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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.)

"And you," said Honor, "can never guess what your love has been to me, who never knew till now what a mother's love was like. Ah! no; you can never guess."

"Honor—" There had been a pause after the girl's low words, and Lady Lawrence broke it now with a new tone of anxiety in her voice. "Honor, one thing has struck me often since we have lived together, and to-night I am going to speak of it for the first time. I can keep no secret from you, my child; not even this thought of mine, for I know it can never obtrude itself as a barrier between my child and me. I told you I felt weary to-night, and that it was natural for an old woman to do so. It is that feeling—for it comes often, dear, and will not be ignored—which brings me sometimes a great anxiety for you. Only sometimes, for generally I can feel strong and content, knowing in whose care you will always be; but sometimes, as I said, and to-night is one of those times. Of course I could not have this anxiety if I knew I should leave you in a husband's care, but I have noticed that such a thought as choosing among those who sue for your hand seems as far removed from you as if you were a young wife enjoying her first triumph, or even as if you had told forty seventy years, as I have, Honor, tell me why this is so."

The girl's eyes had softened to a dreamy sadness, and the smile had died utterly from her lips. "I—I cannot care for them," she faltered; "not for one, I mean, more than others. That is my only reason, auntie."

"The only one?" The old voice faltered like the young one; the dim eyes on the pillow had grown as wistful as those radiant ones beside them. "Is that the only reason, Honor? Do not wonder at my doubting it—do not be hurt by my suspicion. If I did not know you so well, I might read nothing in your eyes and tones; but I do know you well, my dear, and I can see that the reason why no one, in this new life of yours, has won this heart which is so true and so worth winning, is because they were too late. Honor, for months we have been separated from that old life of yours, but we will bridge the separation over, if it would give you happiness. For whom, in that old home, does your heart yearn?"

"I should like to see Phoebe," a little amusement in her low tones.
 "Phoebe!" The exclamation was scornful, truly, but the note of relief was audible. "Only Phoebe Owen? We will manage that some day; but you know as well as I do, that Phoebe would rather stay with Lawrence Haughton than come to you. Is there no one else you long to see?"

"No," said Honor, speaking very readily, when she detected the pain in the question.

"That is well; but I think that I never had any real fear, Honor. You would never wed with either Lawrence Haughton or Hervey Trent."

"Never," said the girl, in simple and surprised dissent.

A long pause, and the words the old lady next uttered were in a different tone.

"Honor, how many times, during the season, have we met Royden Keith, of Westleigh Towers? Very few times, eh?"

"Very few."

"The answer was so quiet and easy that there seemed no excuse for Lady Lawrence's swift glance into the face beside her."

"Very few, as you say. How many times has he been here?"

"Not once, auntie."

"The answer was so slow and calm."

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That there seemed less reason still for the half-smile.

"Not once, as you, say Honor. When I was a poor, insignificant old gentlewoman, sharp and shabby, Royden Keith always behaved to me as a courteous gentleman; he was always attentive and generous, thoughtful both for me and my sick friend, and kind to both. When we lived in cottage lodgings, he spared no trouble to himself if he could serve us; seeing no shame in being the friend of such as we seemed then; bravely facing ridicule to make our lives a little less cramped and dull than he fancied they might be. And so patient and pleasant was he always with—ah, my darling, my little darling, tears at last! Yes, lay your head here—think it your mother's breast, my child; fancy these your mother's arms about you, and whisper it to me presently—only presently. I know so much that it will not take you long to tell. Dear, could I have lived with you so long, and so closely taken you into my heart, if my love could not teach me that secret? No, do not look into my face just yet. I—I will wait a little. It has brought back so many thoughts from that far past; and—and from the future, dear, which may be so near, Honor, our separation will be hard to bear, but I think its chief terror will be gone when I can leave you in his strong and tender care. My darling, why those anguished eyes? Ah, we will let the story rest to-night, and to-morrow all will be clear and bright before us once again."

CHAPTER XXV.

Lady Lawrence and Honor spent the autumn of that year in Italy. The old lady's health was fading slowly, and so they went. It was no pain to either to leave England. Each took her truest friend, and the absence involved no sad and bitter parting.

Since Honor had told her life's one secret to this warm, motherly friend, the two had been, if possible, drawn more closely together. To the old lady's comforting voice there had come a tone of cheering hopefulness, too; and this hopefulness, ever since, had moved her on this subject.

"I have no fear," she said. "You did wrong ever to credit as his such absurd words, Honor. I heard Theodora Trent tell you, but I never thought you could believe them, because I could not do so myself. But I think that will all be made clear in good time. You are true and steadfast, and there is time."

Such words as these she would say whenever—as only at rare intervals—they would talk of Royden; and such words she had been saying on that last day, when the sun glanced brightly on the waters of the Adriatic, and the fair southern morning seemed to bring health and vigor with it.

"Honor, I could have left you in his care without one fear or doubt; but it is not to be. Still, darling, wait and hope. If you can never give your love elsewhere, I know that you will never wed elsewhere. Be brave and true, my dear, in either life. Remember the power I leave with you. Remember the great responsibility you hold, and, above all, remember Who alone can help and guide you."

This was the last time Lady Lawrence mentioned her wealth, or Royden's name; and Honor never forgot the words.

Before nightfall on that day Honor was alone.

Both Mr. Stafford and Lady Lawrence's chaplain were in attendance upon her when she died, and they—with the courier and the servants—took every responsibility and trouble from Honor; yet that knowledge did not prevent Lawrence Haughton hurrying over to Italy the very hour in which the news of Lady Lawrence's death was received in England. For the first few minutes Honor's surprise at seeing him was a pleasant surprise, for she was in a strange country, in grief, and this was a face from her old home; but after that his presence only added every hour more and more heavily to her grief.

His old, unwearied pursuit of her had been as nothing compared with this new, eager courtship, which harassed and distressed, and, even in all her heartfelt grief, angered her at last beyond all words. His old pleas were more persistently urged, and his old efforts were redoubled. She was his old love, the only one for whom his hard and selfish heart had ever yearned. She was even more beautiful now than she had been in those old days, and she was marvellously rich—"the richest girl in England," as he assured himself with unctuous reiteration—and so to win her—to win her, while other men tried so hard in vain—he could count no effort—no effort—too mean or base.

So it was that, upon that journey home, when he was, as Mr. Stafford and the old clergyman supposed, travelling with them to be a comfort to his cousin, he struck the blow which his suspicion and his jealousy had threatened long.

It was but seldom that Honor allowed herself to be alone with him, so weary was she of his presence, but on this day

she could not help it. He had urged his suit, of course (what opportunity did he ever let slip?) but he had been slow and cautious, evidently determining not to allow himself to lose the command over his temper. Most firmly, yet very quietly and wearily, Honor had answered him; and when at last she rose to leave the room, the indecision which had caused his mind to hesitate over this last blow all vanished, and whatever wound his words could give was to be given now.

Honor stood and listened, her eyes fixed wonderingly upon his face, but, before he had finished, her cheeks had grown as white as death.

"Why do you say this to me?" she asked slowly; "why do you come to me and talk of Royden Keith?"

"I hardly know," he answered, with an absurd assumption of ignorance, "except that you used to be curious about him. I thought you would be glad to know who he was."

"I did know who he was," she said; "I have known Mr. Keith, of Westleigh Towers, for a long time."

Lawrence Haughton turned aside his head with a momentary laugh.

"If you felt sure, Honor, you would hardly utter the assertion so eagerly; and you really believe, as strongly as I do, that Royden Keith and Gabriel Myddelton are one?"

"I do not!" she cried. "I never could—" But there the words broke off, and the flash died suddenly out of her angry eyes.

"You mistake your own feelings," said Mr. Haughton, in his slow, convincing tones; "and I have no need to clean wounds from you."

(To be continued.)

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