

RIGHTED AT LAST

BY MARY CECIL HAY

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

"Is it far along this baking lane?" inquired the elder man, without glancing into his companion's face.

"Only a brisk ten minutes' walk," rejoined Mr. Slimp, rubbing his short hands together, as if in the enjoyment of a private joke; "and if it took us ten hours, instead of minutes, the fatigue would be repaid us with interest."

"If it is not," repeated Lawrence Haughton, morosely, "our walk back cannot be too long, if that happens to be what you mean."

Bickerton Slimp smiled affably. Perhaps this was to be considered as a smart repartee of his employer's.

"This preliminary stroke will be over in a couple of hours, now," he observed, adopting an impressive decision in his sharp, weak tones.

No reply from the lawyer, and the clerk continued, with a still more evident assumption of assurance:

"The fact is, the man has not a leg to stand on."

"I don't know," put in Mr. Haughton, with gloomy stiffness; "I would not, even now, take too much for granted; and if this last move does not answer—"

"Not answer!" exclaimed Bickerton Slimp, coming to a dead halt in his walk, "how can it help answering? What can prevent its answering now? And the sum he will give us to keep silence will set us going again more prosperously than ever; after that, I'll engage that the firm shall become the richest and the sharpest in the county."

"If he does not offer us this bribe," said Lawrence, with no appearance of being carried away by Mr. Slimp's enthusiastic anticipations, "the practice—and something else with it, too—cannot be saved, as you know."

"Of course I know," assented Bickerton, with a chuckle, "but there happens to be very little substance in that 'but.' You seem unusually and rather uncharacteristically timid to-day, sir; an unfortunate mood to have happened to fall into just now, when we want all our sharpest wits about us. Mr. Keith is no idiot, and even with truth and justice on our side, we must look sharp to intimidate him."

The two men walked on in silence now, and to judge by the expression of one, the truth and justice which had ranged themselves on his side were not animating or encouraging companions.

"Here we are," cried Mr. Slimp, at last, in an airy tone of stimulation; "this is our gate. Now, Mr. Haughton, don't you go and look down in the mouth, or our game will suffer, and our practice be nowhere. Depend upon me. I shall look you up, and when you are at a loss you must just leave the little affair in my hands."

The insolent familiarity of the confidential clerk was by no means tasteful to the stern and concentrated nature of the master, yet some consciousness of the man's power over him kept all reproof from Lawrence Haughton's lips.

So he walked up the park in silence, Mr. Slimp acting as guide, and showing a very suspicious knowledge of the place.

With an air of bustling complacency, he advanced to the great arched door of the Towers, and pulled the heavy iron bell which hung beside it, while Mr. Haughton followed, not by any means so thoroughly at his ease.

"Mr. Keith," demanded Bickerton, impressively, and the door was opened wide upon the visitors; but the man who ushered them in wondered a great deal what acquaintances of the master's would come in this curt manner, without prefacing the name, or expressing the wish to see him; and he confided this wonder to Mr. Pierce, by whom he passed on the message.

That valet appeared alone at the

door of the room in which the lawyer and his clerk waited.

His master was not well, he said, and would rather not be disturbed, unless his presence was very particularly desired.

Lawrence Haughton, seeing that the man had taken the course upon himself, answered, with angry sternness, that his master's presence was very particularly desired, and that, as his own time was valuable, he should be glad to have his message delivered with promptness.

Pierce returned without further words, and Lawrence Haughton looked curiously around the beautiful room.

"Yes," he thought, with a feeling of self-gratulation almost equal to that in which Mr. Slimp was at that moment indulging—"yes, he can afford to pay well."

When at last Mr. Keith entered the room, the self-gratulation even of Mr. Bickerton Slimp was turned for a minute into another channel. This man, who had horsewhipped him on one never-to-be-forgotten occasion, and who had often goaded him to the very verge of madness by his haughty, unassailable scorn, and rather amused but always evident contempt, was ill, and had been ill.

He came slowly and wearily into the room, and, leaning against the chimney-piece—not from habit, but in real need of the support—he turned to them a face which betrayed intense physical suffering.

There was much satisfaction to Mr. Slimp in that, for the consciousness had not yet forced itself upon him that the face betrayed just the old courage, and the strength which was so firmly built upon great patience.

Lawrence Haughton made an effort to plunge at once into his errand, but the course was too thoroughly at variance with his professional habits to allow him to do so. In his own way, therefore, the words curt and strong, the manner stiff and elaborate—he apprized Royden Keith, there upon his own hearth, that he, Mr. Lawrence Haughton, solicitor of Kinbury, possessed of all needful information in the case, was then on his way to inform his government that Gabriel Myddelton, the criminal condemned eleven years ago to the gallows for the murder of his uncle, Mr. Myddelton, of Abbotmoor, had been tracked, through all disguises and false pretences, by himself and his confidential clerk, and was then in custody of the police at Westleigh Towers.

"Here! Have you the police here?" inquired Royden, looking around him.

"They will be here in two hours' time, or less; at any rate, they will be here before we shall choose to leave," said the lawyer, adding, after a pause, as if the idea had just struck him, "unless we are able to save you from this public degradation."

He repeated the offer presently, more boldly and unmistakably, tacitly to it an impressive reiteration of the threat. His courage was evidently equal to the occasion, and Mr. Slimp (his mind at ease now on that score) felt that he might stand aside and enjoy the scene.

He had no fear for the success of their plan, for was not Gabriel Myddelton standing there in the utter silence of dejection, consequent on defeat? And was not he incapable of raising his eyes, either in surprise or contradiction?

"Have you nothing to say?" inquired Mr. Haughton, impatient now for his growing success.

"Nothing," rejoined Royden, still without looking up.

"You understand my present plans—at once to make public your crime and duplicity, in a quarter from which there can be no appeal."

"I understand."

"And," continued Lawrence, his voice raised more and more eagerly, "to have you taken into custody at once."

"I shall not attempt to turn you from your plan. I told you once before, if you recollect, that I was willing you should pursue it to the end, if you thought it prudent on your own part."

"Then, in little more than an hour's time you will be in custody," cried Lawrence, unable to hide his gathering passion of disappointment; "and by this time to-morrow your identity with the condemned murderer (who was, only by a woman's craft, saved from hanging) will be a household word all over England—in every home in which, under the cunning mask of your wealth and your new name, you have obtained a footing. But," continued Lawrence, with the crafty assumption of friendliness which sat so ill upon him, "I am willing to listen if it strikes you that this fatal publicity could be in any way avoided."

He hesitated, trusting that the conclusion of the speech might be anticipated for him; but he waited in vain. "If not," he exclaimed, savagely, "I shall let the law take its course. If not—" he repeated, emphatically, as if to oblige a reply.

"Is it by your wish, Mr. Haughton," inquired Royden, with a brief glance toward the fidgety figure of Mr. Bickerton Slimp, "that your clerk is present at this interview?"

"I have assisted and advised Mr.

Haughton throughout, struck in the embryo partner in the future firm, with a rather abortive attempt at easy self-possession, "and I wish to see him through it."

"You shall have that pleasure, then, with my hearty consent. I only desired Mr. Haughton to understand that it is not by my wish that you are made cognizant of the private affairs of his own family. You have, as I am fully aware, been for a long time engaged both for him and with him, in his search, and I am quite willing that you should be present at its conclusion; after that, I shall thank you to leave this house at once, and to bear in mind that, if you attempt a second ingress, I shall have you dismissed—by the shoulders."

A pause then, and Lawrence, in a sudden access of impatience, reiterated his old threat, again insinuating the one chance, from his own generosity and compassion, which remained for his victim.

Royden broke the ominous pause which followed, speaking in quiet, weary scorn:

"You intend, you say to make public your conviction that you have discovered Gabriel Myddelton, the murderer of the Squire of Abbotmoor? Let me serve you from the unpleasant ridicule which you would incur by so doing. I have read the document which proves that young Gabriel Myddelton was innocent of the crime for which, eleven years ago, he was tried and condemned."

"The—the—devil!" panted Lawrence Haughton, in uncurbed passion. "What do you mean?"

"I have seen and read," repeated Royden, calmly, "the confession of the real murderer—one Benjamin Territ, miner, of Abbotmoor—confirmed by affidavit, that the document is true upon oath."

"Where is the forgery?" cried Lawrence, his face convulsed with wrath.

"Where is this perjured scoundrel and his lying document?"

(To be continued.)

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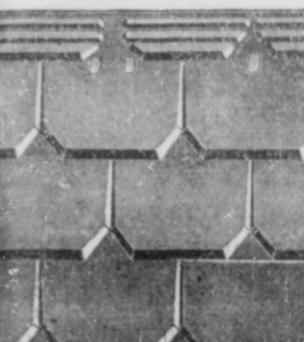
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