

'Don't tell me anything more, Mrs. Dempsey, dear,' laughed Netta, a trifle uneasily, 'or I'll be afraid to go home at all, even with Bran. Why, it has grown dark!' as she stepped from Mrs. Dempsey's brightly lit kitchen into the blackness of the mid-winter night. She shivered a little. Something had surely unnerved her—perhaps it was that unexpected meeting with Godfrey but a little while before. Had she been foolish to refuse his offer of an escort after all?

She said good-bye to her old friend and hurried off in the darkness, which, after a few moments, when the moon had drifted again through the clouds, did not seem quite so dreadfully black and impenetrable. Re-assured by the now very welcome company of Bran, her courage soon began to return; she determined that after all she might venture to go back through the woods, since the way by the road would be almost a full mile longer.

She crossed the stile, therefore, into the wood, and made her way along—more through life-long familiarity with the path than through any sure clearness of vision—till she got about half way through. Once or twice she had an eerie, frightened kind of feeling that someone was following her at some distance behind. But she could see nothing, and became satisfied after a time that it was again only a case of 'nerves,' and that the footsteps she thought she heard at a distance behind her were only the rustling of the wind through the leaves. Besides, Bran was with her, and if there should be anybody about—

But at that moment the dog gave a deep, low growl and leaped quickly in front of her. At the same instant someone struck a match, and poor Netta had a momentary and most terrifying vision of two grinning evil-looking faces that leered at her out of the darkness.

'Hand over your purse, my pretty, and we won't trouble you any further,' said the one nearest to her.

'But I haven't a purse—I brought out no money with me,' faltered Netta, falling back in terror from the malevolent looking faces that mercifully disappeared from her gaze for a moment as the match flickered suddenly out.

'We'll soon find out, Missie, whether you have or not,' snarled one of them, laying a hand roughly on her shoulder.

Netta gave a scream, and as she did so Bran, who had all this time been bristling and growling, suddenly flew at the fellow's throat. Then a sound of footsteps came racing swiftly behind her, and in a moment Godfrey's voice the most welcome sound she had ever heard, she thought shouted angrily at her way-layers:

'What do you mean, you hounds? How dare you molest a lady like this. Dare lay another hand on her and I'll shoot the both of you dead!' Indeed he already had the gun poised, ready to fire.

But the two miscreants cowered miserably before him. 'Don't shoot us, sir,' they cried, 'and for God's sake will you call this damned dog of yours off. Sure we had no intention of frightening the young lady—we only asked her for a copper or two.'

Godfrey looked from one to the other in disgust, then back again at Netta's frightened face. Something in its look of appeal brought him to a sudden decision.

'Be off with you, you pair of the greatest scoundrels unhung,' he cried, 'and be thankful that either of you escape with a whole skin. You will not, however, escape the clutches of the law so easily, I feel sure,' and he expedited the departure of each with a kick, well directed and unerringly aimed.

As soon as they had slunk out of sight and hearing, he turned to Netta with arms outstretched, in an attitude of protecting tenderness.

'Netta, you poor little frightened girlieen,' he said softly.

But instead of coming towards him, she laid her cheek against the silvery bark of a beech tree and began to cry silently and piteously.

'Don't cry, dear,' he pleaded. 'I can guess how frightened you felt, but you know you should have let me come. I felt it wasn't safe for you to be out so late alone, especially when these stories of house-breaking and highway robbery in the neighborhood. But at least I am glad you had Bran.'

'It was you who sent him after me, then?' she asked with a look of sudden enlightenment. The moon had come out from behind the clouds, and all at once Netta's tears ceased.

'Yes, it was all I could do when you wouldn't let his master come also. And then—I tried to keep as close behind you in the wood as I could without frightening you, though I felt a good deal angry with you all the time. You might have accepted my escort,' reproachfully.

'But why should I? I meant to stay quite a good while at Mrs. Dempsey's, and then—your—your wife might have been wondering at your long absence.'

'My wife, Netta! My wife!' he cried in dumb-founded amazement, and laughed half-incredulously.

'Yes?' she queried. 'Aren't you married by this? I heard you had gone to Paris with Julia and your fiancée for the wedding.'

He looked puzzled a moment, then laughed, yet more loudly and boyishly than before.

'With Julia and her fiancée, you must have heard—and misunderstood,' he explained. 'You should know, of course, that Julia was engaged to Henri Dumont, Estelle's only brother, for the last year and a-half, and they were married a fortnight ago in London—a very happy as well as a wealthy marriage it will prove for my sister, I hope and believe. That was why we were so much taken up with Estelle, and Henri, too, when he came. I'm glad the wedding is happily over, for it was a great tie and a bit of a bore having to show them around so much, and Julia made sure to keep my nose to the grinding stone. She always did.'

'You must be very lonely for her, I'm sure,' ventured Netta, who was now walking home quite cheerfully and undismayed beside her big, manly escort, who had tucked her arm possessively through his.

'Lonely for Julia?' he asked, with a look amused and comically doubtful. 'Well, I'd hardly call it lonely, exactly, though the house does seem so quiet and still and peaceful without her bustling and managing ways. But I have been feeling very lonely for somebody else,' he said earnestly, and in the pale moonlight filtering down through the leafless trees she knew that his eyes were tenderly seeking her own.

'You know whom I mean, little Netta,' he went on. 'And, oh,' sadly, 'if only I were not such a pauper—if I only dared speak to your father—'

Netta's heart all at once began to quiver with a strange, unhopd-for happiness.

'Papa has plenty of money,' she said, tremulously, almost in a whisper, 'and if you only knew how fond he is of you —'

'Is he, dear? And are you?' he whispered back, softly.

'What do you think?' asked Netta, with her shyest and most adorable smile. And then, just as she had laid her sweet face a while ago against the bark of a silvery birch, she now laid her cheek against his—but this time not to weep. —NORA TYNAN-O'MAHONY, in the *Weekly Freeman*.

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