

[WRITTEN FOR THE TRUE WITNESS.]

## THORPE CASTLE.

BY ROBERT B. MAY.

Author of "At Rest," "Kindly Light," &amp;c.

To-day the traveller returns. Sitting alone in my own room I can hear the distant hum of preparation. Domestic are flitting about in excited but cheerful toil.

Of all the household, I, only, seem to have no part or share in the general activity. And yet, for how many weeks past has the coming of this same event been counted up on little fingers for my own especial benefit. Little heads have drooped o'er slates and books only to be raised in winsome glee. "Oh, Miss Grace, we cannot work, you know, for brother Fred is coming home so soon." And then they fall to question me about this great, big brother they never, as yet, have seen. Dear hearts, easy enough to answer them. Their part is such a very, very little way backward on the scroll of time. While as for me—shall I tell you something about myself—my present position, and why this usually quiet household seems to have turned suddenly wild with joy.

For twenty years I have been governess and trusted companion in this family. Twenty years ago I came here a poor, ambitious girl, ready to fight the world, of which I had read so much and knew so little, my only weapons health and education. You don't want the old, and oft repeated history, (alas, how trite it is) of family reverses; how the daughter of the late Senior in the banking firm of — had to "go governessing." Neither would you care to hear about my first experiences. Picture, if you can, the day of my arrival here. How well do I remember. It was Christmas Eve. I had travelled all day, and was not sorry to hear my journey would soon be at an end. The directions given, and which I had repeatedly studied, were simple and plain. I was to take the morning express from Euston station as far as Rugby, then I was to change on to the Shropshire main line, which would take me to my destination, a little wayside station called "Thorpe Castle." This, I was given to understand, was a stopping place used only by, and for the accommodation of, the residents of the great house, which was also known by the same name. This being my future home, I read that instructions had been given to "flag" the train, and that the guard would see myself and baggage safely deposited. Also, that the carriage would be there to meet me.

I have omitted all reference to my future duties, neither have I told you how many, or what age were my future pupils. Truth to tell, I was then as much in ignorance as you are now. My final letter of engagement merely stated I was required only as a companion, that accomplishments were needed rather than sterner studies, and I was assured that my position would commend itself in every way to a lady of culture. The salary mentioned was—or so it appeared to me, enormous—so what could I do but accept, thankful, indeed, that Providence had found me a haven of rest at last.

So, behold me, as I alight from the train, a duly appointed unit in the household of Sir Frederick Westmore.

The little station was fairly smothered in a mass of Christmas decorations, holly and fir and mistletoe; the snow glinting brightly on the dark green leaves. Of course, I was the only passenger to arrive, and, being expected, was received with much kindly ceremony by the old man in charge, who appeared to be porter, station-master and everything in one. I afterwards became well acquainted with this original—his name was Salt—and a true and loyal old soul he proved to be.

"Oh, yes, Miss, Sir Frederick's own man is here, with the greys."

He's just been around for the foot-warmer, which her ladyship told him by no means to neglect. Maybe you won't mind sitting down awhile. Its dreadful lonesome coming so far a night like this. And if I might make bold to offer you some tea—and you wouldn't mind drinking from the can. You see, miss, me and my missis we keep the lodge gates on the main drive, and I look after this place when there's any train to stop, which is but seldom, except when the master or young master go to town. "Now, that's

bearty," he continued as I drank, "I do say nobody can beat my missis at brewing tea. Why, master Fred—he often comes down and sits with us to have me splice a fishing-rod or mend a bat, and says he always "Now, Missis Salt, where's that cup of tea, and no matter what's the time, it's there to be had. It aint so sociable-like as beer, maybe, but I do think as the man as invented tea made it for us old folks."

Here the coachman came to say that all was ready for the start. So, in a few moments off we drove, Salt having locked up the little station, seated by the driver on the box. The greys, nothing loath, whirled us rapidly away. We continued on, I should think, for about an hour and then, with a magnificent sweep along the snow clad country road, came to the lodge-gates. These were quickly opened by Mrs. Salt, after a loud rattle from the old man, who told her, as we slowly passed through, that he had me in charge, and would see me safely to the end, as in duty bound. I rather think, however, that Christmas cheer, and the knowledge that he would not be sent empty away, influenced this doughty resolve. Presently he called out, turning round as he did so, "Look, Miss, there's the house, yonder, right through the trees. That's a view that, to my mind, can't be beat in all England, summer nor winter. Don't drive so fast, Thomas, lad, let the lady see all." It was, indeed, a splendid sight, the very perfection of landscape gardening aiding nature in bold and vigorous design. Just now, the effect was almost weird. A thin mantle of snow covered all around, and the ornamental shrubs dotted here and there, in many instances trimmed to fantastic shapes, seemed like sculptured subjects of beasts and birds taken from mythology. Of purpose, too, the drive followed a winding course and new vistas were constantly disclosed.

One such turn caused me to cry out in admiration. We were passing through a dense bank of holly which walled us in, for some distance, on either side. This, however, came to an end and branched off towards the left hand, forming a by-path which gradually widened into a crescent of considerable extent.

Placed in the centre, and in the midst of what, in summer time, must have been a perfect mass of foliage and flowers, appeared a tiny building of pure white marble, so beautifully and so smoothly carved that even the very snow kissed it only in passing to the ground. On graceful columns, supported from the roof, arose the figure of some winged celestial being holding aloft the emblem of all Christian faith. This little gem could not be lightly passed. I sought the check cord, and the carriage stopped. I gazed long and in silence, and then, in reverent tone, I asked the question on my lips. "Oh, that, Miss, that's my lady's chapel."

We pushed on more rapidly now, and shortly Mr. Salt resumed his comments by the way. "There's a heap of company to-night and lots of fun for young and old. The Missis, my lady, she don't think much of parties like, but then there's Master Fred,—and he fifteen this blessed night. And the Doctor's three

daughters, skittish young things they be,—why, bless you, nobody can deny a romp under the mistletoe at such a time. Then there be Professor Weed, and his two sons,—he's great at finding out the insides of flowers. He and Master spend hours pulling things out of the ground by the roots. And there's Miss Twiggins, my wife says she's a lady of uncertain age, but I say her age is very certain. And plenty more. Parson Jones, he be here now, and so be Father Darrell,—oil and wine I call 'em. Well, well, there's room for all, and the more the merrier."

"But the young gentleman's sisters?" I query, "Master Fred's sisters?"

"Beg pardon, Miss, what's that you say? His sisters? Bless if he has any. He's the only chick or child of the house this very minute."

We were getting very close to home now. Who, on earth, then, had I come to teach?

With a splendid dash and clatter we drew up at the handsome porch. The door instantly opened, and down the steps there ran a troupe of laughing boys and girls. Noisily they came, regardless of the drifting snow which played around uncovered heads. Bounding in advance, making straight for the carriage door, and standing there long before old Salt could scramble down,—his hand upon the sill—his face framed in the window sash—his eyes flashing like stars through the crystal frost,—I say, there stood the handsomest, bonniest boy I think I had ever seen.

With a gentle courtesy he helped me to alight, and then with words of welcome echoed by the merry crowd, and surrounded by them all, we passed into the house.

Thus, in such happy, joyous fashion came I here just twenty years ago.

## II.

It was not until some time after the Christmas festivities and the guests, with one or two exceptions, had taken their departure that I found an opportunity to talk seriously to Lady Westmore in regard to my position.

You may imagine my surprise when I found how truly peculiar it was.

The actual family consisted solely of Sir Frederick, his wife and son. Short as my stay had been, the latter already confirmed my first favorable impressions. He it was who had introduced me to his friends, the younger guests, and taken me around the quaint old place, and shown me many rare and curious things. Our intimacy promised to mature in sincere friendship, although, perhaps, a youth of fifteen must appear very much of a boy to a young lady nearly nineteen.

Frederick was, however, tall for his age, and, thanks to tutors, well advanced in all branches of study. He was a manly boy; fond of out-door sports. And then, too, I think that never having had a sister he clung the more to me. A singular trait in the character of one so young was an almost exaggerated sense of what constituted a true point of honour. This refined mentality, so to speak, developed in disaster later on; otherwise this little history would never have been told.

But my first consideration, at this time, was to interview my lady. Kind chance opened the way sooner than I expected. I think I mentioned there were still several guests remaining with us. Among them were Professor Weed and Miss Twiggins, the same people previously spoken of by old Salt. The lady had attached herself to me in return for my kindly endeavour to make her comfortable with the other guests. This was no easy matter, with an elderly spinster on one hand and a company of much younger people on the other. But, happy thought, there was the Professor. So I introduced the pair with most satisfactory results. They discovered that they held many opinions in common, and by good fortune their hobbies trotted them off in opposite directions. Well, as I was passing the morning room, I met Miss Twiggins coming out in a state of (not unusual) distress. "Oh, my dear Miss Hope, you are the very one I want to see. Do you know, the Professor and I have just finished a game of chess, and I won, and he's gone out in a great rage, my dear. So I began to put the men away, and one of the pawns dropped on the floor, and there was darling little Woppy frisking about the room, and when I searched I could not find the piece at all,—and I do believe the little love has swallowed it. He's under the sofa now rolling over and over. Do, please, run to Lady Westmore and ask her what is best to be done. And the Professor wants the return game this afternoon, and if there's a pawn short—oh, my dear, ask for mustard and water *vs. anything!*" I sped away to Lady Westmore's private room and knocked upon the door. On entering I found Sir Frederick and his wife in close conversation.

Ever since my arrival Sir Frederick had treated me with grave kindness. He was a fine, well preserved man of about thirty six years, and seemed always to have an air of self-repression which, somehow, sat not ungracefully upon him. He rose and offered me a chair, himself standing with his arm upon the mantelpiece, looking down upon his wife's face. For a moment there was silence, then her ladyship spoke. "My dear Miss Hope, if, as I presume, you have sought this interview, be assured we have been most anxious to meet you, and were, even now, consulting to that end."

"Let us, in the first place," continued Sir Frederick, speaking instead of his wife, "let us, in the first place, crave your pardon for bringing you here without imparting the full nature of the duties proposed. My dear young lady, 'necessity knows no law'—except that which money can buy. We have the money, and, alas, the necessity exists. You must already have noticed two singular circumstances in relation to ourselves. The one, that at the recent Christmas parties not a single blood relation representing either side of this house was present. The other, our unhappy division of Sabbath observance. Myself, successor to a good old name famous in history of Church and State, worshipping God apart from wife and son. I will not burden you with details, but let me say upon myself alone must fall the blame. I married a Catholic lady, and I married in direct opposition to my family. I was told I had trampled under foot the best traditions of our race and I was, henceforth, cut off and disowned. Amid such distressing recriminations (for be assured I was not slow to assert my own free will) came this gentle lady to share my lot in life. For her sweet sake what sacrifice did I not endure. I was disinherited, at least so far as could be done, and all family correspondence closed with my unworthy self, as it seemed to me, for ever.

Neither the title nor this place could be taken from me. A certain income in my own right, together with my wife's jointure, which she freely placed at my disposal, enabled me to maintain the estate as it is to-day.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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