

Right at Last

Every word she uttered made his heart beat faster, and sent his good angel farther from him.

"You will not have another son?"

"No," she said, "never perhaps."

"Never is a long day," he said. "Who knows? There may be plenty of such gifts for you. I am no prophet, but I will indulge in prophecy on this occasion, and add that I am sure there will be."

"Ah, you do not know," said Joan, with a wistful little smile.

"We shall see!" Then he bent down and almost in a whisper said: "Miss Joan, will you grant me a favor?"

"I?" she said, opening her gray eyes full upon him. "What favor can I grant you?"

"It has been a happy night for me—I have told you so already—I should like to carry away some memento of it. Will you give me that red blossom in your dress?"

Joan looked away from him with a vague trouble in her eyes—a look of doubt, almost of fear.

"Is it too much to ask?" he said in a whisper; "are you angry? You shall not give it to me unless you wish to!"

"It is of no use," she said, hurriedly, and trying to laugh; but the laugh died away on her lips. "It is all faded, and nearly dead—"

"I do not care. I would rather have it now than you have it—"

He stopped short, for she turned her eyes on him with the troubled look more strongly marked.

"I meant that I shall value it just as dearly though it is faded. Give it to me!"

Joan took the flower from the bosom of her dress, her hands trembling, and she did not notice that he stood in front of her to conceal the action from the eyes of any who might be watching them.

"There it is," she said, holding it out to him. "Poor flower! It has not been a very happy evening for it!"

"Not happy, and it has been worth by you!" he said, trying to speak lightly.

"Ah, thanks, thank!" he said, and he thrust it, but gently, inside his coat.

"Come, Joan," said the colonel, bustling up; "where's your things? The Royal, where are you staying?—at the Royal, I suppose? Right! I'll drive over to-morrow and look you up! We're not going to let you give us the slip again!"

"There is no fear of that," he said, quietly. "But don't trouble to come over. I want you and the young ladies to come to the Wold to-morrow and give me your advice. I am going to fit up some of the rooms."

"Good news! I shall be delighted to come, and I am sure Julia and Emmeline will; won't you, girls, eh?"

"Oh, delighted!" they echoed in a breath, with their full smiles on their faces.

"Thanks," he said quietly. "And Miss Joan, I hope she will come also!"

The faces of the two girls who had formed a study for a painter of character.

"Eh?" said the colonel. "Oh, yes; yes! I'm afraid Miss Joan doesn't care for that kind of thing; eh, Joan?"

Joan stood with downcast eyes.

"Miss Joan is too good-natured to refuse her assistance," said Lord Villiers, in a matter-of-fact voice—how different thought Joan to the low, whispering tones of a moment or two before.

"You will come, Miss Joan?" and as he put the fringe cloak around her, he whispered, "Say yes!"

And Joan faintly obeyed and answered: "Yes!"

CHAPTER VII.

Mr. Craddock not only had his office in the city, but he lived there also. Very few people live in the city, and at night, as early as eight o'clock, the great thoroughfares—which have been during the day so thronged by a hurrying, bustling crowd that one can scarcely make one's way along the pavement—are so deserted that, if you are observant, you may see cars actually running across the roadways.

But Mr. Craddock lived in the city because he liked to be near his work.

His office was situated in a little dingy court leading out of Fenchurch street, and here the old gentleman whom Joan had seen sneaking out of the Wold lived, if existence in a room ten by nine, which served as a bedroom and drawing room, and parlor combined, can be called living.

Mr. Craddock was an attorney, but he did not do much in the way of the law.

He was reported to be rich, very rich, and some persons professed great curiosity as to how he got his money and how he employed it.

As a matter of fact, Mr. Elijah Craddock was a money lender.

Of course, it was not generally known that he was a money lender. By most, he was looked upon as simply an eccentric old miser, who chose to live in a dingy den above his office, because, well, because he liked it, and found the air, or want of air, suited him.

One evening—two days before the ball at Redstaple—Mr. Craddock sat on his stool in his office. Every now and then he looked up at a crazy, lopsided clock that hung on the wall and ticked creakily; and, as the old thing wheezed out the hour of ten, he was rising from the stool, when there came a knock at the door, and there entered a young man.

He was tall, and thin, and handsome, having black hair, closely cut, with a dark mustache. His eyes were dark too, and brilliant, almost too brilliant, so that when he flashed them around, as he did when he entered Mr. Craddock's office, one felt an uneasy sense of having been pierced by a gimlet. Perhaps he knew of this unpleasant sharpness, for after one of these piercing glances, he lowered his lids and hid the black, sharp eyes from observation.

"Just an hour late!" said Mr. Craddock, pulling out his turnip-faced watch.

"Just an hour! Whas on earth makes you so late?" and he snarled until his teeth showed through his thin, parched lips.

"I have been dining out!"

"Dining out! A pretty thing you have of it! And you dine out every day in the week, dressed like—a dook! He, he!" and he croaked. "Shouldn't wonder if you've forgot that I picked you out of the gutter, out there," and he pointed into Fenchurch street, "and made a man of you."

"I'm not likely to forget," said the young man, not at all angrily, "seeing that you so kindly keep it in my memory."

"A boy in the gutter—selling lucifers!"—and addressing the furniture.

"Fuses," corrected the young man. "But never mind that. The question is, what do you want now I am here?"

He stooped as he spoke, and picked up a piece of paper which lay, half torn across, in the fireplace. It was the innkeeper's bill at Deercroft.

"Deercroft!" he said, flashing his eyes upon the old man. "Deer—ah, yes, I remember, that is Lord Arrowfield's place—no, not his now! Who came into it? Yes, and he nodded, 'Lord Villiers.'"

The old man eyed him admiringly and chuckled with satisfaction.

"Good—good! Always remember! Never forget anything! That's one of the first things I taught you, Royce! And taught you everything, eh? Yes, I've been down to the Wold at Deercroft. Beautiful place, Royce—and money! Money!" and he held up his hands. "Nearly two millions!"

The young man raised his eyebrows. "So much?"

"Quite! And—and all belongs to Lord Villiers."

Royce turned and looked at him with a strange smile.

"You surely don't mean to suggest that it is of any use trying to make money out of him?" he said with a laugh. "Lord Villiers! If any man knows the world he does; too well for us, Craddock. Depend upon it, he'll keep his two millions!"

"Ehuh!" said Mr. Craddock, and hobbling to the door he turned the key. Don't speak too loud, Royce; that old cat of a housekeeper is not so deaf as she pretends to be. Keep his two million, will he? I'm not so sure of that, and he fixed his small black eyes on the dark keen ones above him.

CHAPTER VII.

Royce turned and shot a keen glance at old Craddock, then bent over the fire again.

"I'm not sure that Lord Stuart Villiers will keep his two millions, Royce," repeated Craddock. He climbed on to the stool and stared down at the younger man, with his head on one side, and his small beady eyes like a raven's. "I'm not so sure, Royce!"

"The Wold was not entailed, I think."

"There!" exclaimed old Craddock, addressing the clock with an impish touch of triumph—"there's a man for a man! don't ask any questions! Not he! Works down to the root of the matter like a mine! Right, Royce; right, Mordant, my boy; the Wold was not entailed. The old earl could do what he liked with it, every rod of it, and every penny of his money! He could leave it to me—to me if he liked—"

"Instead of which, he left to Stuart Villiers," said Mordant Royce. "I remember you drew the will yourself."

"I did," assented old Craddock, "and a very good will it was."

"Leaving it all to Lord Villiers," said Mordant Royce. "Well, I don't see—no one disputes the will, I suppose."

"No one, at present," said the old man. "Listen to the points carefully. There's two millions of money in this business. The Earl of Arrowfield—immensely rich and living entirely alone, possessed of a vast fortune, quite unnumbered, quite unentailed. Who is he to leave it to? As far as the world knows, his nearest relation is Stuart Villiers. A young man he doesn't get on with a man he has quarreled with—but still his nearest kith and kin, and his natural heir. Point one. Royce, now, then, it was not generally known, Royce, that the Earl of Arrowfield was married. He married beneath him—out of pique, they say—to annoy a woman who had jilted him. It was just like him. Anyhow, his wife and he did it 'greem. They separated, Royce—but not before a child was born. A daughter. Point two."

Royce nodded.

"I see."

"Yes; so that there were two relatives nearer than Stuart Villiers."

"Yes, but the countess died, and the daughter also," said Royce.

"Yes; the countess died, I know, and the daughter, so it was understood; but who saw her die—who buried her? He didn't go to his wife's funeral, he didn't go to his daughter's funeral—if she ever was buried. Anybody might have told him that they were dead, and he would have believed it—just because he wanted to."

"Then you think," said Royce, slowly, "that the daughter is alive?"

"No," said old Craddock; "I think she is dead now; but I don't think she died when he thought she did, and if she didn't all sorts of things might have happened! She might have married—might have had a child; if so, that child, supposing it to be alive, would be the natural heir to the Wold and the money, in place of Stuart Villiers. A short time before he died the old earl sent for me; it was an urgent message, and it came from the Wold. I should have gone, but I was laid up with the cursed rheumatism and couldn't move. When I did get down there, the old man had flown again. I wrote a note offering to go wherever he wished; but he wouldn't have it. Simply said he had done the business he wanted to see me about for himself, and I needn't trouble. Now, Royce, what was that business? He wanted to make a fresh will!"

ROYCE LOOKED incredulous.

"Yes, that was it! How do I know it? Well, I didn't know it, I guessed it by the old man's movements. He hadn't been to the Wold for years. He hadn't mentioned his wife's name for years. What does he do when he gets down to the place? Shuts himself up in the library, sleeps in the room where he and his wife used to sleep; had her portrait brought down from the gallery, and placed on a chair in front of him, so that he can see it where he sits. Spends the day mooning about the old lumber rooms, where the countess' dresses and things have been pushed away, and hastily—mark me, Royce—hastily writes some document, with two of the servants as witnesses."

Royce smiled.

"A very pretty story," he said, "but it is all guess work, and worth nothing. I am inclined to think that he didn't make a fresh will."

"That for once your cleverness is at fault, Royce," retorted Craddock, triumphantly. "For he did! I don't guess this time—I know! Why? Because he wrote to Stuart Villiers, telling him that he meant to disinherit him, and that he had left the property to one more fully entitled to it."

For the first time the young man's face was turned on Craddock with sharp, open surprise.

"Ah," he said. "How do you know all this?"

"I saw the letter!" said old Craddock, in a hoarse whisper. "Stuart Villiers read it to me on the terrace of the Wold!"

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"You found nothing at the Wold?"

Royce asked, his voice soft and thoughtful.

Mr. Craddock shook his head.

"Nothing. I was there for hours. I searched the library carefully. It had been locked up after he left, and undisturbed."

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"Yes!" said the old man, sullenly, stubbornly. "Royce, I believe she lived to marry and give birth to the heir of all this property, but where is she? and he stretched out his skinny hands."

"No trace of her at all?"

"Not the faintest. She disappeared as completely as if—she had been a shadow," said Mr. Craddock.

Royce was silent for a moment, then he laughed.

"It is a pretty problem, with two sides. To find the earl's last will and to find the person in whose favor it was made! Most people consider one question of that kind difficult enough," he added.

"But not you; not you, Royce?" said the old man, clutching his arm eagerly. "Not you! You won't make much of it; you're too clever! And I taught you, didn't I, Royce, eh? And look at it! Thousands! We might make terms with the person whose favor the will is in, or with Stuart Villiers himself; it could be worked either way."

"If you had the will and the person to whom the old earl really left his money," said Mordant Royce. He spoke dreamily, with his eyes fixed on the fire, his opera hat held before his lips, his long, white hands playing a soft tune on the crown.

The old man watched him closely, narrowly.

"You're thinking of something, Royce," he declared in his shrill, suppressed treble. "You're thinking of something, I know you are! You're at work on it already, eh? I knew you'd take and hang on to it; that's why I told you. I said to myself, here's a case for Royce, this is the sort of business he'll take to at once. Don't I know him? Didn't I train him up and teach him—"

The young man took out his watch; a handsome repeater, in gold, having a plain but costly chain affixed.

"I must get back," he said, quietly, passing by the old man's enigmatisms. "Lord Devesbury has a party at his rooms, and they expect me."

"Ah," said the old man, eyeing him half-admiringly, half-impudently. And you are going to spend the evening with a viscount and other noblemen, and you'll hold your head as high as any of 'em, ruffie it with the best of 'em, and win their money of 'em, eh, Royce; and slap them on the back and call 'em 'Devesbury' and 'Pendergast' as if they were mere nobodies; and they won't mind it, but he proud to claim the friendship of such a clever, handsome, accomplished fellow as Mordant Royce! Good lord! how surprised they'd be if I topped in and said, in a quiet, friendly tone, 'Lord Devesbury, I picked this young gentleman out of the gutter, my lord; he used to sell fuses; what do you think of me as a tutor, eh?' They'd be surprised, Royce, eh?"

"I dare say," assented the young man with perfect coolness, and lifting his mustache by way of a smile. "But perhaps they wouldn't; such queer things happen every day. Good night!" and with a smile of adieu, he walked quickly out.

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A footman in plain livery opened the door, bowed respectfully, and took Royce's hat and coat, and Royce walked on to the stairs, as if he were familiar with the house.

Opening a door on the first floor, he entered a splendidly furnished room, brilliantly lighted, in which half-a-dozen men were sitting smoking; some of them engaged with cards at a square table, one lolling on the sofa, and another playing on the piano.

The appearance of the tall, well-dressed figure in the doorway was greeted with exclamations of welcome.

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"No one," responded Mr. Craddock, gloomily. "The countess had a daughter, there is no doubt about that; she died, there is no doubt about that; the daughter is supposed to have died—"

"There is doubt about that?"

"Yes!" said the old man, sullenly, stubbornly. "Royce, I believe she lived to marry and give birth to the heir of all this property, but where is she? and he stretched out his skinny hands."

"No trace of her at all?"

"Not the faintest. She disappeared as completely as if—she had been a shadow," said Mr. Craddock.

Royce was silent for a moment, then he laughed.

"It is a pretty problem, with two sides. To find the earl's last will and to find the person in whose favor it was made! Most people consider one question of that kind difficult enough," he added.

"But not you; not you, Royce?" said the old man, clutching his arm eagerly. "Not you! You won't make much of it; you're too clever! And I taught you, didn't I, Royce, eh? And look at it! Thousands! We might make terms with the person whose favor the will is in, or with Stuart Villiers himself; it could be worked either way."

"If you had the will and the person to whom the old earl really left his money," said Mordant Royce. He spoke dreamily, with his eyes fixed on the fire, his opera hat held before his lips, his long, white hands playing a soft tune on the crown.

The old man watched him closely, narrowly.

"You're thinking of something, Royce," he declared in his shrill, suppressed treble. "You're thinking of something, I know you are! You're at work on it already, eh? I knew you'd take and hang on to it; that's why I told you. I said to myself, here's a case for Royce, this is the sort of business he'll take to at once. Don't I know him? Didn't I train him up and teach him—"

ROYCE LOOKED incredulous.

"Yes, that was it! How do I know it? Well, I didn't know it, I guessed it by the old man's movements. He hadn't been to the Wold for years. He hadn't mentioned his wife's name for years. What does he do when he gets down to the place? Shuts himself up in the library, sleeps in the room where he and his wife used to sleep; had her portrait brought down from the gallery, and placed on a chair in front of him, so that he can see it where he sits. Spends the day mooning about the old lumber rooms, where the countess' dresses and things have been pushed away, and hastily—mark me, Royce—hastily writes some document, with two of the servants as witnesses."

Royce smiled.

"A very pretty story," he said, "but it is all guess work, and worth nothing. I am inclined to think that he didn't make a fresh will."

"That for once your cleverness is at fault, Royce," retorted Craddock, triumphantly. "For he did! I don't guess this time—I know! Why? Because he wrote to Stuart Villiers, telling him that he meant to disinherit him, and that he had left the property to one more fully entitled to it."

For the first time the young man's face was turned on Craddock with sharp, open surprise.

"Ah," he said. "How do you know all this?"

"I saw the letter!" said old Craddock, in a hoarse whisper. "Stuart Villiers read it to me on the terrace of the Wold!"

Royce's keen eyes flashed.

"You went there?"

The old man nodded.

"To look for the last will—the will the earl went down there to make; he will be made with his wife's portrait before him."

"You found nothing at the Wold?"

Royce asked, his voice soft and thoughtful.

Mr. Craddock shook his head.

"Nothing. I was there for hours. I searched the library carefully. It had been locked up after he left, and undisturbed."

"In whose favor was the last will made?"

"Ah," groaned the old man, "if we could tell that!"

"You have found no one then?" said Royce.

"No one," responded Mr. Craddock, gloomily. "The countess had a daughter, there is no doubt about that; she died, there is no doubt about that; the daughter is supposed to have died—"

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The young man took out his watch; a handsome repeater, in gold, having a plain but costly chain affixed.

"I must get back," he said, quietly, passing by the old man's enigmatisms. "Lord Devesbury has a party at his rooms, and they expect me."

"Ah," said the old man, eyeing him half-adm