

By Right of Love.

IN THREE INSTALMENTS—PART I.

PRELUDE.

Two men stood in the porch of a tiny chapel on one of the smallest of the Balearic Isles.

They looked at the blue Mediterranean, which heaved and rolled lazily almost at their feet, and occasionally raised their eyes to the sky overhead—a glorious spread of dark southern blue, unbroken by clouds, save for one threatening patch of vapoury gloom which rose out of the sea on the eastern side of the island and crept up and up until it rested above the cross on the tiny spire of the little chapel.

One of the men noticed the cloud, and wondered what it might mean.

A little rain would be welcome; but a big storm always proved disastrous to the unsheltered islet.

The other wore the garb of a priest. He was tall, and dark, and stately, and inscrutable-looking.

The other looked what he was—an Englishman abroad on a yachting trip.

He was of noble birth and handsome presence, and his fortune matched his birth. He was dressed in flannels—white from head to foot, except for the pale blue silk sash round his waist, and a band of the same colour round his straw sailor hat.

His height was about six feet; he had the fine black-lashed grey eyes of his race, a good nose and mouth—the latter partly concealed by a brown moustache, carefully waxed—and a tolerable chin.

His yacht—*White Witch*—was anchored in the little bay below.

The owner could, had he chosen, have watched the preparations for departure going on aboard her; but if his gaze wandered at all from the rolling sea beyond the bay, it was to the narrow path on his left, up which his bride had come.

For it was the man's marriage morn, and he felt light of heart when he thought of his approaching loss of freedom, though, until one short month ago, he had not known of the existence of the girl he was about to make his wife.

'They are late!' he said in Spanish; and there was impatience in his tone.

'Probably the fault of Manuel,' suggested the priest, his eye wandering, perhaps by accident, to the smoke coming from the funnel of some kind of steamer, which, after touching at a neighboring island, was putting swiftly out to sea again.

From this steamer the priest glanced at a boat being rapidly rowed towards the little island from the larger one.

His glance took in the fact that a jib and a mainsail were being run up.

'Manuel Calzado is not famed for his punctuality; but he would not for worlds disappoint his sister. They are sincerely attached. I venture to prognosticate that you will be married within the hour my lord.'

Father Fernando had travelled once to England, and stayed there long enough to pick up one or two useful phrases.

He fluttered himself that he knew how to address all sorts and conditions of Englishmen.

It was a fact, he had indeed made excellent use of his time.

'Should your prognostication prove true, I will trouble any fee you like to ask for marrying us, father. I shall know no real peace of mind until Mercedes is mine beyond the power of man to take away. We go straight to England to be re-married by the Anglican clergyman who baptized me.'

'There is no law in your land forbidding the marriage of those under age?'

'Only when legal guardians are opposed to the match. I am my own master, thank Heaven, and Mercedes' friends are willing that she should be my wife.'

'That is so. See, my lord, here comes your bride. My triple fee is safe.'

The young Englishman made no reply.

He strode away to meet the beautiful girl who greeted him with love-laden eyes.

'You are late, my queen, but I forgive, since you are here.'

'It was my fault,' laughingly explained the handsome Spaniard who headed the procession with his sister. 'Has your excellency forgiveness for me also?'

'Yes, when you learn to address me properly. My wife's brother must not forget that he is now on the point of becoming my brother also. But come, we will delay no longer. Father Fernando awaits us at the altar.'

No doubt Father Fernando wished he could have such a marriage to officiate at every day, when he opened the envelope handed to him, at the close of the ceremony, by the newly made husband.

'It is a generous lad!' he said to himself, as he watched the bride being hurried on board the yacht by her enamoured bridegroom. 'I wish him well from the bottom of my heart. Mercedes loves him, I think, but she is a Calzado! She cannot help being a Calzado; therefore, I say, Heaven help him unless her love prove stronger than instinct—stronger than training—stronger than destiny itself!'

Tony Hanlan had promised she should do so if she married him.

Sir Simon Fortescue was a life-baronet of very limited means.

He and his wife had come together owing to a mutual misunderstanding.

Each had believed the other to be the possessor of a large fortune, whereas they both were as poor as rooks and had extravagant tastes.

Consequently, Mona's youth was spent in an atmosphere of continual struggle—how to make both ends meet, that had never been possible in the Fortescue household—but how to live as smartly as their neighbors.

Mona was tired of it before she left school, and that was how, during her first season, she gratefully accepted Tony Hanlan's invitation to help him spend the dollars his father had made in Pennsylvania, mostly by a lucky find of oil, and partly by the plucky way in which he had stuck to work.

Hanlan, junior, was content to leave the management of things to his overseer while he 'did Europe,' a portion of his education which had been overlooked by his indulgent but unenlightened parent.

Having got as far as London, he decided to stay there awhile.

The season was at its height, and, thanks to one or two useful introductions, and his dollars, he found himself welcomed everywhere.

He might have looked far higher than Mona Fortescue; but he had been accustomed to gratify every passing whim as it arose, and when the whim seized him to make Mona's pretty face his own legal property, he lost no time in telling her so.

Their marriage was fixed for midsummer Day, and it took place, of course, at two p. m.

Hanlan had a suit of rooms at the Cecil. The wedding was to be at St. George's Hanover Square.

He and his best man arrived at the church at ten minutes to two.

The most punctual of men always, Tony was determined not to risk keeping his bride waiting.

At the same moment that he and his friend got out of theiransom at St. George's, a telegraph messenger entered the Cecil, with a cablegram for Tony Hanlan, Esq.

Now, Tony had paid his bill, and ordered his numerous belongings to be forwarded to Liverpool street, and his bride proposing to honeymoon in Holland.

It was known at the Cecil that he was going to be married that afternoon, and the telegraph boy was despatched in a hansom to St. George's.

The Cecil management felt itself justified in being generous to the extent of permitting one of their cabs to carry what might be an important message for a customer who had just settled a bill of abnormal length without a murmur.

When the boy reached the church, the bride was just arriving—late of course; her mother had insisted on that, in order to increase the expectation of the waiting multitude and the impatience of the bridegroom.

It seemed a pity to interrupt a wedding with anything so prosaic as a telegram.

The boy decided to wait until it was all over, considering he would be more likely to get a tip then.

He did wait, worming his way into the church by means of his golden key, represented by the yellow envelopes, which he was careful to carry conspicuously.

Three beneficial clergymen—Lady Fortescue came of a clerical family—helped to tie the knot; a bishop sealed it with his blessing, and the wedding party filed off to the vestry, the bridegroom joyfully triumphant, the bride assured that she had done the best thing possible for herself, Lady Fortescue openly radiant, and Sir Simon as openly relieved.

The signatures were in the register before the telegraph messenger worked his way in, and delivered himself of his charge.

'Went to the Cecil, sir, and sent me on here.'

'Quite right; go and drink my health at the nearest ginger beer shop.'

A sovereign changed hands, to the boy's wild delight.

He vanished in the crowd, and Tony turned to his wife.

'I don't suppose its of any consequence,' he said, 'but one never knows. You will excuse me if I open it?'

'Why, of course!' said Mona, smiling brightly.

The smile froze on her lips when she heard a startled exclamation from her husband, followed by the words—

'What is true, I am a ruined man!'

'What?'

The exclamation came, in a shrill tone from Lady Fortescue; it was echoed, an octave or so lower, by her husband, whose face blanched piteously.

'I would give half I am worth to have had this sooner,' said Tony. 'You'll believe that, won't you, Mona? It's true I mean.'

'But what is the message, Tony? I don't understand.'

'It's from my overseer's clerk. He says the oil supply has given out, and that the overseer has bolted with all that he could lay hands on. As I put him in charge of everything, it means that he has gone off with all my papers; realized my investments most likely, and feathered his nest

pretty warmly. I would have staked my life on that man's honesty.'

'Perhaps it is a mistake, or a practical joke,' suggested the bride, with an inward shiver at the thought of her future, should it prove neither.

'I must go and find out,' said the bridegroom grimly. 'I'm awfully sorry, Mona, more sorry than I can say, that this message did not reach me half an-hour ago. If I have brought ruin on you, I shall never forgive myself. But let us get out of this; we can't talk things over here.'

Mona accustomed to act a part ever since she could walk, found it comparatively easy to face the crowds who waited in the church to witness the departure of the wedding-party; but Tony was less accomplished, and comments were uttered very freely on the change in his appearance since he went into the vestry.

'Looks as if he'd just discovered he's married the wrong woman.'

'Should say he's seen a ghost. She looks pale, too. She was blooming as a rose just now.'

'Something awful's happened, that's certain! Look at the old folks! If they were utterly ruined they couldn't look worse.'

This last remark met the case in a way the utterer of it little guessed at the time, though he took credit to himself for having said as much, in the light of after events.

It was not long before society in general learnt that threatened monetary ruin had temporarily separated the Hanlans.

Tony travelled with the mails to Queens-town in order to go on board the *Etruria*, which had dropped down the Mersey a couple of hours after his unlucky marriage had become a legal fact.

Mona remained with her parents, fully sharing their anxiety concerning what might be in store for them all.

Not only had Lady Fortescue plunged wildly into debt to make her daughter's marriage one of the season's great events, but Sir Simon had borrowed money freely on the surety of his wealthy son-in-law that was to be.

More than a week of weary waiting and sickening suspense, and then the thunder-bolt fell.

Tony cabled to his wife—

'Report true. Am writing.'

His letter, when it came, told a miserable story of a man's trust and a villain's treachery.

The overseer had taken advantage of the power placed in his hands.

Every investment that could be realized had turned into money.

By a luckless coincidence the oil supply came to an end on the same day as that on which the overseer's clerk learned that his superior officer had decamped.

Tony's letter was manly throughout.

An older woman than Mona would have read heartbreak in the bravely written words; but though she pitied him more, if anything, than herself, she fell in with his suggestion that the Atlantic should divide them until he had made a fortune equal to that which he had lost by his own blind folly.

But social position was over for the Fortescues.

Sir Simon died of heart-failure almost immediately after the arrival of that fatal letter, and it was found that he owed very nearly thirty thousand pounds.

Lady Fortescue was in despair. She had no choice but to accept the home offered by one of her brothers, who had married into an episcopal family.

Mona, declining to live on charity, determined to earn her own living.

She accepted a post as companion-chaperon to a grand-daughter of Countess Darkhaven, who resided at an old castle almost surrounded by the sea, situated on a little peninsula far down in the West of England.

The necessary correspondence for the settlement of the companion-chaperon question was carried on, on Lady Darkhaven's side, by her son, the Honourable Serge was heir to the Earldom of Darkhaven, the man in present possession thereof being his elder brother, who, though married, did not appear to have a son.

Yet, although his death had very recently been announced in the Times, as Mona never remembered, his heir—according to Debbrett—still signed himself Serge Beaudesert. There was surely some mystery in that.

CHAPTER II.

It was growing dusk as the carriage which had been sent to the station to meet the Lady Zebra Beaudesert's undesired chaperon, dashed round the curve which ended at the entrance to the Darkhaven grounds, and permitted Mrs. Tony Hanlan a comprehensive view of the English Channel.

In the western sky there lingered a suggestion of a recent glorious sunset; and against this ruddy glow the dark sails of fishing-boats, making for night-work, stood out in sombre relief.

In the foreground, facing south and west, stood the old castle at the end of a long drive sloping upwards through a park, the finest trees of which appeared to have climbed by degrees to form a background to the battlemented, grey-stoned building.

If the Beaudeserts strolled their home and their horses, I shall not have anything to complain of, thought Mona. But thought went so far just then, for the hooting of an owl almost close to her, as it seemed, made her turn her head suddenly in the direction whence it had come.

Then, for the first time, she noticed a church on her right, close to the park gates; its silent graveyard sloping up behind it nearly to the top of the little hill on which it stood.

On the summit of this hill was a cottage, and just outside the doorway stood a woman looking down at the carriage and its occupant, or was it at the owl which had perched itself on the low, square tower of the church?

Mona only caught a glimpse of the

woman, for the coachman sent his horses through the park gates at that moment, and the trees hid both cottage and graveyard from view.

A second hoot from the owl reached Mona's ears as the carriage was brought to a standstill inside a huge court-yard, the massive gate of which stood hospitably open.

She was assisted to alight by a somewhat grave-looking man with refined features, who made himself known to her in the first words he spoke—

'Welcome to Darkhaven, Mrs. Hanlan. You must not judge us by the seeming discourtesy we have shown in permitting you to come from the station alone. I was under the impression that my niece had driven to meet you, or I should have gone myself. It is of no use mincing matters, even at this early stage of our acquaintance; so I may as well prepare you to expect a very difficult character to deal with in Zebra—my niece. She openly defies my mother and myself, and will, most certainly, subject you to the same annoyance.'

'Oh, well, it will be part of my duty to endeavour to counteract anything that may be objectionable in your niece's manner, Mr. Beaudesert! I sincerely hope she will take to me.'

'She will be very hard to please if she does not! The smile, answering Mona's which accompanied these words, altered the man's face entirely; it made sunshine where all had been shadow. 'You are younger—much younger—than I expected, Mrs. Hanlan,' he added, as he opened a door and stood aside for her to enter the large oak-panelled room revealed to view.

She paused an instant on the threshold and answered deprecatingly over her shoulder—

'You did not ask my age. I feared it might be against me, and so I did not mention it.'

'You cannot have been married long?' he murmured questioningly, following her into the room.

'No, not long.' Then, noticing that the room was tenanted by a white-haired, handsome old lady in deep mourning, she lowered her voice as she added: 'Some day, if you wish, I will tell you all about it. I could not write full details; besides, I thought you might possibly know them.'

'We go but seldom into society,' he replied. 'We are utterly out of the fashionable world here. Permit me—raising his voice considerably—to introduce you to my mother, Lady Darkhaven. This is Mrs. Hanlan, mother, who has kindly undertaken to relieve you of the responsibility of looking after Zebra.'

The old lady held out a wrinkled hand, and looked at Mona through her gold-rimmed spectacles.

'I am very grateful to you, Mrs. Hanlan, and very glad to see you, though I fear whether you are old enough to have much influence over so untamed a nature as that of my grand daughter. My son prepared me for a much older lady.'

Again the magic smile played over Beaudesert's face.

'I must plead guilty, mother dear, to having totally forgotten the important question of age; though, for my own part, I am inclined to think my carelessness may lead to good results. Zebra is more likely to listen to counsel from a companion of her own age. She may possibly be led, but never driven.'

'But where is she?' asked the countess, peering round the room after the manner of the semi-blind. 'I thought she went to meet Mrs. Hanlan.'

'I thought so, too,' replied Beaudesert, 'but it seems she did nothing of the sort, as I found out when it was too late even to cycle to the station, or I should certainly have gone myself.'

'But really it was not necessary,' exclaimed Mona. 'I did not anticipate seeing Lady Beaudesert at the station. Indeed, I thought myself highly fortunate to be brought here by such magnificent horses. My experience of companions made me determined to cultivate a becoming spirit of humility.'

Her merry laugh contradicted the slight tinge of bitterness underlying her words.

'It is hard to be compelled to work for one's living when one is young enough to enjoy life, said the countess; and it must make it harder when the necessity for making money separates married lovers.'

'But perhaps we were not lovers—in the sense you mean, Lady Darkhaven. I should like to tell you all about it some day, if I may. It makes me feel like a hypocrite when you pity me for having to earn my living. And I don't in the least deserve to be happy here, as I fancy I shall be.'

'Don't be too sure of that until you have made the acquaintance of my grand-daughter and her brother, the present Earl of Darkhaven,' was the somewhat mystifying reply.

'Who want me?'

A boy of sixteen or so lounged up the long-room with his hands in his pockets.

He looked more like a Spanish gypsy than an English earl, and his accent was doubtful.

His grandmother and uncle watched to see how he would behave in the presence of his sister's companion.

He whistled a tune half under his breath as he came closer, still keeping his hands in his pockets.

When he was near enough to have taken in Mona's appearance, he said—

'Are you Zebra's keeper? She means to hate you like poison. And so shall I, if you interfere with us in any way.'

'You will be good enough to remember, Emilio, that you occupy the position of a gentleman in this house. English gentlemen are never discourteous to ladies,' said Beaudesert quietly.

'Mrs Hanlan is not a lady!' the boy retorted. 'She will be paid, as the servants are.'

Beaudesert flushed at this insulting speech, which did not reach Lady Darkhaven's deaf ears.

Mona signed to him to be silent, or he would have taken his nephew by the

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shoulders, and turned him out of the room.

'According to your idea, then, Lord Darkhaven,' she said, 'even Queen Victoria is not a lady? Her subjects allow her a certain income for governing them to the best of her truly regal ability. And as the money you receive, or will some day receive, from your property is, in reality, payment to you for looking after it, why, it is evident that you are not a gentleman.'

'I don't need to be a gentleman; I'm a noblemans!' said the boy insolently.

'You are by no means the first "mildord" I have met who is neither,' responded Mona quietly.

'Well, I must say you're a pretty cool one!' exclaimed the astonished young earl.

'I must, in common honesty, return the compliment,' replied Mrs. Tony Hanlan. 'So now that we have already found one thing in which we can meet on equal ground, suppose we shake hands and begin to be friends?'

She smiled so invitingly that nothing human could have resisted her.

Emilio's brown hand was in hers before he had time to think of resisting.

Beaudesert crossed the room to where his mother sat looking on at the little scene, and wondering what it was all about.

Bending until his lips were close to her ear, he said—

'Mrs. Hanlan will not have a high opinion of our hospitality unless we give her some refreshment after her journey. Shall I ring for a maid to show her to her room?'

Without waiting for the countess's assent he touched the nearest bell, and continued, speaking to Mona this time—

'My mother dare not dine later than seven, or we should have waited for you this evening. Would you prefer to have some supper in your own room, or will you have it downstairs with Emilio and myself—and possibly Zebra for company?'

'I dislike eating alone—it is so unsocial; and I am not at all tired so I will join you, if I may. I will not be many minutes changing my dress.'

As Mona passed the young earl on her way to the door, she said, smilingly—

'I am sure you know where your sister is. Do find her by the time I come down. I want to see if she is at all like what I expect.'

'All right, if you tell me what you do expect her to be like.'

'Just such another as yourself.'

She laughed as she looked at him in the eyes, and passed on leaving him half inclined to send some impudent speech after her.

But before he had made up his mind what to say she was out of hearing, so he thought better of it, and went in search of his sister.

The Lady Zebra Beaudesert did not resemble her brother in the least, so far as manner went.

He was what our American cousins would describe as an out-and-out young 'tough,' whereas it was by no means difficult to credit the fact that Zebra Beaudesert has some gentle blood in her veins.

It might have been altogether gentle, even though her father had taken to wife a Spanish gipsy; for Spanish gipsies can, some of them, trace their descent from royal ancestors.

But the Calzados had no pride of birth about them.

They did not even claim to be undiluted gipsies.

The late Earl of Darkhaven had been married nearly three years before he learnt the truth about them—a truth which brought about an immediate separation from his wife, for which her family never forgave him, and which turned whatever love she had had for him into active hate.

When Mona entered the dining-room, she found Zebra standing by her uncle's side, looking very handsome in a black mouseline de laine dinner dress.

She came forward in an easy assured way, holding out her hand.

'I have forbidden Uncle Serge to introduce us, Mrs. Hanlan. It was his fault that I was not at the station to meet you.'

(CONTINUED ON FIFTEENTH PAGE.)

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