

The Peril of Nancy Mayland

By ELLEN LEYS.

IT was very late—past eight o'clock—but still the typewriter was clicking rapidly. The typist looked pale and weary; dark marks were showing under her tired blue eyes, and her slender form drooped over the machine.

The door of the little room off the main office opened, and a man entered. Nancy Mayland glanced up, and a tell-tale flush spread over her cheeks as she saw who he was.

"I am most awfully sorry to have kept you so late, Miss Mayland," he said, coming over to her. "I did not realize how the time was going. You must be simply exhausted."

"Oh, it doesn't matter, thank you, Mr. Anderson," she answered. "I've just done."

"The other clerks have all gone," the young man went on. "There has been a great deal of extra work to-day."

"And Mr. Forbes's absence throws it all on you. If I am tired, what must you be?"

The young man's face lighted up at her sympathetic tone. "Well, I am feeling rather done," he admitted. "You see, although I am nominally his head clerk, Mr. Forbes does not take me fully into his confidence, and so I have had to deal with a lot of correspondence about matters of which I know very little." His voice lowered a little, and he bent nearer the girl. "Do you know, Miss Mayland, it's rather odd, this absence of his. He has not been at the office all this week, and though, of course, I haven't said anything about it, I haven't had a word from him."

The typist looked up in astonishment. "What a queer thing for him to do!" she exclaimed.

Just then a step sounded in the outer office.

"Who on earth can that be?" said Anderson, and, springing to his feet, he threw open the door and looked out.

"Why, Mr. Forbes!" the girl heard him exclaim.

"Hullo, Anderson," came the response, in tones which made the girl say to herself, "He's in a rage."

Mordaunt Forbes, the wealthy stockbroker, in whose office Jim Anderson and Nancy Mayland were employed, was a man of very violent temper. His clerks dreaded the whirlwind gusts of fury that sometimes overpowered him, and had learnt to read the signs of their coming. Nancy sprang to her feet, put her table in order hastily, pinned her simple felt hat on to her golden-brown hair, and slipped on her coat. She could not hear all that Mr. Forbes was saying, but a few words she caught told her that he was annoyed at the office being kept open until this hour. She was glad to be able to slip through the outer room without attracting more than an angry glance from Mr. Forbes.

She shivered as she went into the dense, cold fog outside, and twisted her fur stole more closely round her neck. She made her way along the pavement to the corner where the omnibus she usually took stopped, and stood under a lamp-post to wait for one.

A step behind her made her glance round. A man was close beside her. He lifted his hat.

"Miss Mayland, you must let me see you home to-night," Anderson said. "It is so foggy, it's really not safe for you to be out alone. You don't mind?"

The pleading note in his voice brought a quick blush to her cheeks. "Of course not, Mr. Anderson," she said, softly. "But it's quite out of your way."

"What has that to do with it?" he said, looking down into the lovely face. Then he added: "I have for some time been seeking an opportunity to ask if I might call on your mother, or whoever it is you are with."

The girl's blush deepened. "I live alone," she said. "My father and mother are dead, and I have no relations in London."

"Poor child!" he said, softly. Then he added: "I, too, am all alone."

The girl glanced up. It was a good face that looked down on her; the mouth firm yet tender, the eyes deep-set and honest.

For a few minutes the two stood silent.

At last Anderson spoke. "There does not seem to be an omnibus coming," he said. "Please let me get a hansom."

Nancy looked almost frightened. "Oh, Mr. Anderson, it would cost an awful lot! I live ever so far away in Bloomsbury, at Connaught House."

"That big ladies' boarding-house? I know. That's not so very far."

A policeman's figure loomed out of the darkness.

"Could you get us a cab, constable?" asked Anderson. "We were waiting for the 'bus, but it doesn't seem to be coming."

"I don't think you'll get the 'bus to-night, sir," said the man. "This is one of the worst fogs I've seen. But I'll see if I can get you a hansom." He disappeared into the darkness again.

The two young people, left standing under the lamp, began to talk. Anderson soon found that Nancy was very fond of taking long walks, a taste he shared.

"Why shouldn't we have one together some day?" he said. "We could take the train into the country and have a good tramp."

"It would be lovely," cried Nancy.

"You'd enjoy it?"

The girl's face answered him.

"Then let us. We could start early and get back by tea-time. Lunch at a country inn and have tea at Lyons', or whatever you like. Will you?"

"I'd love to!" murmured Nancy, with a happy little laugh.

"Let's go to-morrow if it's fine. Forbes has given us a holiday as we've worked so hard to-day. Shall we?"

And reading consent in her eyes, Anderson went on: "Where shall we go? It's awfully nice out in Buckinghamshire in the winter. We could take the train to Denham or Gerard's Cross, and make a round. Would you like that?"

"It would be lovely."

"Then I will meet you at Marylebone to-morrow. There's a good train at a quarter-past eleven. I'll be there by eleven."

"And so will I," she answered. "Is that someone coming?"

Anderson looked around. A form was close beside them, but as he turned it melted into darkness. The fog was getting thicker every minute. Then he heard a voice hailing.

"Are you there, sir? I've got a taxi."

The policeman appeared, the welcome red motor close beside him. In another minute they were seated side by side, and being whirled away into the gloom together.

THE next day a bright sun was shining, and Nancy's heart beat joyfully as she set out to keep her appointment. She was looking charming, clad in a short walking skirt, warm coat, and stout boots, with a little fur cap perched on her lovely hair. She reached Marylebone just after eleven, and took up her stand under the big clock.

The minutes passed slowly till the time was near for the train to go, and still there was no sign of Anderson. Her blue eyes filled with tears in spite of herself. Her disappointment was very keen.

A man, a perfect stranger to her, approached, raising his cap. He was clad as if for motoring.

"Excuse me, but are you Miss Mayland?" he said.

"That's my name," she answered, wondering.

"I'm afraid I have very bad news for you. Mr. Anderson—"

"Oh, what has happened to him?"

The man hesitated. "I was in my motor-car, and going rather fast, I'm afraid, and he suddenly ran out in front of me—"

The girl turned white. "Is he—is he—dead?" she asked, in a low, strained whisper.

"No, but he is very badly hurt. I took him to a hospital, and he asked me to come and explain his absence to you, and ask you if you would mind going to see him."

"Of course I will."

"Then would you come with me?" I have my car here, and I can take you very quickly."

For answer she moved in the direction of the street. The stranger led her to where a large closed motor-car was standing, and handed her in. He shut the door behind her and sprang into the driver's seat.

They set off at tremendous speed, but Nancy scarcely noticed it. The shock had opened her eyes, and she knew that she had given Anderson her heart. She loved him—and he was hurt, dying, perhaps! Leaning back against the soft cushions she let her grief find outlet in a flood of bitter tears.

After a while the stormy sobs ceased, and she began to wonder at the lapse of time. She glanced at the watch on her wrist. It was more than half an hour since they had left the station. Surely they ought to have reached the hospital?

She looked out of the window. They were flying along a road bordered by hedges. What did this mean?

With a sudden access of fear she lowered the window and called out to the driver. He did not

answer, and the car never stopped. They whirled on, through a village, then out on to a broad road that ran through open country.

"Was it a trap? But why should anyone entrap her? The motor was moving much too fast for her to attempt to spring out, and the driver paid no heed to her cries."

At last the car rushed through a large gate, up a broad drive, and then stopped before the entrance to a house. Perhaps this was the hospital. She opened the door and sprang out. Two men were standing at the foot of a wide flight of steps. They strode forward and seized her by the wrists. In vain she struggled; she was overpowered, carried up the steps, through a spacious hall, up a long flight of stairs, and then pushed inside a room and the door locked behind her.

It was a secure prison in which she found herself. The window was small, and protected by stout iron bars. The furniture was of the scantiest. A cot bed, a small table, a chair, a wash-stand—that was all.

Nancy sat down on the bed and tried to collect her scattered thoughts. Why should she be imprisoned like this? Could she have been mistaken for someone else? No, the man had spoken to her by name. The mystery was too deep for her to solve.

The windows were too high for her to see out of it, and the door was stout. The prison was very strong. Escape seemed impossible.

After about an hour she heard steps coming along the corridor. They stopped, and she went over to the door, but to her surprise, the handle was not turned. She heard a door open further down the passage, the sound of voices, then the turning of a key. Next minute her own door was unlocked.

One of the men who had brought her in entered with a tray, on which was a plate of cold meat, bread, cheese, and a glass of water. He left her to make a frugal meal and then returned. He made no answer to her questions as to the reason of her imprisonment, but took up the tray and went out, locking and barring the door. She listened intently, and heard him go on a little way and then open another door, as he had done when he came with the dinner.

Was there, then, another prisoner shut up in the room next to her? It seemed like it. She went up to the wall and beat on it with her clenched fists, hoping that her comrade in distress might hear and answer. She shouted aloud, but no response came. After a little she took off her boot and hammered on the wall with its heel. Soon after she stopped an answering knock came.

So she had a fellow-captive. Who was it! she wondered. Could she communicate with him or her? She must try and find some means. The wall was too stout for her to make a hole through it.

Supper was brought her in the same way, and that night she slept soundly—to her surprise. The same man brought her breakfast. This time he set a tray down on the floor outside, and brought in her cup of tea and plate of bread and butter without a tray. The other prisoner's food was lying out there. Could she slip a letter in among the bread and butter? Not now—the man was already going—but next time she might try.

After breakfast she wrote a little note on the back of an old letter that she had in her pocket with a scrap of pencil. It ran: "I am Nancy Mayland. I have been imprisoned here—I don't know why. Could we communicate and make a plan of escape? Do you know the Morse code? I don't; but if you do, tap A on the wall, and so on till I learn it."

A TRAY was brought in at lunch time, but in the evening she got her chance. As the man set down her bread and butter she said:

"Is there a crack in that window? There seems to be a dreadful draught."

He went over to examine it, and while his back was turned she stepped noiselessly to the half-open door and slipped her note in among the slices of bread on the plate on the tray. By the time her gaoler looked around she was back in her former place.

The man said, "Nothing wrong with the window," and went out unsuspecting. Nancy could hardly eat, she was so excited.

Soon after the man had come back for her plate and then gone, a sharp tap followed by a long one sounded on the wall. She tapped back with the heel of her boot. Another combination was then rapped out, and so on through the alphabet. She wrote

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