

By Right of Love.

IN THREE INSTALMENTS—PART II.

CHAPTER IV.

Later that day Mona Hanlan told her story to Serge Beadesert.

Zebra had started immediately after lunch for a sail with Emilio.

Mona had been invited to join them, but she saw that she was not really wanted—by Zebra, at any rate; and as Lady Darkhaven begged her to consult her own inclinations, she pleaded slight fatigue and letters to write as an excuse for not going.

Before parting with her for the afternoon the countess complimented her on the quieting effect she already appeared to have on the untamed girl whom she was there to chaperon.

'You must be very sweet and true by nature, Mrs. Hanlan, for both of those children to have fallen so quickly under your charm. Emilio raved to me about you for nearly an hour this morning.'

'The young villain lost his head over Mrs. Hanlan, mother, regardless of the fact that she is married,' said Beadesert. 'I would not encourage his ravings if I were you. Remember, Spaniards mature early. At sixteen Emilio is as old as an Englishman of twenty.'

'But, dear me, that seems very shocking! To think of any young man falling in love—with a married woman, I mean!'

Was there a smile in Beadesert's eyes as he replied demurely—

'I fear it happens occasionally. We will entreat Mrs. Hanlan not to encourage him, shall we?'

'I am sure she will not need our entreaty,' exclaimed the countess, looking anxiously at Mona, who laughed outright as she replied—

'Mr. Beadesert is only teasing. Let me assure you, however, Lady Darkhaven, that your grandson is a mere boy in my eyes; and, besides, he is half English, you know, so we cannot think of him as being so very Spanish.'

The countess retired, quite satisfied that Zebra's chaperon might be depended on in doing what was right and sensible.

When she had gone, Mona's laugh changed into a sigh.

She glanced at Beadesert, who was studying her with very tender eyes—more tender than he guessed.

'Mr. Beadesert,' she said impulsively, 'I cannot bear that your mother should think so well of me. Can you spare a few moments while I tell you about my marriage? I would rather tell you than her; it shows me up in such despicable colors. You can tell the countess afterwards. Oh, how I wish I could live the last three months over again! If I could only get my freedom back—and my self-respect!'

'You do not love your husband?'

Beadesert's voice was, at the moment, as tender as his eyes, into which a strange light flashed.

Carried away by his evident sympathy and interest, Mona answered brokenly and miserably—

'No Heaven help me, I do not! I married him because he was rich, and before we had left the church I knew him to be a possibly ruined man. A telegram was brought to him in the vestry. He behaved very nobly in the midst of his sudden trouble. He knew my reason for having accepted him, and his chief sorrow was that the news had reached him too late to prevent the marriage. He started for America at once, and he would not hear of my going with him. Poor Tony!'

'You parted on your wedding day?'

'Yes. Let me tell you all now that I have begun; it will be a relief if you don't mind listening!'

'You know I shall not mind,' murmured the dangerously-caressing voice. 'But come out under the trees, it looks more inviting there.'

She let him take her where he would, and settle her comfortably, being careful to place his own chair that he could watch her face.

'Now begin,' he murmured.

See obeyed, vividly painting the wretched struggle to keep up appearances on next to no money which was the chief experience her young life had known, and the only lesson she had learned from her parents.

Then came the story of Tony Hanlan, the joining of their fates, and the account of how he had been robbed.

As Mona casually mentioned the name of the absconding overseer, Beadesert started violently, repeating the name in a tone of amazement.

'Toro! Do you know his first name?'

'Yes; but it may not be the same, of course. Go on, please. Forgive my interruption.'

'There is nothing more to tell, you heard the news I received this morning? My husband is on the track of this Toro.'

'It is a Spanish name.'

'Yes; he belong, or did belong, to somewhere in the North of Spain. I fancy he is half-American.'

'Strange! The Toro I know is half-American, and he hailed originally from Catalonia. Your story is most interesting and most sad. I feel for you from the bottom of my heart.'

'I don't deserve much sympathy; I was greatly to blame for marrying with so unworthy a motive.'

'My dear child, it is done every day. You were brought to consider it your duty to sell yourself for money. The wrong was not yours. I cannot bear to hear you

blame yourself. I am glad you made a confident of me before going to my mother; I shall repeat it to her, as you wish me to do so, but I shall tell it in my own way.'

'Now, I am going to ask your patience while I explain the presence of that young savage here as legal lord and master—a position to which I had every reason to look forward as my own, until a few weeks ago. But I must not be selfish; you said you felt tired, and you have letters to write.'

'My fatigue is already a thing of the past, and my letters can wait. Please believe me when I say that I am both anxious to hear what you have to tell me concerning your niece and nephew.'

'Then I will tell you. My poor brother, Basil, the late Earl of Darkhaven, made a very foolish marriage when he was under age. He lost his head over a handsome Spanish girl, whom he met while cruising in his yacht. Her father was a merchant skipper, scouring the seas on his own account.'

'The only relative who turned up at the marriage was the bride's brother, Manuel Calzados. The ceremony took place in a tiny chapel, the officiating priest being a certain Fernando Toro. A fortnight later they were re-married by the late rector of this parish, in the little church you have probably noticed just outside the park gates.'

'Nothing much amiss happened until Basil had been a benedict for a couple of years or so. He continued to worship his wife, though he could not shut his eyes to the fact that she had done a very unwise thing—socially—in marrying her.'

'She was wholly uneducated, and by no means refined. He managed to teach her to read and write English before Zebra came to put a stop to her studies, but when I think of the sort of woman she was and is, I cannot wonder at my niece being an utterly untamed creature. I was at Eton when my brother married, and only came here for the holidays; but still, I saw all I wanted to see of my sister-in-law.'

'I was here when the thunderbolt fell which opened my brother's eyes fully to the terrible mistake he had made. He had taken his wife and the baby Zebra for a trip in his yacht, and, thinking to please Mercedes, he made for her old home, and, while she went to ascertain if her old grandmother, with whom she had lived, was still alive, he re-visited the little chapel where his marriage had taken place.'

'He found a new priest in possession, and it was from him that Basil learnt the deception which had been practised on him. This new man had only arrived a couple of days previously to take the place of Fernando, who, it appeared had been discovered to be in league with a band of sea-robbers, who, in the guise of honest merchants, made a living by boarding craft smaller than their own, and helping themselves to anything of value they could find, not hesitating to use a knife or revolver in the case of resistance. In fact they were desperadoes of the worst description.'

'The leader of the gang was none other than Manuel Calzados, brother to the girl Basil had married; he had succeeded his father at trade.'

'The Calzados, it was found, were formerly gipsies, outlawed from their tribe on account of their excess of depravity. They were destitute of all honor, and Toro was as bad, or worse.'

'He had joined them some years before. Why he acted the part of priest and was content to dwell on that tiny island in the Mediterranean was best known to himself and the Calzados. Probably he was of immense use to them by virtue of the sanctity of his office. Who would be likely to suspect wrong of an honest merchant skipper who was hand in glove with a dignified priest of good repute?'

'But, one day, the supposed merchant skipper took in hand, a task beyond his power to carry through. Instead of taking captives, he and his crew were themselves captured and brought to justice. Papers were found in their vessel implicating Father Fernando; but they managed somehow to send him warning, and he was never taken. He, in his turn, contrived to enable Manuel Calzados to escape; but what became of the two, Heaven only knows.'

'Fresh from hearing this story, my brother returned to where he had left his wife. She had fled with her child, and he never saw her again until he lay on his deathbed at Madrid a few weeks ago. He had never forgotten her, and he almost made Spain his home in the hope of finding her some day. In some mysterious manner she learnt that he was dying, and she turned up at his hotel, with the girl Zebra and the boy Emilio, declaring that the latter had been born a few months after she left her husband, producing certificates of his birth and baptism, and so on, to prove that he really was my poor brother's child.'

'When I arrived on the scene, Basil was nearly breathing his last. He made me promise to go on looking after things until Emilio was able to do so, and he asked me to take both children and their mother home with me.'

'This I tried to do; but the woman, Mercedes, refused to accompany me, or to allow Emilio to do so. Zebra was free to please herself; she and I came back together.'

'I shall always be of opinion that there was some mystery about Basil's death, and that his wife was mixed up in it. I have detectives at work trying to ferret out the truth, so we may know some day.'

'A few days ago the boy and his mother turned up. He announced his intention of living here, but she declines to enter the castle. She has taken up her abode in that cottage above the little graveyard.'

'Mona could keep silent no longer. 'I guessed as much some moments ago,' she said, 'and now I am quite sure. Mr. Beadesert, I must tell you what I saw and heard last night.'

CHAPTER V.

He leant forward and stared at her, but said not a word.

His eyes—ablaze at the moment—were sufficient invitation for her to continue.

She hurriedly related her midnight experience, feeling glad that she had been prompted to do so when she saw his eager, wondering expression change to one of concern for herself.

Bending still nearer, he took her hand, saying, in even a lower tone than he had used before—

'I am thankful you have told me! Thankful that we have exchanged confidence so fully. That woman intends some harm to you, but I will guard you as the apple of my eye.' Then, as though conscious that he had let himself go a trifle too far, he added, slowly releasing her hand: 'It is my duty as your host, to see that no harm comes to you.'

She was trembling with the force of some emotion at work within her.

She had to moisten her lips with her almost dry tongue before she could speak—

'But what harm? I don't understand! Why should she wish to injure me?'

'Do you not understand? His voice thrilled her with its exceeding tenderness. Mercedes is still associated in some way with the man who has robbed your husband. Toro himself is now in danger, and you are to pay the penalty. Thank Heaven we have had our talk so early in the day. You must leave here at once.'

The grey eyes bent on her face were dark with passionate longing and regret. Something stirred to life in the girl's heart, giving her courage to face the worst that might befall; not for her husband's sake, but rather than be separated from Serge Beadesert.

'I shall not leave here,' she answered firmly, adding, with a smile, 'unless you are dissatisfied with me.'

'I—dissatisfied with you? Good Heaven! He dare not look at her now; glancing determinedly aside at the blue sea, visible in its peaceful calm through the trees, he murmured, half irresolutely—'You ought to go this very hour. You may not understand the nature of the danger which threatens you, but—it is there!'

He might have added—'And here, in the very love which fills my heart already to overflowing for you. A double danger threatens, and against the worst she had not yet any thought of being on her guard.'

All she knew of the strange sweet feeling which was waiting to live within her, was that she more than ever regretted her marriage with Tony Hanlan, and that it would make her happy to stay at Darkhaven for ever.

'I will not go!' she said again. 'What a coward I should be if I ran away from so vague a danger as this! I should despise myself for ever! But hush! I hear your nephew's voice—yet they are surely not back already.'

But it was, in very truth, Emilio and Zebra who came towards them across the lawn, the former flushed and angry, the latter smiling in a manner which somehow brought the blood to Mona's cheeks.

'Feeling rested, Mrs. Hanlan? Letters written?'

Beadesert would have liked to strike the smiling mouth; but Mona was equal to the occasion, and perfectly able to defend herself.

'No, Lady Beadesert, I have not written my letters; but I have forgotten my fatigue in listening to the very interesting story your uncle has been telling me. I certainly confess to having felt some curiosity as to how you and your brother came to be Beadesert.'

It was Zebra's turn to color now. The shaft had gone home. Nevertheless, she would not acknowledge herself defeated.

'I daresay we shall turn out as well as some of our dead and gone ancestors. Have you explored the portrait gallery? There is one there of a Serge Beadesert who walked this earth nearly two hundred years ago. He was chiefly famed for making love to other men's wives. I fancy Uncle Serge must be come to life again; the resemblance is really quite startling.'

Emilio burst into a loud laugh.

'That's it, Ze! You know how to do it! Mrs. Hanlan doesn't like it any more than our beloved uncle; but it serves her right for playing such a mean trick. Why couldn't she say she wanted to stay at home and flirt with—'

'Silence, you young cur, or you shall have the thrashing I have so often promised you!'

Beadesert's hand gripped the boy's shoulder. His handsome face flushed with passion.

Mona would not have believed it was in him to get so angry, and even Zebra looked on in breathless interest, her sympathy with her brother, but her admiration reluctantly given to the man in whose firm grip Emilio was absolutely helpless.

Approaching the two Mona laid her hand on Beadesert's arm, which felt like a bar of iron, with the muscles at such tension.

Please release him, Mr. Beadesert! When he thinks of what he has said he will apologize to you.'

Emilio was freed in an instant. The iron muscles had become as wax under Mona's soft touch. 'You are too indulgent, Mrs. Hanlan. But I suppose you are right. Yet I would suggest, if I



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may, that you have nothing to say to this young cur until he has apologized.'

Mona nodded, and moved off across the lawn towards the door by which she and Beadesert had come out.

He resumed his seat, and drawing a book from his pocket, began to read.

Zebra and her brother walked in sullen silence in the direction from which they they had come.

Presently the former said, speaking in Spanish:

'You see you have spoiled our sail all for nothing. It's no use insulting Mrs. Hanlan; the insult doesn't stick, somehow.'

'I didn't mean to insult her. I love her but so does he. It hurts him; that's what made me do it.'

'A strange way to show your love for a woman—to insult her. I should kill a man who tried that sort of thing with me.'

'You are Spanish, you see; English girls are so cold.'

'I am half English; I wish I were not. It is no use your loving her, Emilio; she thinks you a child.'

'She shall find out her mistake!' growled Emilio. 'I am going in; I must see her and apologize; it is easy enough to apologize to her. You'll have to do it to him!'

'I'll die first!' said Zebra. 'And yet I don't think I mind much.'

She wheeled round and returned to where Beadesert was reading—or pretending to.

'Ucle Serge, I was horrid—detestable! I am sorry, really. Only, that portrait is like you, you know.'

'You are forgiven, Zebra.'

Something in his smiling glance sent the blood into her face.

He drew her to him, standing up so that he towered above her.

In his gentle, caressing way he added—'We begin to understand each other, I fancy, niece of mine. Your weapons are sharp, and you know how to strike. I should be sorry if you wounded Mrs. Hanlan. I want her to be happy here. She is young and and in trouble. Her husband's life is threatened.'

'Would you save him if you had the chance?' asked the girl.

'Most certainly I should,' was the stern reply.

'Now don't get cross again. I shouldn't you know, in your place: try to save his life, I mean. I will be a charming niece to you in future; only you must be an equally charming uncle to me.'

'So be it; and now be off, for I want to read.'

Humming an air of her beloved Spain, Zebra went slowly across the lawn and out on the bush-bound common beyond.

The bushes formed a safeguard badly needed just there where the cliff ran sheer down to the rocks at the water's edge.

Brambles were dotted a few feet apart the whole of the way; so that it was possible for an expert climber to make his way up or down, though no apparent reason existed for such a trial of skill, seeing that a tolerably good path had been cut in the cliff a hundred yards higher up.

Zebra was, therefore, not unnaturally surprised to see a man's head and shoulders appear suddenly above the bushes as she strolled towards the path, by which she purposed descending to the beach.

The head was close-cropped. For an instant they stared at each other, the man's face growing ashen white.

Then passionate words of entreaty broke from his lips—words uttered in good English, but with an accent which made Zebra strongly suspect him to be a countryman of her own.

'Help me! be merciful as you are beautiful! Help me to escape!'

'Escape? From what and whom?'

His pallor lessened, and his face brightened.

He listened to explain that he had contrived to escape from the convict prison a few miles distant, and was making his way—or trying to do so—to the abode of one who would stand his friend; only he had evidently made a mistake as to the exact spot at which he should have scaled the cliff.

'There is a path a little further on,' said Zebra, inwardly admiring his fine dark eyes, and the contour of his clean-shaven face.

'I was to avoid the path by at least a mile,' he replied. 'I certainly passed one quite a mile away. I did not notice this one you speak of. But for the love of Heaven, help me to get inland before I am missed! And yet how can I escape in this accursed dress?'

As he rose better into view she saw he

was still wearing his convict's garb.

The insignia of crime roused no aversion in her, as it might have done if she had a more conventional training.

'You will never get away in that!' she declared. 'Come full into view that I may see your height. Do not fear! I am not going to betray you; and we have the common to ourselves.'

Half doubting, half trusting, he obeyed, and stood by her side.

Their eyes were on a level.

For a moment or two Zebra studied him, and he he. Then she spoke.

'I have an inspiration. We will change clothes, and I will keep yours to wear at a fancy dress ball when I get the chance.'

She laughed, amused at her own notion.

'But how—' he was beginning hopefully, when she stopped him.

'Do you see that shed yonder? It has two compartments—not very roomy, but sufficient for our purpose—and one leads into the other. We will use them as our dressing-rooms. You creep along between the bushes, and please be careful not to spoil my new costume.'

He made no attempt to persuade her out of her wild scheme. He would have seized any chance of assuring his escape.

'Goodness knows what this place was built for,' said Zebra, as they met at the shed. 'For your convenience, apparently. Now, go in there and take off your outer garments. Tap at the inner door when you have them ready to pass to me.'

She entered after him, closing the door of communication.

In a couple of minutes she heard the expected tap.

'Open the door, pass your things through, and wait five minutes,' she commanded.

He did so, muttering—'Remember, I am trusting you! If you give me up, I will some day kill you.'

'No doubt. But I am trusting you also, though in a different way, because I like your face and because you are my countryman. Shut the door and wait till I tell you to open it.'

Five minutes served for her to divest herself of her black, gauzy dress and silk underskirt, and to don the convict garb, which fitted her quite as well as it had fitted his late wearer.

With a little laugh of amusement, she tossed her own discarded garments at the door of communication, saying—

'Help yourself.'

Long, thin fingers, belonging to a brown sinewy arm, clutched at the dainty clothes, and the door was banged to once more.

It was fully ten minutes before another tap came at it.

'I am ready senorita.'

'Enter then.'

The laugh was mutual as they surveyed each other's altered appearance.

Had it not been for his close cropped head, the Spanish desperado would have made a very handsome woman, while Zebra's wealth of black hair was the only thing to make one doubt her being, in very truth, a daring young criminal.

'Our heads will betray us,' she said, at last. 'You must take my sailor hat, and keep it on as best you can. Hadn't you a cap?'

'I lost it coming along.'

'Then I must risk detection. Come, it is not safe to delay. Where do you want to go? Perhaps I can direct you.'

'If I tell you that, I shall place myself entirely at your mercy. I wonder if I dare? You are half English, you see.'

'How do you know that?'

'Is it not so? Are you not Zebra Beadesert, daughter of the late Lord Darkhaven? I see I am right! Well, a man ought to be able to trust his own cousin. I am Jose Calzados, and I am on my way to the house where your mother, my father's sister, lives.'

'Jose Calzados! You! I have heard of you often. Now, indeed, I am interested in your escape! Go by way of the common, keeping close to the bushes. When they come to an end, and you will see in front of you a churchyard, and above it a cottage; that is where my mother lives. Now be off, Cousin Jose.'

'And you?' he asked.

'I shall stay her until it is dark. Do not

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