

LADY MARY--CONTINUED
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regarding visitors whom I was to be allowed to meet could not be disputed by Sir Donald, he well knew. But he determined to see my father's will, and, if anything therein tended to throw doubt upon Lady Mary's word, consult a solicitor in my behalf, and to learn if it might be possible to release me from her guardianship before my coming of age. Three or four days was to be the limit of his absence.

"I had one or two small matters of business to settle in Keswick before starting for London," he said at last, "and so started from home in time to give myself four or five hours at least before my train was to leave."

"I did everything that I had to do, and went at last down to the station, where, just as I was sauntering leisurely up to the booking office to get my ticket, I was accosted by a little boy. There was something familiar to me about his face, but I could not remember where I had seen him, until he stammered out that he had come from the Dark House. Then I recalled that he was a son of the lodgekeeper there.

"He had a note for me, he said, and had come all the way from Sombermere Court to Keswick to find me and had almost given me up. 'She gave me five bob for comin',' he remarked, 'and I got a lift most of the way, but before that I ran.' Naturally I tendered him a few shillings more, and got the note. If I had only known what it contained I should have thought my pockets full of gold scarcely enough for the service he had rendered. But he was evidently afraid that his absence would not be approved at home, and was in such a hurry to be off, that he did not wait until I had broken open the seal on the envelope before he had run away.

"Would you like me to show you the letter, my darling? I shall treasure it so long as I may live."

"Yes," I answered. And he took from his breast-pocket a folded paper, which he read again as I read it, his arm around me, his head against mine.

"My friend," it began, "I pray that this may not be too late to reach you, for there is no other way. I am watched. I cannot leave this house myself, and it is only through the good offices of Trout, the housekeeper—now devoted to Eve's interests—that I have any hope of despatching this to you at Keswick, where I know you mean to spend a few hours before you go on your mission to London.

"My precious child has been enticed away by a base trick. Miss Cade had promised to drive here into town. At the last moment I was horrified to see Valentine Graeme jump into the dog cart, and whip up the horse, without giving Eve a chance to escape—as she was evidently most anxious to do.

"I saw it all from a window, and at once suspected a plot. Valentine Graeme will force her into a marriage, if he can. He has kidnapped her, I know, and I should have had no means of guessing where he could have taken her had it not been for Trout—whom I make a point of consulting upon most issues now. She has even acted as spy at my behest on more than one occasion.

"The man will take Eve to her sister's house, she believes—a lonely farm known as Stony Grange, only a few miles from Keswick. Anyone could direct you, she thinks, if you mention the name—which is unfavorably, but well-known in Keswick. It seems that most of Valentine Graeme's childhood was passed at the place, and it appears to me that there is another mystery in this. At all events, there is the spot of all others to look for Eve, Trout assures me. And it will be useless for you to go alone, for there is a farmhand—a relative of the family—who is a veritable giant in size and strength. I know that you are reckless—that you do not think of yourself; but I implore you, think of Eve, and do not risk being defeated in an attempt to save her.

"I need not urge you to this undertaking, I am sure. You have only to hear of my poor defenceless girl's danger to go to her aid. And my prayers will go with you. Somehow—as

soon as you can find means, for Heaven's sake let me know how your attempt has fared. I shall not sleep, I shall not touch food, I shall scarcely live, until I hear. Tidings may be sent me through Trout—Yours, A. R."

Never had I seen Mrs. Rayne's handwriting before, yet I knew almost before I had begun to read, that the letter was from her. Had it not been for her love and devotion, then, even Donald could not have saved me. He would have gone away from Keswick unconscious of my peril, hoping to bring me news on his return which—whatever it might have been—would have come too late.

I hardly dared to think of what my fate would have been had it not been for Donald's dash to the rescue; but I felt a cold conviction that Valentine Graeme would have succeeded in carrying out his plan to make me his wife. So unscrupulous was he, so completely had I been in his power and that of his servants, that escape would only have been possible—without aid—through death.

"Thank God, and you, and Mrs. Rayne," I cried, shuddering and clinging to him, and dwelling with a horrible sense of fear and fascination on the great peril through which I had passed. "I never have been able to understand why poor Mrs. Rayne loved me so. I did not care much about her until lately. I have hardly been grateful at all. But now I shall never, never doubt her again."

"No, never doubt her again," Donald echoed gravely. But when I looked up at him questioningly, his eyes did not meet mine.

"In spite of what Mrs. Rayne's letter told me about the farm known as Stony Grange," he went on, "I was not able to find anyone who could give me explicit directions as to how to reach it, not even at the post office, where I was told they never received any letters for a place by that name.

"One—twice—I was sent off on a wild-goose chase. I had gone on ahead myself on a good horse I hired of a man I know in Keswick (hence the riding-whip, with which I was able, I am glad to say, to do some execution), and the two men followed with the brougham, in which I meant to take you away, once I had got you safely under my charge.

"I thought at first of appealing to the police, and having Graeme arrested as a kidnapper, but I feared delay and 'red tape,' and, besides, I did not want to see you the heroine of a scandal and a 'nine days' wonder' in the country-side. I felt some confidence in myself, and I believed I should be able to do the thing alone, or, at least, without any help but that of my own men.

It was five o'clock when I got Mrs. Rayne's letter, and nearly two hours passed before I was at length able to find Stony Grange, which, it seems, has been ostentatiously re-named of late years, a fact which would account for much of my trouble.

"It was very dark, and I had left my horse outside the gates, meaning to reconnoitre within, when there came a great barking of dogs. I was a little disconcerted at first, thinking I had been discovered, and fearing my plans might suffer defeat, when I heard your voice calling out for help, my darling. Then I forgot everything else, and stumbled along through the darkness as fast as I could, with a shout to my fellows to follow, and was thankful when I could begin to guide my steps by the light from a window in the house. It was not much, but it brought me to you just in time, and the rest you know."

"Up to the present," I said, blissfully resting my head upon his shoulder, feeling as if I must have known and loved him all my life, and telling myself that now I had him to protect me there could be nothing but happiness ahead. "But I want to know more—I want to know how you are going to keep me from going back to the dreadful life I have led at the Dark House in the future? For, though I think I love, and know I am fascinated by my stepmother, and cannot bring myself to believe she had a hand in this, still, the thought of returning