taking it upon himself to answer, “through yonder archway when the fight commenced. I will go in search of them if you like.”

“I am rather at a loss what to do with them,” said the count, half-laughing. “It would be a pity to bring such a cavalcade of pretty women into the city to die of the plague. Can you suggest nothing, Sir Norman?”

“Nothing, but to leave then here to take care of themselves, or let them go free.”

“They would be a great addition to the court at Whitehall,” suggested Hubert, in his prettiest tone, “and a thousand times handsomer than half the damsels therein. There, for instance, is one a dozen timer more beautiful than Mistress Stuart herself!”

Leaning, in his nonchalant way, on the hilt of his sword, he pointed to

Miranda, whose fiercely-joyful eyes were fixed with a glance that made the three of them shudder, on the bloody floor and the heap of slain.

“Who is that?” asked the count, curiously. “Why is she perched up there, and why does she bear such an extraordinary resemblance to Leoline? Do you know anything about her, Kingsley?”

“I know she is the wife of that unlovely little man, whose howls in yonder passage you can hear, if you listen, and that she was the queen of this midnight court, and is wounded, if not dying, now!”

“I never saw such fierce eyes before in a female head! One would think she fairly exulted in this wholesale slaughter of her subjects.”

“So she does; and she hates both her husband and her subjects, with an intensity you cannot conceive.”

“How very like royalty!” observed Hubert, in parenthesis. “If she were a real queen, she could not act more naturally.”

Sir Norman smiled, and the count glanced at the audacious page, suspiciously; but Hubert's face was touching to witness, in its innocent unconsciousness. Miranda, looking up at the same time, caught the young knight's eye, and made a motion for him to approach. She held out both her hands to him as he came near, with the same look of dreadful delight.

“Sir Norman Kingsley, I am dying, and my last words are in thanksgiving to you for having thus avenged me!”

“Let me hope you have many days to live yet, fair lady,” said Sir Norman, with the same feeling of repulsion he had experienced in the dungeon. “I am sorry you have been obliged to witness this terrible scene.”

“Sorry!” she cried, fiercely. “Why, since the first hour I remember at all, I remember nothing that has given me such joy as what has passed now; my only regret is that I did not see them all die before my eyes! Sorry! I tell you I would not have missed it for ten thousand worlds!”

“Madame, you must not talk like this!” said Sir Norman, almost sternly. “Heaven forbid there should exist a woman who could rejoice in bloodshed and death. You do not, I know. You wrong yourself and your own nature in saying so. Be calm, now; do not excite yourself. You shall come with us, and be properly cared for; and I feel certain you have a long and happy life before you yet.”

“Who are those men?” she said, not heeding him, “and who—ah, great Heaven! What is that?”

In looking round, she had met Hubert face to face. She knew that that face was her own; and, with a horror stamped on every feature that no words can depict, she fell back, with a terrible scream and was dead!

Sir Norman was so shocked by the suddenness of the last catastrophe, that, for some time, he could not realize that she had actually expired, until he bent over her, and placed his ear to her lips. No breath was there; no pulse stirred in that fierce heart—the Midnight Queen was indeed dead!

“Oh, this is fearful!” exclaimed Sir Norman, pale and horrified.

“The sight of Hubert, and his wonderful resemblance to her, has completed what her wound and this excitement began. Her last is breathed on earth!”

“Peace be with her!” said the count, removing his hat, which, up to the present, he had worn. “And now, Sir Norman, if we are to keep our engagement at sunrise, we had better be on the move; for, unless I am greatly mistaken, the sky is already grey with day-dawn.”

“What are your commands?” asked Sir Norman, turning away, with a sigh, from the beautiful form already stiffening in death.

“That you come with me to seek out those frightened fair ones, who are a great deal too lovely to share the fate of their male companions. I shall give them their liberty to go where they please, on condition that they do not enter the city. We have enough vile of their class there already.”

Sir Norman silently followed him into the azure and silver saloon, where the crowd of duchesses and countesses were “weeping and wringing their hands,” and as white as so many pretty ghosts. In a somewhat brief and forcible manner, considering his characteristic gallantry, the count made his proposal, which, with feelings of pleasure and relief, was at once acceded to; and the two gentlemen bowed themselves out, and left the startled ladies.

On returning to the crimson court, he commanded a number of his soldiers to remain and bury the dead, and assist the wounded; and then, followed by the remainder and the prisoners under their charge, passed out, and were soon from the heated atmosphere in the cool morning air. The moon was still serenely shining, but the stars that kept the earliest hours were setting, and the eastern sky was growing light with the hazy gray of coming morn.

“I told you day-dawn was at hand,” said the count, as he sprang into his saddle; “and, lo! in the sky it is gray already.”

“It is time for it!” said Sir Norman, as he, too, got into his seat; “this has been the longest night I have ever known, and the most eventful one of my life.”

“And the end is not yet! Leoline waits to decide between us!”

Sir Norman shrugged his shoulders.

“True! But I have little doubt what that decision will be! I presume you will have to deliver up your prisoners before you can visit her, and I will avail myself of the opportunity to snatch a few moments to fulfill a melancholy duty of my own.”

“As you please. I have no objection; but in that case you will need some one to guide you to the place of rendezvous; so I will order my private attendant, yonder, to keep you in sight, and guide you to me when your business is ended.”

The count had given the order to start, the moment they had left the ruin, and the conversation had been carried on while riding at a break-neck gallop. Sir Norman thanked him for his offer, and they rode in silence until they reached the city, and their paths diverged; Sir Norman's leading to the apothecary's shop where he had left Ormiston, and the count's leading—he best knew where. George—the attendant referred to—joined the knight, and leaving his horse in his care, Sir Norman entered the shop, and encountered the spectral proprietor at the door.

“What of my friend?” was his eager inquiry. “Has he yet shown signs of returning consciousness?”

“Alas, no!” replied the apothecary, with a groan, that came wailing up like a whistle; “he was so excessively dead, that there was no use keeping him; and as the room was wanted for other purposes, I—pray, my dear sir, don't look so violent—I put him in the pest-cart and had him buried.”

“In the plague-pit!” shouted Sir Norman, making a spring at him; but the man darted off like a ghostly flash into the inner room, and closed and bolted the door in a twinkling.

Sir Norman kicked at it spitefully, but it resisted his every effort; and, overcoming a strong temptation to smash every bottle in the shop, he sprang once more into the saddle, and rode off to the plague-pit. It was the second time within the last twelve hours he had stood there; and, on the previous occasion, he who now lay in it, had stood by his side. He looked down, sickened and horror-struck. Perhaps, before another morning, he, too, might be there; and, feeling his blood run cold at the thought, he was turning away, when some one came rapidly up, and sank down with a moaning gasping cry on its very edge. That shape—tall and slender, and graceful—he well knew; and, leaning over her, he laid his hand on her shoulder, and exclaimed:

“La Masque!”

CHAPTER, XXI. WHAT WAS BEHIND THE MASK.

The cowering form rose up; but, seeing who it was, sank down again, with its face groveling in the dust, and with another prolonged, moaning cry.

“Madame Masque!” he said, wonderingly; “what is this?”

He bent to raise her; but, with a sort of scream she held out her arms to keep him back.

“No, no, no! Touch me not! Hate me—kill me! I have murdered your friend!”

Sir Norman recoiled as if from a deadly serpent.

“Murdered him! Madame, in Heaven's name, what have you said?”

“Oh, I have not stabbed him, or poisoned him, or shot him; but I am his murderer, nevertheless!” she wailed, writhing in a sort of gnawing inward torture.

“Madame, I do not understand you at all! Surely you are raving when you talk like this.”

Still moaning on the edge of the plague-pit, she half rose up, with both hands clasped tightly over her heart, as if she would have held back from all human ken the anguish that was destroying her,

“NO—no! I am not mad—pray Heaven I were! Oh, that they had strangled me in the first hour of my birth, as they would a viper, rather than I should have lived through all this life of misery and guilt, to end it by this last, worst crime of all!”

Sir Norman stood and looked at her still with a dazed expression. He knew well enough whose murderer she called herself; but why she did so, or how she could possibly bring about his death, was a mystery altogether too deep for him to solve.

“Madame, compose yourself, I beseech you, and tell me what you mean. It is to my friend, Ormiston, you allude—is it not?”

“Yes—yes! surely you need not ask.”

“I know that he is dead, and buried in this horrible place; but why you should accuse yourself of murdering him, I confess I do not know.”

“Then you shall!” she cried, passionately. “And you will wonder at it no longer! You are the last one to whom the revelation can ever be made on earth; and, now that my hours are numbered, it matters little whether it is told or not! Was it not you who first found him dead?”

“It was I—yes. And how he came to his end, I have been puzzling myself in vain to discover ever since.”

She rose up, drew herself to her full majestic height, and looked at him with a terrible glance,

“Shall I tell you?”

“You have had no hand in it,” he answered, with a cold chill at the tone and look, “for he loved you!”

“I have had a hand in it—I alone have been the cause of it. But for me he would be living still!”

“Madame,” exclaimed Sir Norman, in horror.

“You need not look as if you thought me mad, for I tell you it is Heaven's truth! You say right—he loved me; but for that love he would be living now!”

“You speak in riddles which I cannot read. How could that love have caused his death, since his dearest wishes were to be granted to-night?”

“He told you that, did he?”

“He did. He told me you were to remove your mask; and if, on seeing you, he still loved you, you were to be his wife.”

“Then woe to him for ever having extorted such a promise from me! Oh, I warned him again, and again, and again. I told him how it would be—I begged him to desist; but no, he was blind, he was mad; he would rush on his own doom! I fulfilled my promise, and behold the result!”

She pointed with a frantic gesture to the plague-pit, and wrung her beautiful hands with the same moaning of anguish.

“Do I hear aright?” said Sir Norman, looking at her, and really doubting if his ears had not deceived him. “Do you mean to say that, in keeping your word and showing him your face, you have caused his death?”

“I do. I had warned him of it before. I told him there were sights too horrible to look on and live, but nothing would convince him! Oh, why was the curse of life ever bestowed upon such a hideous thing as I!”

Sir Norman gazed at her in a state of hopeless bewilderment. He had thought, from the moment he saw her first, that there was something wrong with her

brain, to make her act in such a mysterious, eccentric sort of way; but he had never positively thought her so far gone as this. In his own mind, he set her down, now, as being mad as a March hare, and accordingly answered in that soothing tone people use to imbeciles,

“My dear Madame Masque, pray do not excite yourself, or say such dreadful things. I am sure you would not willfully cause the death of any one, much less that of one who loved you as he did.”

La Masque broke into a wild laugh, almost worse to hear than her former despairing moans.

“The man thinks me mad! He will not believe, unless he sees and knows for himself! Perhaps you, too, Sir Norman Kingsley,” she cried, changing into sudden fierceness, “would like to see the face behind this mask?—would like to see what has slain your friend, and share his fate?”

“Certainly,” said Sir Norman. “I should like to see it; and I think I may safely promise not to die from the effects. But surely, madame, you deceive yourself; no face, however ugly—even supposing you to possess such a one—could produce such dismay as to cause death.”

“You shall see.”

She was looking down into the plague-pit, standing so close to its cracking edge, that Sir Norman's blood ran cold, in the momentary expectation to see her slip and fall headlong in. Her voice was less fierce and less wild, but her hands were still clasped tightly over her heart, as if to ease the unutterable pain there. Suddenly, she looked up, and said, in an altered tone:

“You have lost Leoline?”

“And found her again. She is in the power of one Count L'Estrange.”

“And if in his power, pray, how have you found her?”

“Because we are both to meet in her presence within this very hour, and she is to decide between us.”

“Has Count L'Estrange promised you this?”

“He has.”

“And you have no doubt what her decision will be?”

“Not the slightest.”

“How came you to know she was carried off by this count?”

“He confessed it himself.”

“Voluntarily?”

“No; I taxed him with it, and he owned to the deed; but he voluntarily promised to take me to her and abide by her decision.”

“Extraordinary!” said La Masque, as if to herself. “Whimsical as he is, I scarcely expected he would give her up so easily as this.”

“Then you know him, madame?” said Sir Norman, pointedly.

“There are few things I do not know, and rare are the disguises I cannot penetrate. So you have discovered it, too?”

“No, madame, my eyes were not sharp enough, nor had I sufficient cleverness, even, for that. It was Hubert, the Earl of Rochester's page, who told me who he was.”

“Ah, the page!” said La Masque, quickly. “You have then been speaking to him? What do you think of his resemblance to Leoline?”

“I think it is the most astonishing resemblance I ever saw. But he is not the only one who bears Leoline's face.”

“And the other is?”

“The other is she whom you sent me to see in the old ruins. Madame, I wish you would tell me the secret of this wonderful likeness; for I am certain you know, and I am equally certain it is not accidental.”

“You are right. Leoline knows already; for, with the presentiment that my end was near, I visited her when you left, and gave her her whole history, in writing. The explanation is simple enough. Leoline, Miranda, and Hubert, are sisters and brother.”

Some misty idea that such was the case had been struggling through Sir Norman's slow mind, unformed and without shape, ever since he had seen the trio, therefore he was not the least astonished when he heard the fact announced. Only in one thing he was a little disappointed.

“Then Hubert is really a boy?” he said, half dejectedly.

“Certainly he is. What did you take him to be?”

“Why, I thought—that is, I do not know,” said Sir Norman, quite blushing at being guilty of so much romance, “but that he was a woman in disguise. You see he is so handsome, and looks so much like Leoline, that I could not help thinking so.”

“He is Leoline's twin brother—that accounts for it. When does she become your wife?”

“This very morning, God willing!” said Sir Norman, fervently.

“Amen! And may her life and yours be long and happy. What becomes of the rest?”

“Since Hubert is her brother, he shall come with us, if he will. As for the other, she, alas! is dead.”

“Dead!” cried La Masque. “How? When? She was living, tonight!”

“True! She died of a wound.”

“A wound? Surely not given by the dwarfs hand?”

“No, no; it was quite accidental. But since you know so much of the dwarf, perhaps you also know he is now the king's prisoner?”

“I did not know it; but I surmised as much when I discovered that you and Count L'Estrange, followed by such a body of men, visited the ruin. Well, his career has been long and dark enough, and even the plague seemed to spare him for the executioner. And so the poor mock-queen is dead? Well, her sister will not long survive her.”

“Good Heavens, madame!” cried Sir Norman, aghast. “You do not mean to say that Leoline is going to die?”

“Oh, no! I hope Leoline has a long and happy life before her. But the wretched, guilty sister I mean is, myself; for I, too, Sir Norman, am her sister.”

At this new disclosure, Sir Norman stood perfectly petrified; and La Masque, looking down at the dreadful place at her feet, went rapidly on:

“Alas and alas! that it should be so; but it is the direful truth. We bear the same name, we had the same father; and yet I have been the curse and bane of their lives.”

“And Leoline knows this?”

“She never knew it until this night, or any one else alive; and no one should know it now, were not my ghastly life ending. I prayed her to forgive me for the wrong I have done her; and she may, for she is gentle and good—but when, when shall I be able to forgive myself?”

The sharp pain in her voice jarred on Sir Norman's ear and heart; and, to get rid of its dreary echo, he hurriedly asked:

“You say you bear the same name. May I ask what name that is?”

“It is one, Sir Norman Kingsley, before which your own ancient title pales. We are Montmorencis, and in our veins runs the proudest blood in France.”

“Then Leoline is French and of noble birth?” said Sir Norman, with a thrill of pleasure. “I loved her for herself alone, and would have wedded her had she

been the child of a beggar; but I rejoice to hear this nevertheless. Her father, then, bore a title?”

“Her father was the Marquis de Montmorenci, but Leoline's mother and mine were not the same—had they been, the lives of all four might have been very different; but it is too late to lament that now. My mother had no gentle blood in her veins, as Leoline's had, for she was but a fisherman's daughter, torn from her home, and married by force. Neither did she love my father notwithstanding his youth, rank, and passionate love for her, for she was betrothed to another bourgeois, like herself. For his sake she refused even the title of marchioness, offered her in the moment of youthful and ardent passion, and clung, with deathless truth, to her fisher-lover. The blood of the Montmorencis is fierce and hot, and brooks no opposition” (Sir Norman thought of Miranda, and inwardly owned that that was a fact); “and the marquis, in his jealous wrath, both hated and loved her at the same time, and vowed deadly vengeance against her bourgeois lover. That vow he kept. The young fisherman was found one morning at his lady-love's door without a head, and the bleeding trunk told no tales.

“Of course, for a while, she was distracted and so on; but when the first shock of her grief was over, my father carried her off, and forcibly made her his wife. Fierce hatred, I told you, was mingled with his fierce love, and before the honeymoon was over it began to break out. One night, in a fit of jealous passion, to which he was addicted, he led her into a room she had never before been permitted to enter; showed her a grinning human skull, and told her it was her lover's! In his cruel exultation, he confessed all; how he had caused him to be murdered; his head severed from the body; and brought here to punish her, some day, for her obstinate refusal to love him.

“Up to this time she had been quiet and passive, bearing her fate with a sort of dumb resignation; but now a spirit of vengeance, fiercer and more terrible than his own, began to kindle within her; and, kneeling down before the ghastly thing, she breathed a wish—a prayer—to the avenging Jehovah, so unutterably horrible, that even her husband had to fly with curdling blood from the room. That dreadful prayer was heard—that wish fulfilled in me; but long before I looked on the light of day that frantic woman had repented of the awful deed she had done. Repentance came too late the sin of the father was visited on the child, and on the mother, too, for the moment her eyes fell upon me, she became a raving maniac, and died before the first day of my life had ended.

“Nurse and physician fled at the sight of me; but my father, though thrilling with horror, bore the shock, and bowed to the retributive justice of the angry Deity she had invoked. His whole life, his whole nature, changed from that hour;

and, kneeling beside my dead mother, as he afterward told me, he vowed before high Heaven to cherish and love me, even as though I had not been the ghastly creature I was. The physician he bound by a terrible oath to silence; the nurse he forced back, and, in spite of her disgust and abhorrence, compelled her to nurse and care for me. The dead was buried out of sight; and we had rooms in a distant part of the house, which no one ever entered but my father and the nurse. Though set apart from my birth as something accursed, I had the intellect and capacity of—yes, far greater intellect and capacity than, most children; and, as years passed by, my father, true to his vow, became himself my tutor and companion. He did not love me—that was an utter impossibility; but time so blunts the edge of all things, that even the nurse became reconciled to me, and my father could scarcely do less than a stranger. So I was cared for, and instructed, and educated; and, knowing not what a monstrosity I was, I loved them both ardently, and lived on happily enough, in my splendid prison, for my first ten years in this world.

“Then came a change. My nurse died; and it became clear that I must quit my solitary life, and see the sort of world I lived in. So my father, seeing all this, sat down in the twilight one night beside me, and told me the story of my own hideousness. I was but a child then, and it is many and many years ago; but this gray summer morning, I feel what I felt then, as vividly as I did at the time. I had not learned the great lesson of life then—endurance, I have scarcely learned it yet, or I should bear life's burden longer; but that first night's despair has darkened my whole after-life. For weeks I would not listen to my father's proposal, to hide what would send all the world from me in loathing behind a mask; but I came to my senses at last, and from that day to the present—more days than either you or I would care to count—it has not been one hour altogether off my face.”

“I was the wonder and talk of Paris, when I did appear; and most of the surmises were wild and wide of the mark—some even going so far as to say it was all owing to my wonderful unheard-of beauty that I was thus mysteriously concealed from view. I had a soft voice, and a tolerable shape; and upon this, I presume, they founded the affirmation. But my father and I kept our own council, and let them say what they listed. I had never been named, as other children are; but they called me La Masque now. I had masters and professors without end, and studied astronomy and astrology, and the mystic lore of the old Egyptians, and became noted as a prodigy and a wonder, and a miracle of learning, far and near.

“The arts used to discover the mystery and make me unmask were

innumerable and almost incredible; but I baffled them all, and began, after a time, rather to enjoy the sensation I created than otherwise.

“There was one, in particular, possessed of even more devouring curiosity than the rest, a certain young countess of miraculous beauty, whom I need not describe, since you have her very image in Leoline. The Marquis de Montmorenci, of a somewhat inflammable nature, loved her almost as much as he had done my mother, and she accepted him, and they were married. She may have loved him (I see no reason why she should not), but still to this day I think it was more to discover the secret of La Masque than from any other cause. I loved my beautiful new mother too well to let her find it out; although from the day she entered our house as a bride, until that on which she lay on her deathbed, her whole aim, day and night, was its discovery. There seemed to be a fatality about my father's wives; for the beautiful Honorine lived scarcely longer than her predecessor, and she died, leaving three children—all born at one time—you know them well, and one of them you love. To my care she intrusted them on her deathbed, and she could have scarcely intrusted them to worse; for, though I liked her, I most decidedly disliked them. They were lovely children—their lovely mother's image; and they were named Hubert, Leoline, and Honorine, or, as you knew her, Miranda. Even my father did not seem to care for them much, not even as much as he cared for me; and when he lay on his deathbed, one year later, I was left, young as I was, their sole guardian, and trustee of all his wealth. That wealth was not fairly divided—one-half being left to me and the other half to be shared equally between them; but, in my wicked ambition, I was not satisfied even with that. Some of my father's fierce and cruel nature I inherited; and I resolved to be clear of these three stumbling-blocks, and recompense myself for my other misfortunes by every indulgence boundless riches could bestow. So, secretly, and in the night, I left my home, with an old and trusty servant, known to you as Prudence, and my unfortunate, little brother and sisters. Strange to say, Prudence was attached to one of them, and to neither of the rest—that one was Leoline, whom she resolved to keep and care for, and neither she nor I minded what became of the other two.”

“From Paris we went to Dijon, where we dropped Hubert into the turn at the convent door, with his name attached, and left him where he would be well taken care of, and no questions asked. With the other two we started for Calais, en route for England; and there Prudence got rid of Honorine in a singular manner. A packet was about starting for the island of our destination, and she saw a strange-looking little man carrying his luggage from the wharf into a boat. She had the infant in her arms, having carried it out for the identical purpose of

getting rid of it; and, without more ado, she laid it down, unseen, among boxes and bundles, and, like Hagar, stood afar off to see what became of it. That ugly little man was the dwarf; and his amazement on finding it among his goods and chattels you may imagine; but he kept it, notwithstanding, though why, is best known to himself. A few weeks after that we, too, came over, and Prudence took up her residence in a quiet village a long way from London. Thus you see, Sir Norman, how it comes about that we are so related, and the wrong I have done them all."

"You have, indeed!" said Sir Norman, gravely, having listened, much shocked and displeased, at this open confession; "and to one of them it is beyond our power to atone. Do you know the life of misery to which she has been assigned?"

"I know it all, and have repented for it in my own heart, in dust and ashes! Even I—unlike all other earthly creatures as I am—have a conscience, and it has given me no rest night or day since. From that hour I have never lost sight of them; every sorrow they have undergone has been known to me, and added to my own; and yet I could not, or would not, undo what I had done. Leoline knows all now; and she will tell Hubert, since destiny has brought them together; and whether they will forgive me I know not. But yet they might; for they have long and happy lives before them, and we can forgive everything to the dead."

"But you are not dead," said Sir Norman; "and there is repentance and pardon for all. Much as you have wronged them, they will forgive you; and Heaven is not less merciful than they!"

"They may; for I have striven to atone. In my house there are proofs and papers that will put them in possession of all, and more than all, they have lost. But life is a burden of torture I will bear no longer. The death of him who died for me this night is the crowning tragedy of my miserable life; and if my hour were not at hand, I should not have told you this."

"But you have not told me the fearful cause of so much guilt and suffering. What is behind that mask?"

"Would you, too, see?" she asked, in a terrible voice, "and die?"

"I have told you it is not in my nature to die easily, and it is something far stronger than mere curiosity makes me ask."

"Be it so! The sky is growing red with day-dawn, and I shall never see the sun rise more, for I am already plague-struck!"

That sweetest of all voices ceased. The white hands removed the mask, and the floating coils of hair, and revealed, to Sir Norman's horror-struck gaze, the

grisly face and head, and the hollow eye-sockets, the grinning mouth, and fleshless cheeks of a skeleton!

He saw it but for one fearful instant—the next, she had thrown up both arms, and leaped headlong into the loathly plague-pit. He saw her for a second or two, heaving and writhing in the putrid heap; and then the strong man reeled and fell with his face on the ground, not feigning, but sick unto death. Of all the dreadful things he had witnessed that night, there was nothing so dreadful as this; of all the horror he had felt before, there was none to equal what he felt now. In his momentary delirium, it seemed to him she was reaching her arms of bone up to drag him in, and that the skeleton-face was grinning at him on the edge of the awful pit. And, covering his eyes with his hands, he sprang up, and fled away.

CHAPTER XXII. DAY-DAWN.

All this time, the attendant, George, had been sitting, very much at his ease, on horseback, looking after Sir Norman's charger and admiring the beauties of sunrise. He had seen Sir Norman in conversation with a strange female, and not much liking his near proximity to the plague-pit, was rather impatient for it to come to an end; but when he saw the tragic manner in which it did end, his consternation was beyond all bounds. Sir Norman, in his horrified flight, would have fairly passed him unnoticed, had not George arrested him by a loud shout.

“I beg your pardon, Sir Norman,” he exclaimed, as that gentleman turned his distracted face; “but, it seems to me, you are running away. Here is your horse; and allow me to say, unless we hurry we will scarcely reach the count by sunrise.”

Sir Norman leaned against his horse, and shaded his eyes with his hand, shuddering like one in an ague.

“Why did that woman leap into the plague-pit?” inquired George, looking at him curiously. “Was it not the sorceress, La Masque?”

“Yes, yes. Do not ask me any questions now,” replied Sir Norman, in a smothered voice, and with an impatient wave of his hand.

“Whatever you please, sir,” said George, with the flippancy of his class; “but still I must repeat, if you do not mount instantly, we will be late; and my master, the count, is not one who brooks delay.”

The young knight vaulted into the saddle without a word, and started off at a break-neck pace into the city. George, almost unable to keep up with him, followed instead of leading, rather skeptical in his own mind whether he were not riding after a moon-struck lunatic. Once or twice he shouted out a sharp-toned inquiry as to whether he knew where he was going, and that they were taking the wrong way altogether; to all of which Sir Norman deigned not the slightest reply, but rode more and more recklessly on. There were but few people abroad at that hour; indeed, for that matter, the streets of London, in the dismal summer of 1665, were, comparatively speaking, always deserted; and the few now wending their way homeward were tired physicians and plague-nurses from the hospitals, and several hardy country folks, with more love of lucre than fear of death bending their steps with produce to the market-place. These people, sleepy and pallid in the gray haze of daylight, stared in astonishment after the

two furious riders; and windows were thrown open, and heads thrust out to see what the unusual thunder of horses' hoofs at that early hour meant. George followed dauntlessly on, determined to do it or die in the attempt; and if he had ever heard of the Flying Dutchman, would undoubtedly have come to the conclusion that he was just then following his track on dry land. But, unlike the hapless Vanderdecken, Sir Norman came to a halt at last, and that so suddenly that his horse stood on his beam ends, and flourished his two fore limbs in the atmosphere. It was before La Masque's door; and Sir Norman was out of the saddle in a flash, and knocking like a postman with the handle of his whip on the door. The thundering reveille rang through the house, making it shake to its centre, and hurriedly brought to the door, the anatomy who acted as guardian-angel of the establishment.

“La Masque is not at home, and I cannot admit you,” was his sharp salute.

“Then I shall just take the trouble of admitting myself,” said Sir Norman, shortly.

And without further ceremony, he pushed aside the skeleton and entered. But that outraged servitor sprang in his path, indignant and amazed.

“No, sir; I cannot permit it. I do not know you; and it is against all orders to admit strangers in La Masque's absence.”

“Bah! you old simpleton!” remarked Sir Norman, losing his customary respect for old age in his impatience, “I have La Masque's order for what I am about to do. Get along with you directly, will you? Show me to her private room, and no nonsense!”

He tapped his sword-hilt significantly as he spoke, and that argument proved irresistible. Grumbling, in low tones, the anatomy stalked up-stairs; and the other followed, with very different feelings from those with which he had mounted that staircase last. His guide paused in the hall above, with his hand on the latch of a door.

“This is her private room, is it!” demanded Sir Norman.

“Yes.”

“Just stand aside, then, and let me pass.”

The room he entered was small, simply furnished, and seemed to answer as bed-chamber and study, all in one. There was a writing-table under a window, covered with books, and he glanced at them with some curiosity. They were classics, Greek and Latin, and other little known tongues—perhaps Sanscrit and Chaldaic, French belles lettres, novels, and poetry, and a few rare old English

books. There were no papers, however, and those were what he was in search of; so spying a drawer in the table, he pulled it hastily open. The sight that met his eyes fairly dazzled him. It was full of jewels of incomparable beauty and value, strewn as carelessly about as if they were valueless. The blaze of gems at the midnight court seemed to him as nothing compared with the Golconda, the Valley of Diamonds shooting forth sparks of rainbow-fire before him now. Around one magnificent diamond necklace was entwined a scrap of paper, on which was written:

“The family jewels of the Montmorencis. To be given to my sisters when I am dead.”

That settled their destiny. All this blaze of diamonds, rubies, and opals were Leoline's; and with the energetic rapidity characteristic of our young friend that morning, he swept them out on the table, and resumed his search for papers. No document was there to reward his search, but the brief one twined round the necklace; and he was about giving up in despair, when a small brass slide in one corner caught his eye. Instantly he was at it, trying it every way, shoving it out and in, and up and down, until at last it yielded to his touch, disclosing an inner drawer, full of papers and parchments. One glance showed them to be what he was in search of—proofs of Leoline and Hubert's identity, with the will of the marquis, their father, and numerous other documents relative to his wealth and estates. These precious manuscripts he rolled together in a bundle, and placed carefully in his doublet, and then seizing a beautifully-wrought brass casket, that stood beneath the table, he swept the jewels in, secured it, and strapped it to his belt. This brisk and important little affair being over, he arose to go, and in turning, saw the skeleton porter standing in the door-way, looking on in speechless dismay.

“It's all right my ancient friend!” observed Sir Norman, gravely. “These papers must go before the king, and these jewels to their proper owner.”

“Their proper owner!” repeated the old man, shrilly; “that is La Masque. Thief-robber-housebreaker—stop!”

“My good old friend, you will do yourself a mischief if you bawl like that. Undoubtedly these things were La Masque's, but they are so no longer, since La Masque herself is among the things that were!”

“You shall not go!” yelled the old man, trembling with rage and anger. “Help! help! help!”

“You noisy old idiot!” cried Sir Norman, losing all patience, “I will throw you out of the window if you keep up such a clamor as this. I tell you La Masque is

dead!”

At this ominous announcement, the ghastly porter fell back, and became, if possible, a shade more ghastly than was his wont.

“Dead and buried!” repeated Sir Norman, with gloomy sternness, “and there will be somebody else coming to take possession shortly. How many more servants are there here beside yourself?”

“Only one, sir—my wife Joanna. In mercy's name, sir, do not turn us out in the streets at this dreadful time!”

“Not I! You and your wife Joanna may stagnate here till you blue-mold, for me. But keep the door fast, my good old friend, and admit no strangers, but those who can tell you La Masque is dead!”

With which parting piece of advice Sir Norman left the house, and joined George, who sat like an effigy before the door, in a state of great mental wrath, and who accosted him rather suddenly the moment he made his appearance.

“I tell you what, Sir Norman Kingsley, if you have many more morning calls to make, I shall beg leave to take my departure. As it is, I know we are behind time, and his ma—the count, I mean, is not one who it accustomed or inclined to be kept waiting.”

“I am quite at your service now,” said Sir Norman, springing on horseback; “so away with you, quick as you like.”

George wanted no second order. Before the words were well out of his companion's mouth, he was dashing away like a bolt from a bow, as furiously as if on a steeple-chase, with Sir Norman close at his heels; and they rode, flushed and breathless, with their steeds all a foaming, into the court-yard of the royal palace at Whitehall, just as the early rising sun was showing his florid and burning visage above the horizon.

The court-yard, unlike the city streets, swarmed with busy life. Pages, and attendants, and soldiers, moving hither and thither, or lounging about, preparing for the morning's journey to Oxford. Among the rest Sir Norman observed Hubert, lying very much at his ease wrapped in his cloak, on the ground, and chatting languidly with a pert and pretty attendant of the fair Mistress Stuart. He cut short his flirtation, however, abruptly enough, and sprang to his feet as he saw Sir Norman, while George immediately darted off and disappeared from the palace.

“Am I late Hubert?” said his hurried questioner, as he drew the lad's arm within his own, and led him off out of hearing.

“I think not. The count,” said Hubert, with laughing emphasis, “has not been visible since he entered yonder doorway, and there has been no message that I have heard of. Doubtless, now that George has arrived, the message will soon be here, for the royal procession starts within half an hour.”

“Are you sure there is no trick, Hubert? Even now he may be with Leoline!”

Hubert shrugged his shoulders.

“He maybe; we must take our chance for that; but we have his royal word to the contrary. Not that I have much faith in that!” said Hubert.

“If he were king of the world instead of only England,” cried Sir Norman, with flashing eyes, “he shall not have Leoline while I wear a sword to defend her!”

“Regicide!” exclaimed Hubert, holding up both hands in affected horror. “Do my ears deceive me? Is this the loyal and chivalrous Sir Norman Kingsley, ready to die for king and country—”

“Stuff and nonsense!” interrupted Sir Norman, impatiently. “I tell you any one, be he whom he may, that attempts to take Leoline from me, must reach her over my dead body!”

“Bravo! You ought to be a Frenchman, Sir Norman! And what if the lady herself, finding her dazzling suitor drop his barnyard feathers, and soar over her head in his own eagle plumes, may not give you your dismissal, and usurp the place of pretty Madame Stuart.”

“You cold-blooded young villain! if you insinuate such a thing again, I'll throttle you! Leoline loves me, and me alone!”

“Doubtless she thinks so; but she has yet to learn she has a king for a suitor!”

“Bah! You are nothing but a heartless cynic,” said Sir Norman, yet with an anxious and irritated flush on his face, too: “What do you know of love?”

“More than you think, as pretty Mariette yonder could depose, if put upon oath. But seriously, Sir Norman, I am afraid your case is of the most desperate; royal rivals are dangerous things!”

“Yet Charles has kind impulses, and has been known to do generous acts.”

“Has he? You expect him, beyond doubt, to do precisely as he said; and if Leoline, different from all the rest of her sex, prefers the knight to the king, he will yield her unresistingly to you.”

“I have nothing but his word for it!” said Sir Norman, in a distracted tone, “and, at present, can do nothing but bide my time.”

“I have been thinking of that, too! I promised, you know, when I left her, last night, that we would return before day-dawn, and rescue her. The unhappy little beauty will doubtless think I have fallen into the tiger's jaws myself, and has half wept her bright eyes out by this time!”

“My poor Leoline! And O Hubert, if you only knew what she is to you!”

“I do know! She told me she was my sister!”

Sir Norman looked at him in amazement.

“She told you, and you take it like this?”

“Certainly, I take it like this. How would you have me take it? It is nothing to go into hysterics about, after all!”

“Of all the cold-blooded young reptiles I ever saw,” exclaimed Sir Norman, with infinite disgust, “you are the worst! If you were told you were to receive the crown of France to-morrow, you would probably open your eyes a trifle, and take it as you would a new cap!”

“Of course I would. I haven't lived in courts half my life to get up a scene for a small matter! Besides, I had an idea from the first moment I saw Leoline that she must be my sister, or something of that sort.”

“And so you felt no emotion whatever on hearing it?”

“I don't know as I properly understand what you mean by emotion,” said Herbert, reflectively. “But ye-e-s, I did feel somewhat pleased—she is so like me, and so uncommonly handsome!”

“Humph! there's a reason! Did she tell you how she discovered it herself?”

“Let me see—no—I think not—she simply mentioned the fact.”

“She did not tell you either, I suppose, that you had more sisters than herself?”

“More than herself! No. That would be a little too much of a good thing! One sister is quite enough for any reasonable mortal.”

“But there were two more, my good young friend!”

“Is it possible?” said Hubert, in a tone that betrayed not the slightest symptom of emotion. “Who are they?”

Sir Norman paused one instant, combating a strong temptation to seize the phlegmatic page by the collar, and give him such another shaking as he would not get over for a week to come; but suddenly recollecting he was Leoline's brother, and by the same token a marquis or thereabouts, he merely paused to cast a withering look upon him, and walked on.

“Well,” said Hubert, “I am waiting to be told.”

“You may wait, then!” said Sir Norman, with a smothered growl; “and I give you joy when I tell you. Such extra communicativeness to one so stolid could do no good!”

“But I am not stolid! I am in a perfect agony of anxiety,” said Hubert.

“You young jackanapes!” said Sir Norman, half-laughing, half-incensed. “It were a wise deed and a godly one to take you by the hind-leg and nape of the neck, and pitch you over yonder wall; but for your master's sake I will desist.”

“Which of them?” inquired Hubert, with provoking gravity.

“It would be more to the point if you asked me who the others were, I think.”

“So I have, and you merely abused me for it. But I think I know one of them without being told. It is that other fac-simile of Leoline and myself who died in the robber's ruin!”

“Exactly. You and she, and Leoline, were triplets!”

“And who is the other?”

“Her name is La Masque. Have you ever heard it?”

“La Masque! Nonsense!” exclaimed Hubert, with some energy in his voice at last. “You but jest, Sir Norman Kingsley!”

“No such thing! It is a positive fact! She told me the whole story herself!”

“And what is the whole story; and why did she not tell it to me instead of you.”

“She told it to Leoline, thinking, probably, she had the most sense; and she told it to me, as Leoline's future husband. It is somewhat long to relate, but it will help to beguile the time while we are waiting for the royal summons.”

And hereupon Sir Norman, without farther preface, launched into a rapid resume of La Masque's story, feeling the cold chill with which he had witnessed it creep over him as he narrated her fearful end.

“It struck me,” concluded Sir Norman, “that it would be better to procure any papers she might possess at once, lest, by accident, they should fall into other hands; so I rode there directly, and, in spite of the cantankerous old porter, searched diligently, until I found them. Here they are,” said Sir Norman, drawing forth the roll.

“And what do you intend doing with them?” inquired Hubert, glancing at the papers with an unmoved countenance.

“Show them to the king, and, though his mediation with Louis, obtain for you the restoration of your rights.”

“And do you think his majesty will give himself so much trouble for the Earl of Rochester's page?”

“I think he will take the trouble to see justice done, or at least he ought to. If he declines, we will take the matter in our own hands, my Hubert; and you and I will seek Louis ourselves. Please God, the Earl of Rochester's page will yet wear the coronet of the De Montmorencis!”

“And the sister of a marquis will be no unworthy mate even for a Kingsley,” said Hubert. “Has La Masque left nothing for her?”

“Do you see this casket?” tapping the one of cared brass dangling from his belt; “well, it is full of jewels worth a king's ransom. I found them in a drawer of La Masque's house, with directions that they were to be given to her sisters at her death. Miranda being dead, I presume they are all Leoline's now.”

“This is a queer business altogether!” said Hubert, musingly; “and I am greatly mistaken if King Louis will not regard it as a very pretty little work of fiction.”

“But I have proofs, lad! The authenticity of these papers cannot be doubted.”

“With all my heart. I have no objections to be made a marquis of, and go back to la belle France, out of this land of plague and fog. Won't some of my friends here be astonished when they hear it, particularly the Earl of Rochester, when he finds out that he has had a marquis for a page? Ah, here comes George, and bearing a summons from Count L'Estrange at last.”

George approached, and intimated that Sir Norman was to follow him to the presence of his master.

“Au revoir, then,” said Hubert. “You will find me here when you come back.”

Sir Norman, with a slight tremor of the nerves at what was to come, followed the king's page through halls and anterooms, full of loiterers, courtiers, and their attendants. Once a hand was laid on his shoulder, a laughing voice met his ear, and the Earl of Rochester stood beside him!

“Good-morning, Sir Norman; you are abroad betimes. How have you left your friend, the Count L'Estrange?”

“Your lordship has probably seen him since I have, and should be able to answer that question best.”

“And how does his suit progress with the pretty Leoline?” went on the gay earl. “In faith, Kingsley, I never saw such a charming little beauty; and I shall do combat with you yet—with both the count and yourself, and outwit the pair of you!”

“Permit me to differ from your lordship. Leoline would not touch you with a pair of tongs!”

“Ah! she has better taste than you give her credit for; but if I should fail, I know what to do to console myself.”

“May I ask what?”

“Yes! there is Hubert, as like her an two peas in a pod. I shall dress him up in lace and silks, and gewgaws, and have a Leoline of my own already made its order.”

“Permit me to doubt that, too! Hubert is as much lost to you as Leoline!”

Leaving the volatile earl to put what construction pleased him best on this last sententious remark, he resumed his march after George, and was ushered, at last, into an ante-room near the audience-chamber. Count L'Estrange, still attired as Count L'Estrange, stood near a window overlooking the court-yard, and as the page salaamed and withdrew, he turned round, and greeted Sir Norman with his suavest air.

“The appointed hour is passed, Sir Norman Kingsley, but that is partly your own fault. Your guide hither tells me that you stopped for some time at the house of a fortune-teller, known as La Masque. Why was this!”

“I was forced to stop on most important business,” answered the knight, still resolved to treat him as the count, until it should please him to doff his incognito, “of which you shall hear anon. Just now, our business is with Leoline.”

“True! And as in a short time I start with yonder cavalcade, there is but little time to lose. Apropos, Kingsley, who is that mysterious woman, La Masque?”

“She is, or was (for she is dead now) a French lady, of noble birth, and the sister of Leoline!”

“Her sister! And have you discovered Leoline's history?”

“I have.”

“And her name!”

“And her name. She is Leoline De Montmorenci! And with the proudest blood of France in her veins, living obscure and unknown—a stranger in a strange land since childhood; but, with God's grace and your help, I hope to see her restored to all she has lost, before long.”

“You know me, then?” said his companion, half-smiling.

“Yes, your majesty,” answered Sir Norman, bowing low before the king.

CHAPTER XXIII. FINIS

As the last glimpse of moonlight and of Hubert's bright face vanished, Leoline took to pacing up and down the room in a most conflicting and excited state of mind. So many things had happened during the past night; so rapid and unprecedented had been the course of events; so changed had her whole life become within the last twelve hours, that when she came to think it all over, it fairly made her giddy. Dressing for her bridal; the terrible announcement of Prudence; the death-like swoon; the awakening at the plague-pit; the maniac flight through the streets; the cold plunge in the river; her rescue; her interview with Sir Norman, and her promise; the visit of La Masque; the appearance of the count; her abduction; her journey here; the coming of Hubert, and their suddenly-discovered relationship. It was enough to stun any one; and the end was not yet. Would Hubert effect his escape? Would they be able to free her? What place was this, and who was Count L'Estrange? It was a great deal easier to propound this catechism to herself than to find answers to her own questions; and so she walked up and down, worrying her pretty little head with all sorts of anxieties, until it was a perfect miracle that softening of the brain did not ensue.

Her feet gave out sooner than her brain, though; and she got so tired before long, that she dropped into a seat, with a long-drawn, anxious sigh; and, worn out with fatigue and watching, she, at last, fell asleep.

And sleeping, she dreamed. It seemed to her that the count and Sir Norman were before her, in her chamber in the old house on London Bridge, tossing her heart between them like a sort of shuttlecock. By-and-by, with two things like two drumsticks, they began hammering away at the poor, little, fluttering heart, as if it were an anvil and they were a pair of blacksmiths, while the loud knocks upon it resounded through the room. For a time, she was so bewildered that she could not comprehend what it meant; but, at last, she became conscious that some one was rapping at the door. Pressing one hand over her startled heart, she called “Come in!” and the door opened and George entered.

“Count L'Estrange commands me to inform you, fair lady, that he will do himself the pleasure of visiting you immediately, with Sir Norman Kingsley, if you are prepared to receive them.”

“With Sir Norman Kingsley!” repeated Leoline, faintly. “I-I am afraid I do not quite understand.”

“Then you will not be much longer in that deplorable state,” said George, backing out, “for here they are.”

“Pardon this intrusion, fairest Leoline,” began the count, “but Sir Norman and I are about to start on a journey, and before we go, there is a little difference of opinion between us that you are to settle.”

Leoline looked first at one, and then at the other, utterly bewildered.

“What is it?” she asked.

“A simple matter enough. Last evening, if you recollect, you were my promised bride.”

“It was against my will,” said Leoline, boldly, though her voice shook, “You and Prudence made me.”

“Nay, Leoline, you wrong me. I, at least, need no compulsion.”

“You know better. You haunted me continually; you gave me no peace at all; and I would just have married you to get rid of you.”

“And you never loved me?”

“I never did.”

“A frank confession! Did you, then, love any one else?”

The dark eyes fell, and the roseate glow again tinged the pearly face.

“Mute!” said the count, with an almost imperceptible smile. “Look up, Leoline, and speak.”

But Leoline would do neither. With all her momentary daring gone, she stood startled as a wild gazelle.

“Shall I answer for her, Sir Count?” exclaimed Sir Norman, his own cheek dashed. “Leoline! Leoline! you love me!”

Leoline was silent.

“You are to decide between us, Leoline. Though the count forcibly brought you here, he has been generous enough to grant this. Say, then, which of as you love best.”

“I do not love him at all,” said Leoline, with a little disdain, “and he knows it.”

“Then it is I!” said Sir Norman, him whole face beaming with delight.

“It is you!”

Leoline held out both hands to the loved one, and nestled close to his side, like a child would to its protector.

“Fairly rejected!” said the count, with a pacing shade of mortification on his brow; “and, my word being pledged, I most submit. But, beautiful Leoline, you have yet to learn whom you have discarded.”

Clinging to her lover's arm, the girl grew white with undefined apprehension. Leisurely, the count removed false wig, false eyebrows, false beard; and a face well known to Leoline, from pictures and description, turned full upon her.

“Sire!” she cried, in terror, calling on her knees with clasped hands.

“Nay; rise, fair Leoline,” said the king, holding out his hand to assist her. “It is my place to kneel to one so lovely instead of having her kneel to me. Think again. Will you reject the king as you did the count?”

“Pardon, your majesty!”, said Leoline, scarcely daring to look up; “but I must!”

“So be it! You are a perfect miracle of troth and constancy, and I think I can afford to be generous for once. In fifteen minutes, we start for Oxford, and you must accompany us as Lady Kingsley. A tiring woman will wait upon you to robe you for your bridal. We will leave you now, and let me enjoin expedition.”

And while she still stood too much astonished by the sudden proposal to answer, both were gone, and in their place stood a smiling lady's maid, with a cloud of gossamer white in her arms.

“Are those for me?” inquired Leoline, looking at them, and trying to comprehend that it was all real.

“They are for you—sent by Mistress Stuart, herself. Please sit down, and all will be ready in a trice.”

And in a trice all was ready. The shining, jetty curls were smoothed, and fell in a glossy shower, trained with jewels—the pearls Leoline herself still wore. The rose satin was discarded for another of bridal white, perfect of fit, and splendid of feature. A great gossamer veil like a cloud of silver mist over all, from head to foot; and Leoline was shown herself in a mirror, and in the sudden transformation, could have exclaimed, with the unfortunate lady in Mother Goose, shorn of her tresses when in balmy slumber: “As sure as I'm a little woman, this is none of it!” But she it was, nevertheless, who stood listening like one in a trance, to the enthusiastic praises of her waiting-maid.

Again there was a tap at the door. This time the attendant opened it, and George reappeared. Even he stood for a moment looking at the silver-shining vision, and so lost in admiration, that he almost forgot his message. But when Leoline turned the light of her beautiful eyes inquiringly upon him, he managed

to remember it, and announced that he had been sent by the king to usher her to the royal presence.

With a feet-throbbing heart, flushed cheeks, and brilliant eyes, the dazzling bride followed him, unconscious that she had never looked so incomparably before in her life. It was but a few hours since she had dressed for another bridal; and what wonderful things had occurred since then—her whole destiny had changed in a night. Not quite sure yet but that she was still dreaming, she followed on—saw George throw open the great doors of the audience-chamber, and found herself suddenly in what seemed to her a vast concourse of people. At the upper end of the apartment was a brilliant group of ladies, with the king's beautiful favorite in their midst, gossiping with knots of gentlemen. The king himself stood in the recess of a window, with his brother, the Duke of York, the Earl of Rochester, and Sir Norman Kingsley, and was laughing and relating animatedly to the two peers the whole story. Leoline noticed this, and noticed, too, that all wore traveling dresses—most of the ladies, indeed, being attired in riding-habits.

The king himself advanced to her rescue, and drawing her arm within his, he led her up and presented her to the fair Mistress Stuart, who received her with smiling graciousness though Leoline, all unused to court ways, and aware of the lovely lady's questionable position, returned it almost with cold hauteur. Charles being in an unusually gracious mood, only smiled as he noticed it, and introduced her next to his brother of York, and her former short acquaintance, Rochester.

“There's no need, I presume, to make you acquainted with this other gentleman,” said Charles, with a laughing glance at Sir Norman. “Kingsley, stand forward and receive your bride. My Lord of Canterbury, we await your good offices.”

The bland bishop, in surplice and stole, and book in hand, stepped from a distant group, and advanced. Sir Norman, with a flush on his cheek, and an exultant light in his eyes, took the hand of his beautiful bride who stood lovely, and blushing, and downcast, the envy and admiration of all. And

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“Before the bishop now they stand,
   The bridegroom and the bride;
 And who shall paint what lovers feel
   In this, their hour of pride?”
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Who indeed? Like many other pleasant things is this world, it requires to be felt to be appreciated; and, for that reason, it is a subject on which the unworthy chronicler is altogether incompetent to speak. The first words of the ceremony dropped from the prelate's urbane lips, and Sir Norman's heart danced a

tarantella within him. “Wilt thou?” inquired the bishop, blandly, and slipped a plain gold ring on one pretty finger of Leoline's hand and all heard the old, old formula: “What God hath joined together, let no man put asunder!” And the whole mystic rite was over.

Leoline gave one earnest glance at the ring on her finger. Long ago, slaves wore rings as the sign of their bondage—is it for the same reason married women wear them now? While she yet looked half-doubtfully at it, she was surrounded, congratulated, and stunned with a sadden clamor of voices; and then, through it all, she heard the well-remembered voice of Count L'Estrange, saying:

“My lords and ladies, time is on the wing, and the sun is already half an hour high! Off with you all to the courtyard, and mount, while Lady Kingsley changes her wedding-gear for robes more befitting travel, and joins us there.”

With a low obeisance to the king, the lovely bride hastened away after one of the favorite's attendants, to do as he directed, and don a riding-suit. In ten minutes after, when the royal cavalcade started, she turned from the pest-stricken city, too and fairest, where all was fair, by Sir Norman's side rode Leoline.

Sitting one winter night by a glorious winter fire, while the snow and hail lashed the windows, and the wind without roared like Bottom, the weaver, a pleasant voice whispered the foregoing tale. Here, as it paused abruptly, and seemed to have done with the whole thing, I naturally began to ask questions. What happened the dwarf and his companions? What became of Hubert? Did Sir Norman and Lady Kingsley go to Devonshire, and did either of them die of the plague? I felt, myself, when I said it, that the last suggestion was beneath contempt, and so a withering look from the face opposite proved; but the voice was obliging enough to answer the rest of my queries. The dwarf and his cronies being put into his majesty's jail of Newgate, where the plague was raging fearfully, they all died in a week, and so managed to cheat the executioner. Hubert went to France, and laid his claims before the royal Louis, who, not being able to do otherwise, was graciously pleased to acknowledge them; and Hubert became the Marquis de Montmorenci, and in the fullness of time took unto himself a wife, even of the daughters of the land, and lived happy for ever after.

And Sir Norman and Lady Kingsley did go to the old manor in Devonshire, where—with tradition and my informant—there is to be seen to this day, an old family-picture, painted some twelve years after, representing the knight and his lady sitting serenely in their “ain ingle nook” with their family around them. Sir

Norman,—a little portlier, a little graver, in the serious dignity of pater familias; and Leoline, with the dark, beautiful eyes, the falling, shining hair, the sweet smiling lips, and lovely, placid face of old. Between them, on three hassocks, sit three little boys; while the fourth, and youngest, a miniature little Sir Norman, leans against his mother's shoulder, and looks thoughtfully in her sweet, calm face. Of the fate of those four, the same ancient lore affirms: “That the eldest afterward bore the title of Earl of Kingsley; that the second became a lord high admiral, or chancellor, or something equally highfalutin; and that the third became an archbishop. But the highest honor of all was reserved for the fourth, and youngest,” continued the narrating voice, “who, after many days, sailed for America, and, in the course of time, became President of the United States.”

Determined to be fully satisfied on this point, at least, the author invested all her spare change in a catalogue of all the said Presidents, from George Washington to Chester A. Arthur, and, after a diligent and absorbing perusal of that piece of literature, could find no such name as Kingsley whatever; and has been forced to come to the conclusion that he most have applied to Congress to change his name on arriving in the New World, or else that her informant was laboring reader a falsehood when she told her so. As for the rest,

“I know not how the truth may be;
I say it as 'twas said to me.”

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