

A Terrible Temptation.

CHAPTER III.—Continued. In the pause that followed, Edmond Vesey's glance met the Lady Joan's, one brief, flashing, intelligent look, then the young man arose quietly. "If no better man be found, I offer myself," he said. The other turned upon him a pleased and by no means surprised smile. "From what you have already done I say at once that no better man than you, Master Vesey, will be forthcoming. If you accept the task, we accept your services gladly. The business you are to be entrusted with demands courage, secrecy, and some little ingenuity; I believe you possess them all. Success means an open path to rank, fortune, and such honors as royal gratitude can bestow; failure means high treason. I wish you to plainly know what you undertake." "I never shrank from undertaking any duty set before me. I may fail, but I shall not shrink from it." "Fine words—savouring a little of boastfulness it seems to me, but that may, of course, be a mistake of mine," Lord Bellinger covertly uttered with a sneer. A slight flush overspread Vesey's fair handsome face as he heard the words, but he took no notice. "Tell me exactly what is required of me," he turned to the speaker. "To be ready in one week, to ride wherever you may be commanded. Money will be at your service. The papers will be ready on the tenth of this month, and within three days of that date must be at their destination. They must on no account be destroyed, but if found upon you no earthly power will preserve your life. I tell you this that you may make your own preparations—take your own precautions."

gipsy's first words; then with that curious contraction of eyebrows marking dis- leasure, she added hastily: "No, don't tell a lie. I saw your face as you recognized me, and you were not pleased." "I am—upon my soul I am," Vesey rejoined. Quickly his projected journey recurred to him, and he foresaw the help this child of the moor might be to him. "But it was astonishment prevented my looking glad at first. How did you get to London? Who would have dreamed of seeing you here?" "I told you it would be where you least expected to see me." "Well, you have certainly proved your words." She had timidly, half-appropriately linked her fingers through his arm as she spoke; and they were slowly moving on together. Behind them walked a shadow with grim exultation on his features, no less a personage than Lord Bellinger. Jealously watching his rival's prolonged farewell with Lady Joan, he had seen the gipsy's greeting. "A fine intrigue here, my young gentleman; almost in Joan's very sight you do her this insult. Well, a lucky thing for me. If I cannot turn this to some advantage, I am not the man I fancy myself I will just walk on this way and watch matters a little. By George! the girl is lovely enough to turn any gallant's head. What a figure—what grace of movement—what eyes!" as Stella raised her glance to her companion's beneath the light of one of the lamps. "So much the better; Joan would scorn an ugly rival, but one as beautiful as herself may not be treated too lightly." Meantime Stella was answering her companion: "I have come to bring you back this." She drew out and showed him his own lost watch. "I had great trouble in getting it from Rube Garnet—"

are light, her skin is like snow and pink may. She is like you. You might be brother and sister. Is it so?" with strained intense gaze and breathless utterance. He smiled happily. "Not so, little Stella." "She is no relation of yours?" asked the girl sadly. "She is my friend." He said the words, with no intention of misleading her, proudly, blissfully. His mind was fully of the glorious possibilities held out to him, he uttered what was indeed to-day the truth. Stella drew a deep breath of relief, and the expression of her eyes changed. "Only your friend!" she repeated softly. "Has she ever done you such a service as I did?" "Never, little one. She has never beheld me in such a predicament." He stroked the brown clinging fingers as he spoke in gratitude. "Tell me one thing more. This Lady Joan, this proud Giorgio—is she more beautiful than I am, think you?" He smiled down upon the eager face, amused by the vanity of the question, putting no other construction upon it. "In your diverse styles you are equally beautiful," he said, and again the girl drew that deep sigh of relief. "Will you give me lodging for to-night?" she asked suddenly. "I must return early in the morning, but I should like to be near you to-night. You have room surely for—just me." She was guileless as an infant, he knew; she thought no evil, and he would not put the ideas into her head—nay, even if he did she would scarce understand. What were social laws and proprieties to the wild unfettered child of nature? Swallowing his perplexity as best he might, Vesey led his strange companion to the house in which he had rooms, and Lord Bellinger, with an exclamation of delight, saw them enter together. Esmond Vesey would have given his own room up to Stella, but she shrank from the unaccustomed luxury of such a resting-place, and preferred to camp out, as it were, before his sitting-room fire. Next morning he introduced her to his landlady as his cousin from the country and they had breakfast together, after which he amused her by showing her various pictures and such things, at which she gazed with delight, clinging to his arm the while, and looked adoringly in his face as she murmured: "I need not leave you just yet. I can stay an hour longer; it is so nice to be here with you. I will stay a little longer, and make more haste when I set out." There came a rap at the door suddenly, and glancing from the window, Vesey saw a sedan-chair and a lady alighting from it at his door. Could he believe his eyes? He turned to the gipsy girl with almost angry impatience. "Someone is coming to see me on important private business, Stella. You must go in here"—he almost pushed her into the next room—"and on no account stir or move until I call you. Do you understand?" "I understand. I will obey," she said docilely, and the door closed upon her even as the landlady, with some uneasiness upon her features, announced: "The Lady Joan Ambrose."

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