

THE BROWN MASK

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CHAPTER I Brethren of the Road



There was no possibility of misunderstanding, that the place was not for them. It was natural, therefore, that a certain air of mystery should surround the house, for, although the alley was a cul-de-sac, there were stories of marvelous escapes from this trap even when the entrance was closed by a troop of soldiers, and it was whispered that there was a secret way out from the "Punch-Bowl" known only to the favored few. Nor was an element of romance wanting. The dwellers in this alley were of the poorest sort, dirty and unkempt, picking up a precarious livelihood, pickpockets and cutpurses—"foysters" and "hyppers" as their thieves' slang named them; yet through all this wretched shabbiness there would flash at intervals some fine gentleman, richly dressed, and with the swagger of St. James' in his gait. Conscious of the sensation he occasioned, he passed through the alley looking strangely out of place, yet with no uncertain step. He was a hero, not only to these ragged worshippers, but in a far wider circle where wit and beauty moved; he knew it, gloried in it, and recked little of the price which must some day be paid for such popularity. The destination of these gentlemen was always the "Punch-Bowl" tavern.

Neither of a man, nor of a tavern, is it safe to judge only by the exterior. A grim and forbidding countenance may conceal a warm heart, even as the unimpressive "Punch-Bowl" contained a cosy and comfortable parlor. Tonight, half a dozen fine gentlemen were enjoying their wine, and it was evident that the landlady was rather proud of her guests. Buxom, and not too old to forget that she had once been accounted pretty, she still loved smartness and bright colors, was not averse to a kiss upon occasion, and had a just—course, perhaps, but with some wit in it—for each of her customers. She knew them well; their secrets, their love episodes, their dangers; sometimes she gave advice, had often rendered their valuable help, but she had also a keen eye for business. Her favors had to be paid for, and even from the handsomest of her customers a price never been known to settle a score. The "Punch-Bowl" was no place for empty pockets, and bad luck was rather a crime than an excuse. When it pleased her the landlady could tell many tales of other gentlemen who had known and would never see again, and she always gave the impression that she considered her former customers far superior to her present ones. Perhaps she found the comparison good for her, especially since she spoke to vain men. She had become remiss since that evening.

The very night before he was taken he sat where you're sitting," she said, pointing to one of her customers, who was seated by the hearth. "Ah! He made a good end of it did Jim of the Green Coat; kicked off his boots as if they were an old pair, he had done with, and drew the ordinary of the cart, saying he had no time to waste on him just then. I was there and saw it all.

There was silence as she concluded her glowing tale. Depression must take hold of the most careless and light hearted for a moment, and even the attraction of making a good end with an opportunity of turning a workman's ordinary cannot appear so attractive. The landlady had contrived to make her story vivid, and furtive glances were cast at the individual who occupied the seat she had indicated. There suddenly appeared to be something fatal in it, as though why a man might congratulate himself for being seated elsewhere. The occupant was the least concerned. He had taken the most comfortable place in the room; it seemed to be right by his chair and flicking some dust from his sleeve. He appeared to resent such slavish admiration of Galloping Hermit—perhaps because he felt that his own pre-eminence had challenged the frequenters of the "Punch-Bowl." He threw a guinea to the landlady, told her to buy a keepsake with the change, and passed out with a careless nod, as though he intended never to come back into such low company.

The landlady stood fingering the guinea, turning it between her finger and thumb, rather helping her reflections by the other hand, but satisfying herself that the coin was a good one.

"I believe we've had Galloping Hermit here tonight," she said suddenly. "For as little as a gentleman like you, who are just now, Mark my words, he wears a brown mask on special occasions, and thought by sneering to throw dust in our eyes. It's not the fellow, but the mask, that's the trouble. I'm not sure that I won't buy a brown silk mask for keepsake and slip it on when next I see him coming in at the door. That would settle the question."



"He found himself a prisoner, bound hand and foot."

But a poor show. There flashed past me a splendid horseman, man and beast one perfect piece of harmony. The moon was near the full. I saw the neat, strong lines of the horse, the easy movement of the rider, and I could see that the mask which the man wore was brown. This happened two years ago, out beyond Barnes.

"And without that brown mask no one knows him," said the man who had first spoken of him. "He has been met on all the roads, north, south, east and west—never in company, always alone. He never fails, yet the blood-fasters have watched for him in vain. Truly, he disappears as mysteriously as the devil might. He may go to court. He may be a well-known figure there, gaming with the best, a favored sutor, where beauty smiles. He may have been here among us at the 'Punch-Bowl' without our knowing it."

"It is not impossible," Gentleman Jack admitted, smiling a little at the other's enthusiasm.

"I envy him," was the answer. "We seem mean beside such a man as Galloping Hermit."

"I do not cry 'Yes' to that," said Gentleman Jack, just in time to prevent an outburst from the landlady, who appeared to fancy that the quality of her entertainment was being called in question. "The brown mask conceals a personality, no doubt, but before we can judge between man and man we must know something of their various opportunities. Were he careful and lucky, such a man as my bishop would be hard to run to earth. Galloping Hermit is careful, for only at considerable intervals do we hear of him. The road would seem to be a pastime with him, rather than a life he loved. For me, the night never comes that I do not long to be in the saddle, that I do not crave the excitement, even if there be no spoil worth the trouble of taking. This man is different. He is only abroad when the quarry is certain. True, success has been his, but for all that the fear of Tyburn may spoil his rest at night, and when he gets there we may find that the brown mask concealed a coward or a miserably ordinary fellow."



Beside her sat an elderly woman who seemed to be enjoying herself exceedingly and appeared to find especial relish in Judge Marriott's remarks. The more brutal they were the more witty she seemed to think them.

"As sentence was pronounced the girl rose to her feet and turned to go. In truth, it had been no wish of hers to come. The judge, the people, the whole atmosphere sickened her. She longed to get away, to feel the fresh air upon her cheek, and in her anxiety to depart she took no particular trouble to make sure that her companion was following her. There was a hasty crushing on all sides of her; as she was carried forward she became conscious that she was alone, that she was being stared at and commented upon by some of those who were about her. She ought not to be there, she felt it rather than knew it, and was painfully aware that people were judging her accordingly. One man spoke to her, and in her effort to escape his attentions she contrived to thrust herself into a corner of an outer lobby, and waited.

"Can I be of service?"

"For a moment she thought that the man she had escaped from had found her, and she turned indignantly. The steady gray eyes that met hers were eyes to trust—she felt that at once. This was quite a different person. He was young, with a face grave beyond his years, and a sense of strength about him likely to appeal to a woman.

"I am waiting for my aunt, Lady Bolsover," she said, the color mounting to her cheeks under his steady gaze, and then, suddenly anxious that he should not think evil of her, she added: "I did not want to come. It was horrible."

"Your aunt must have missed you," he said, glancing round the almost empty lobby, for the crowd had poured out into the street by this time. "If you have a coach waiting, may I take you to it?"



"I am glad you did not come here willingly," he said, suddenly, "for no other thought had been in my mind all this time. This is no place for a woman."

"Indeed, no. I am wondering why a man should be here at all," she said, looking at him with a keen eye.

"Galloping Hermit once did me a kindness. I would like to repay the debt."

"But how? What could you do?"

"I should be glad to do anything that might have happened to give me an opportunity. I did not, still, I shall see him presently. Perhaps, I may yet be able to do him some small service."

"There came no intervention on the prisoner's behalf in the days that followed, nor did he set up any plea for his life on the ground of knowing of plots against the king's majesty. This would be to shirk the day of reckoning, and he had boasted to his companions that he would stand up for his life. He had ridden up Holborn Hill scores of times, seeking spoil and adventure on Hounslow Heath, or seeking a gentleman to whom he would once more, and pay the price like a gentleman. It would be no lonely journey; there would be excitement and triumph in the deed. He had lived his life and enjoyed it; he had allowed nothing to stand in the way of his desires; he had pressed into a few short years far more satisfaction than any other career could have given him. Why should he whimper because the end came early? It would be a good end to make full of movement and color. He knew, for he had been a spectator when others had taken that journey, and he was more of a man than he was. The whole town was ringing with his fame. Why should he have regrets? Beauty and fashion came to visit him any one man came to thank him for some former kindness, and he had had nothing of the highwayman had thought nothing of and had forgotten."

These. The hour that did not hold some excitement in it, he wore her and made her petulant. Her husband, dead these ten years, had been among the enthusiastic welcomers of Charles at his restoration, and his wife had from first to last been a well-known figure in the court of the merry monarch. That she was no beauty, rather than because she possessed any great strength of character, probably accounted for the fact that she enjoyed no peculiar fame in that dissolute company. As she could not be the heroine of an intrigue, it pleased her to consider herself too great a dame for such affairs, and she was fully persuaded that she might count her lovers by the score, even now, had she so desired. As she had no very definite character, so she had no real convictions. Charles was dead, and James was king. Many changes were imminent, and Lady Bolsover was waiting to see in which direction the wind blew. Her nature, perhaps, was to taste Puritans and all their ways, but, necessary to her own well-being, she would easily be able to love them and curse all Catholics. She was not really bad at heart, but she was a strange companion for Barbara Lanison.

Some few months ago Sir John Lanison of Aylingford Abbey, in Hampshire, Lady Bolsover's brother and Barbara's uncle and sole guardian since the death of her parents, had hidden his niece away at the Abbey so that no man should have a chance of seeing her. He had known prettier women, but she was well enough, and where her face failed to attract her ample fortune would.

"She got more learning than is needful for a girl, to my mind," he told his sister; "but that kind of nonsense will be knocked out of her as soon as she understands her value as a woman. Send her back with all the corners rounded, my dear Peggy—that is what I want."

Lady Bolsover had done her best, but the result was not very satisfactory. Barbara had convictions which her aunt was powerless to undermine, and seemed to make the slightest impression on her. She had barely refrained from laughing outright at the compliments of recognized wits, and had a dozen galleys with annotations had been baffled and put to shame. Lord Rosmore, whose way with a woman was pronounced irresistible, had declared her adorable, but impossible, and Judge Marriott had promised Lady Bolsover a very handsome gratuity if she could persuade her niece to favor him and become his wife.

Barbara Lanison could not be unconscious of the sensation she caused. She was never so—but she sometimes studied the reflection in her mirror, and tried to discover the reason. Quite honestly she failed. She was not dissatisfied with the reflection; in its way it was



"Passed out with a careless nod, much as though he intended never to come back into such low company."

ride three ones," he said carelessly. "Let's get it over, or I shall be getting hungry, as all these folks must be. There's a good pair of boots for any one who has the courage to wear them. I'm ready. Make an end of it."

And the landlady at the "Punch-Bowl" that night drank to his memory, declaring that he had died game, as was fitting for a gentleman of the road.

CHAPTER II

Barbara Lanison

AS THE coach rolled heavily homeward toward St. James' Square, Lady Bolsover speedily recovered from her anxiety concerning her niece; she did not even reprimand her for getting lost in the crowd, and seemed to take no interest whatever in the gentleman who had come to the rescue and had not waited to be thanked. He could have been no person of consequence, or he would not have neglected the opportunity of bowing over her hand. She talked of nothing but the trial and the excellent manner in which her friend Judge Marriott had conducted it. Some of his witticisms she remembered and repeated with such excellent point that her niece shuddered again as she had done when they fell from the judge's lips.

"It was altogether horrible," said the girl. "I wonder why you made me go."

pleasing, she admitted, but she had not supposed that it was of the kind that would appeal to men, and to such a variety of men. The women who usually pleased them were so different. It even occurred to her that there might be something in herself, in her behavior, which was not quite nice, and that the real attraction lay in this, an idea which proved that her estimate of the men who came to her aunt's house was not a very high one.

Born and bred in the country, and with an amount of learning which her uncle considered unnecessary, she had prejudiced, no doubt, and possibly had a standard of female beauty in her mind which her own reflection did not satisfy. That she was mistaken in her own estimate of herself was certain, or the men would not have been so assiduous in their attentions. Perhaps she admired dark women, and the reflection which smiled at her out of the depths of the mirror was fair. The eyes were blue—that blue which the sky shows in the early morning of a cloudless day, and there was a suggestion of tears in them—the tears which may come from much laughter rather than those which speak of sorrow. There was a touch of gold in the fair hair, which was inclined to be rebellious and curl into little loops about her neck and forehead. The skin was fair, with the bloom of perfect health upon it, and the little mouth was firm, the lips fresh as from the kiss of a rose. There was grace in all her movements, the unstudied grace which tells of life in the open air and freedom from restraint; and in thought and word and deed conventionality had small interest for her. It was hardly wonderful that Lord Rosmore should pronounce her adorable, or that Judge Marriott should forget that his youth was a thing of the past. Indeed, she had come as a revelation to the men whose lives were made up of court intrigue and artifice.

"Perhaps another reason why Barbara Lanison found it difficult to understand the sensation she created lay in the fact that her heart and affections remained entirely untouched. Those blue eyes, underneath their long lashes, were very keenly, and gave her a quick insight into character. She was not to be easily led, and if she did a good many things in her aunt's house, where she was a guest, which did not come naturally to her, and which did not please her, there was a point beyond which no persuasion could lead her. Lady Bolsover's part could make her go. Much as she liked her aunt, she had been taken to the trial of the highwayman, and she had been there for a long time. There was shown by her eager desire to explain the presence to the man who had come to her rescue in the crowd, and she had definitely, honest her own thoughts more of this man during the next few days than of all the eligible gallants who had been brought to her notice."

If in one sense Lady Bolsover had to admit failure with regard to her plans concerning her niece, in another direction she had achieved a considerable success, for since the advent of Barbara Lanison her own favor had been courted on all sides, and her house in St. James' Square had become a little court in itself. It was being looked upon as a place where the best of the best of the aristocracy were to be met. Barbara's name was a first step toward her good graces, she had promised to do her best with her niece on their behalf, and she had definitely, honest her own thoughts more of this man during the next few days than of all the eligible gallants who had been brought to her notice."

(CONTINUED NEXT SUNDAY.)