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RIGHTED AT LAST

BY MARY CECIL HAY

Author of "The Arundel Motto," "Nora's Love Test," "Back to the Old Home," Etc.

(Continued.)

"Yes, Royden," she answered, almost in a whisper. "I cannot bear to tell you, Roy, for you are worried so; but still I must, because you can always make it right for us. I am so weak and timid, and you are so cool and calm."

"What fresh worry have you now, Alice?"

He had held the one hand to her when he saw the fear which had overcome her—the fear which she had not either the spirit or the strength to battle—and she seized it between her trembling fingers as she answered:

"It is a man, Royden—a man who has been here before. I have seen him once myself, in the dark here, prowling—a small man in black—very small—thin, as well as short, and—he is here to-night. I saw him first, Roy; and Miss Henderson has seen him. I took her to one of the west windows, and we saw him go through the shrubbery; and now my maid has seen him, too, and she says he has been here before. She thinks he is a friend of one of the men-servants, but I do not. I know he is here to spy. No man would haunt this house but for that purpose. Oh, Royden, what shall I do?"

"Do not be afraid, dear. Show me where you saw him."

With an unhurried step, and a cool, rather amused face, he walked up to the window at which she had been standing hidden when he entered, and he laughed a little when he met her piteous eyes; but, for all that, there was something in his face which, if she had been less weak and anxious for herself, it might have frightened her to see.

"There," she whispered, below her breath, as, closing the heavy curtains behind them to shut out the light within the room, she pointed with her finger, drawing back her hand again timidly, as if afraid of even that slight movement. "There, just passing over the back of the house! There—toward the back of the house! I saw him quite plainly when the clouds passed from before the moon—quite plainly, Roy, for he had not time to hide among the trees. He is at the back of the house now, somewhere; at least he has not passed back where I could see him. It is the same man—indeed it is—who was here before. He was here to watch us then, and he is here to watch us now—else why should he haunt the place? Oh, Roy, do not be angry with me in this dreadful time! If they find out!"

"My dear," he said, most gently, "why should I be angry with you? And do you not know very well that we are not going to let them find out? Though there is one thing," he added, laughing, as he came back into the room, "which I am going to let them find out."

"Oh, Royden, you will be careful."

"Very careful," he answered, laying his hand for a moment reassuringly upon her shoulder; "very careful, dear, for your sake; and you must be brave—for mine."

"Mr. Keith," said Miss Henderson, coming forward for the first time, her voice betraying her own anxiety and unrest, "would it not be better to move no hand in this? Would it not be safer and wiser? How do we know who this may be, or what whispers may have got abroad?"

"Oh, I know him," said Royden, throwing back his head with a hearty laugh which did more toward giving them courage than anything else could have done just then. "I know him as a harmless little spy, whose power is certainly not vested in his own person. You have no need to fear, Miss Henderson—do feel assured of that; and, Alice, do not tremble so. Sit here, my dear, and wait for my return. It is just the night for fears and fancies, is it not?"

But we will set them all at rest.

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rest. Ah, it would have done you good, as it did me, to hear the poor little Frenchman up-stairs talk of the beauties of this wild night, and read to me of a woman who has lived for ten years in constant acute bodily suffering, working hard in poverty all the while, yet who writes from her sick-bed that for him to be happy is the only longing which her Father's mercy has let her feel. Alice, from such hearts there are lessons for us to learn. Heaven grant we may not waste its teaching when it comes in such disguise."

"You never could," she whispered; "and I am trying—oh, I do try, Roy."

He answered only with a kind and gentle smile, and then he turned away. All trace of this smile was gone before he reached the foot of the wide, lamp-lighted staircase, and his lips were firm, and his eyes dark with anger. The "gentleman's gentleman" and the portly butler (who ruled at Westleigh Towers with a far greater and wider despotism than ever its master thought to exercise) were enjoying a glass of punch together before a great fire in the pantry, when the unexpected entrance of their master surprised them.

"You are wise," he said, in his pleasant tones, as he walked up to the fire. "On such a night as this we have no excuse for not keeping ourselves warm. I want to know, Evans, whether all the house-servants are in-doors to-night?"

"I fancy so, sir," the butler answered, putting a chair toward his master. "Most of them are in the servants' hall. Mrs. Hart is in her own room, and the house-steward is with her this evening, and the lady's-maid, I think."

"And the rest are in the hall?"

"Yes, sir."

"That will do. Draw your chairs to the fire again. I thought I should need you, Evans, but as Burton is here" (Burton was the house-steward), "I will go to him."

"Shall I fetch him, or send him to you, sir?"

"No; I want no fuss."

If the appearance of the master had caused surprise in the butler's pantry, the surprise was ten times greater in the housekeeper's room.

"Go into the hall for me, Burton," he said, quietly returning the respectful greetings; "I want to know if all the men are there—men and maids, indeed. Find out if any one is missing, and I will wait here."

He stood before the fire in the housekeeper's snug little room, while she wondered what the master meant, and why he should be anxious to know that all the servants were together. It was so unlike him.

But she had forgotten her passing sense of injury, and was entertaining him to the best of her ability, when Burton returned to say that one man was away—a new servant. He was in the harness-room, his fellow-servants thought, as he often sat there at night with the rooms. Should Burton go or send to see after him?

"I will do it myself, I think," said the master, quietly. "If I go through this west door, you can bolt it behind me."

Passing at the great arched entrance to the stable-yard, Royden turned and looked at his watch. The wild gloom of the night oppressed him unaccountably, and for the brand he had taken upon himself he had a strange and angry repugnance; yet at that moment, as he looked up among the heavy clouds and away across the heaving sea, one memory rose and filled his eyes with a warm love—the memory of those words which had been read aloud to him an hour ago, and which told of Honor.

The harness-room, to which Royden at once made his way, was a long room running at angles with the gateway. A large fire blazed in the grate, but the only occupant now was a young groom, standing at a distance from the fire, and whistling merrily as he trimmed and lighted his small hand-lamp.

A few words told all he had to tell. The man the master sought had been there, but had left quite an hour ago. Yes, he often did come in to have a chat, but he had not stayed long to-night; in fact, some friend or relation had called for him and taken him out.

No, the groom could tell nothing more. It was quite possible that the two men had gone to the village alone; but really he could not tell; he had not noticed this visitor who had summoned his fellow-servant away; nor had he cared to ask where they were going. He had only by chance heard and understood that the man had been urged by this visitor to go and make an evening of it. Perhaps—the groom did not know, but thought it possible—they might be in Mat. Burke's cottage. Mat was quite deaf, and known to be a good grog; Mat lived near the Towers, too; and, after all, it was not very likely they would go to the village public, where the servants from Westleigh Towers were so well known, and where every one understood well enough how little the master would like to hear of his men sitting there at night to drink. No, it would not be the same as Mat's. Mat was a quiet, honest man, and stone deaf; only his

sons brig brought over a cask now and then, and Mat made a sly bit of money out of it when he could.

Quietly setting aside all efforts of further information or personal attendance, the master went back to the house. Ten minutes afterward, with the fur collar of his long Russian coat buttoned over his chin, he left the dark, wet avenue, and turning into the high-road, walked swiftly on against the cutting north-west wind. Royden knew Mat Burke's cottage well, and in spite of the scarce-broken darkness, made his way direct to it. A torn cotton curtain was drawn before the window, but Royden could see that the kitchen was brightly lighted; and he could hear a voice he recognized—a weak, raised voice, the sound of which made him pause for a moment with a feeling of cold repulsion—utter his own name with a laugh.

He gave a prompt, loud rap upon the door, but in the same instant he opened it, and, stooping to pass the doorway, entered at once into the bright, untidy room. The sight of three men drinking at the fire was no surprise to him; but to those three men the entrance of the master of Westleigh Towers was more than a surprise.

(To be continued.)

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