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By J. J. BELL,

Author of "Wee Macgreegor," "Mrs. McLerie," Etc.

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"Mr. Houston has no idea of our little secret?" he continued. "You are quite certain he suspects nothing? It's just as well, for he might take it badly if he knew."

"There's nothing wrong!" she gasped.

"Oh, no," he answered lightly, "nothing seriously wrong. Still, you know, a man doesn't like to find out that he is being managed. You understand? And, as you told me, you are very anxious to manage Mr. Houston's affairs without his knowing what is going on. It's a pretty idea, but apt to lead to trouble. A woman can take too much upon herself. Even an incapable man has his dignity."

"I—I don't understand." For the moment she felt that she had taken too much upon herself.

"Well, I'll put it plainly, Mrs. Houston," he said, rising slowly and turning his back to the fire. "Suppose some one told Mr. Houston that his wife knew his financial position—pardon the long words—and concealed it from him."

"Oh!"

"Suppose some one told him that his wife was treating him like a child. Would he like it? Would he appreciate her self sacrifice?"

"But no one knows but you. I had to tell you, Mr. Dobbie. You were so kind, and I was desperate that day. But nobody knows but you about David." Speaking her husband's name seemed to strengthen her. She looked him straight in the face.

He hesitated, but only for an instant. "Nobody knows but myself, and nobody else need know," he said deliberately.

Jess felt herself turning cold. Her hand tightened on the back of the

"Goodby just now—er—Mrs. Houston," he said.

chair she had been holding during the past five minutes. "Why—why do you say that?" she asked in a whisper.

He smiled. "Did it frighten you—Jessie?"

"How dare you?" she exclaimed.

Still smiling, he took a step forward.

"Don't move!" she cried, gripping the back of the chair with both hands.

"Don't be alarmed, my dear girl. I shan't move. I wouldn't spoil the picture you make on any account. But I want to talk to you. Why are you angry? Let's be friends. Eh?"

The look of contempt on her white face stung him to the quick.

"Then I'll leave you in the meantime, but this day week you'll come to my office and persuade me to make it up," he said harshly. "Won't you?" he asked, with a sudden change of tone. "Won't you?" he repeated, this time in the appealing notes of a lover.

Jess made no sound.

"Why not?" he inquired softly.

She remained silent, and he could no longer endure her eyes upon him.

"Goodby just now—er—Mrs. Houston," he said, taking his hat and gloves from the table. "I hope we'll have a pleasanter chat this day week. At what hour may I expect you? What on earth are you doing?"

Jess, still holding the chair, had slipped back to the door and turned the key.

"So you don't want me to go yet?" said Mr. Dobbie, with an uncomfortable laugh.

Mrs. Houston moistened her dry lips. "You must wait till David comes home," she said quietly.

For the moment her words literally took his breath away, but only for the moment. "Are you mad?" he demanded. "You'll make me lose my steamer, and it's the last tonight."

She paid no attention.

"I was only joking, Mrs. Houston. You've made me feel an awful ass," he said presently, trying to laugh. "Let us part in peace, as the hymn says."

Her face, if anything, grew more determined. "You must wait, Mr. Dobbie, till I have explained matters to Mr. Houston."

"You intend to tell him everything?"

"Everything."

The man considered, and when he spoke again his smile was ugly. "Do you wish to make your husband a bankrupt, Mrs. Houston?"

"You wouldn't"— she began.

"Would you?"

"You said three months, Mr. Dobbie."

"Did I?"

"Oh, you—you"—

He, knowing the situation was his, advanced toward her, saying politely, "Kindly open the door."

She turned the key mechanically.

"Till this day week," he said pleasantly as he passed into the lobby. "Hello!"

"Hullo yersel'," said the aggrieved voice of Mrs. Wallace, who had just come from the kitchen, having entered by the back door. "Whit's ado? Wha's this?"

"It's all right, Aunt Wallace," said Jess, trying to steady her voice as she followed her unwelcome visitor from the parlor.

"Guidsake, lassie, ye luk as if ye had been seein' a ghaist! Wha's this?" Mrs. Wallace demanded in a loud whisper, pointing to Mr. Dobbie, who was struggling with the patent lock on the door.

"Oh, never mind, aunt; never mind," murmured her niece, ready to collapse.

Mrs. Wallace looked sharply at Jess. "Is he a freen o' yours?" she asked quickly. "Is he a freen o' Davie's?"

"No, no!" said the young woman wildly.

"Sic bein' the case, he's nae freen o' mines," muttered Mrs. Wallace. "Young man," she suddenly roared, "quit spilin' the sneck o' that door an' pey attention to me."

"Confound this lock!" grunted Mr. Dobbie, with another wrench at the handle.

"Bad language 'll no' help ye!" cried Mrs. Wallace.

"Who's the old party?" he exclaimed angrily, turning to Jess.

"Auld pairty!" the aunt almost shrieked. "I'll auld pairty ye, ye tailor's dummy, ye penny masher, ye"—

"Aunt, aunt!" protested Mrs. Houston.

"Haud yer tongue, lassie! I'm jist beginnin'! Whit has the man stolen, Jess?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing!"

"I'm glad to hear ye catched him in time, but I'll pit the polis on his track onywey. Weel, Maister Burgular, whit ha'e ye got to say fur yersel', eh?"

White with wrath, the glass merchant turned on her. "Show me how to open this cursed door, or"—

"Whisht, man! Ye're bad enough wi'oot sweerin'."

"Aunt Wallace, for my sake let him go," whispered Jess.

"Let him gang? Nae fears. Wait till Davie comes hame, an' he'll mak' collops o' this braw bit o' mankind. I'm no' feart fur him. I'll stab him wi' ma umbrella as shin as luk at him."

The enraged man spoke again. "Do you know who I am?" he roared.

"Wha?" said Mrs. Wallace.

"My name is Dobbie."

"I'm mair curious to ken whit yer natur' is."

"And I'll tell you now that Mrs. Houston has foolishly compromised herself"—

"Whit?" For a brief space the elderly woman hesitated. Then she strode forward and struck him over the head with her umbrella, splitting his felt hat and crushing it over his eyes. "That's yin fur you!" she cried.

At that moment he succeeded in opening the door.

"Mr. David Houston will go bankrupt for this!" he yelled. "I'll show him no mercy!"

"An' ye'll get nane either!" cried Mrs. Wallace, making a dash at him. "Yin! Twa! Three! Fower!" And she rushed down the garden path after him, belaboring him with her umbrella till it broke at the handle. It was an utter rout, so far as Mr. Dobbie was concerned.

"I doot I've been whit the gentry ca' vulgar," she panted to herself as she returned to the cottage.

She found her niece on the verge of fainting and made speed to soothe and comfort her both physically and mentally.

"Jess, ma dear," she said when the young woman had somewhat recovered, "I doot ye'll ha'e to trust yer auld auntie. Ye canna dae everythin' yersel'. Nobody can. Dinna mak' a lang story aboot it, but jist tell me whit I can dae to help ye."

* * * * * * *

"I ken ye've done yer best," said Mrs. Wallace a little later. "An' ye'll dae better yet, lass," she added. "I'll keep it a secret to please ye, but I'm feart ye're takin' ower big a responsibeelity."

"But it's only a few months now, Aunt Wallace," Jess pleaded. "I was so proud to think I could put David's affairs right without troubling him. I couldn't bear to give in now."

"Weel, weel, a willfu' wumman 'll ha'e her ain wey. But mind an' trust me. I ha'ena the ready money ye need, but I'll get it fur ye the morn, an' ye'll pey aff Dobbie, no' furgettin' to keep back the price o' ma guid umbrella. An' ye can pey back the money when ye can. An' noo I'm gaun to help ye get Davie's tea ready, an' ye maun gang early to bed the nicht an' ha'e a guid sleep, puir lass!"

On her way home Mrs. Wallace dropped into the grocer's shop.

"Hoo's trade, Mr. Ogilvy?"

"Deplorable, waur nor ever, Mistress Wallace. Did ye forget somethin' when ye was in afore?"

"Na, but I cam' back to see if ye cud tell me whaur I cud get the len' o' forty pound the morn's mornin'."

"Forty pound!"

"Mphm! D'ye ken onybody wha wud ask nae questions an' pit the money in ma haun fur aboot three month?"

"Are ye serious, Mistress Wallace?"

"Aye, I'm serious, Maister Ogilvy."

The grocer fixed his eyes on a tin of sardines and slowly said, "Aweel, I may say I ken the person ye're spierin' aboot exac'ly."

CHAPTER VI.

A LITTLE WARMTH AND A BLAZE.

"COME in to your tea, Davie!" called Jess from the door of the cottage.

"I'm jist comin'," replied her husband, who was bending over a plot under the wall.

"But you said you were coming half an hour ago."

"Did I?" said David, grubbing in the earth. "D'ye like sweet peas, Jess?"

"Yes, but I don't like old tea and cold buttered toast," his wife returned impatiently. "Come, Davie."

"I'll be in the hoose in twa ticks, lass. Dinna fash yersel'. The warl's no' comin' to an end."

"My patience is, David."

"Nae fears. I ken yer patience better nor that. Jist think o' the show o' sweet peas ye'll ha'e in July, Jess, an I'll let ye pu' as mony o' them as ye like, an' welcome, dearie."

"But can't you finish planting them after you've had your tea, Davie?" she asked, partly appeased.

"'Deed, I never thocht o' that. Of coorse I can." And David Houston rose and followed his wife into the cottage. "I'm vexed for keepin' ye waitin', Jess," he said as he joined her in the kitchen. "I doot I whiles forget things."

"Oh, never mind. It doesn't matter," she said coldly.

"Are ye angry wi' me, Jess?" he asked anxiously.

"Angry? Why should I be angry?"

"I—I thocht ye wasna pleased at—at somethin'," he answered lamely. "Ye see, I forget the time when I'm at ma gairden, an'"—

"You've been at the garden since 7 o'clock this morning, David," she observed as she filled his teacup. "Your breakfast was cold before you came to it, and so was your dinner."

"I didna fin' onythin' wrang wi' either o' them," he returned pleasantly. "Ye're a clever yin at the cookin'," he added admiringly.

Jess looked as if she had not heard him. It was the local spring holiday, and she had made special efforts with the homely meals, each one of which had been spoiled through her husband's late appearance at table. Still she had kept her temper so far.

"I'm sayin' ye're a clever yin at the cookin', Jess," he repeated.

"I'm glad you think so."

The tone of her voice was something new to David, and he paused in conveying half a slice of toast to his mouth and stared at her.

Avoiding his gaze, she played with her spoon in an absentminded fashion.

"What's wrang, lass?"

"Nothing."

"But ye're no' takin' yer tea. Are ye no' weel?"

"Oh, be quiet!"

"But I dinna like to see ye no' enjoyin' yer tea."

"Don't bother. Go on with your own tea and get back to your garden."

Mr. Houston, with many an uncomfortable glance at his wife, who, in spite of his efforts, refused to be drawn into conversation, continued his meal, with hardly his usual hearty appetite, but with an obvious desire to show her that he appreciated the buttered toast.

"I think I'll ha'e a smoke noo," he remarked immediately he had finished, and was surprised when his wife, contrary to custom, failed to rise to fetch him his house pipe from the mantelpiece.

After a short period of waiting he drew his wooden pipe from his pocket and proceeded to fill it.

Jess rose and began to clear away the dishes, a thing she usually delayed doing until David had enjoyed a ten minute smoke.

"Aren't you going to finish planting your seeds?" she inquired abruptly, addressing the teapot in her hand.

"I was thinkin' I wud wait till ye was ready to come oot to the gairden. It's fine an' warm the nicht."

"I don't think I'll come out tonight. I've other things to do. Don't wait," she said, with her back to him.

"What are ye busy aboot the nicht, Jess?"

"A lot of things."

Houston got up, put on his cap and moved toward the door. "Come oot if ye can," he said kindly. "I'm gaun to gi'e ye a great show o' sweet peas for the summer."

She made no reply, and on the threshold he halted and turned. "Wud ye no' try a—a—a pill, dearie?" he asked, with the utmost hesitation and diffidence.

The color rushed to Mrs. Houston's face, and her eyes sparkled. She stamped her foot. "David Houston," she cried, "will you go to your garden when I ask you?"

"But, Jess"—he began.

A plate slipped from her hands and smashed to pieces on the bottom of the sink. "See what you've made me do!" she exclaimed.

"Och, never heed aboot the dish, lass," David stammered at last. "I—I wish ye wud tell me what's troublin' ye."

"I wish you would go when I ask you," said his wife, her lip trembling.

"Weel, I'll gang to please ye," he returned [illegible], "but I wish ye wud tell me what's [illegible]"

He was interrupted by the [illegible]

Continued