

MY LADY OF DOUBT

By Randall Parrish

"You must pardon my roughness," I apologized, "but there was no time for ceremony."

She smiled, a flood of color coming back into the clear cheeks, as she drew slightly away.

"I appreciate that, sir," frankly, shaking out her ruffled skirts, "and you have made knighthood real."

"Then," I ventured, "may I hope to receive the reward, fair lady?"

She laughed, a little tremor of nervousness in the sound, but her eyes full of challenge.

"And what is that?"

"Your name; the hope of better acquaintance."

Her eyes swept my uniform questioningly.

"You are not of the garrison?"

"No; a courier just arrived from New York."

"Yet an officer; surely then you will be present tonight?"

"The privilege is mine; if sufficient temptation I may attend."

"Tempted! How, sir?"

"By your pledging me a dance."

She laughed again, one hand grasping the long skirt.

"You ask much—my name, a better acquaintance, a dance—all this for merely saving me from a mob. You are not a modest knight, I fear. Suppose I refuse?"

"Then am I soldier enough to come unasked, and win my welcome?"

"I thought as much," the long lashes opening up to me the depths of the blue eyes. "I promise nothing then, nor forbid. But there is Captain Grant seeking me. If I do not speak of gratitude, it is nevertheless in my heart, sir; she swept me a courtesy, to which I bowed but in hand, and now an envoy."

I stood as she left me, staring while she crossed the lawn and a dark-faced officer of Rangers. Once she glanced back over her shoulder, and then disappeared in the crowd of revelers.

I had not intended to remain in Philadelphia through the night. Already I had secured the information sought, and now must consider the safest and quickest method of escape.

It seemed to me this night, given up to revelry, afforded the best possible opportunity for my safely passing the British guard lines. Tomorrow discipline would be resumed, the soldiers

caught her—the animal dashing forward beneath the double burden into the open field.

"Would return to their posts and the citizens of the city would again appear on the streets. This would greatly intensify my danger, for, at any moment, I might encounter some one who knew me, who might denounce me to the authorities."

That this was the exact truth of the situation could not be denied, yet, now, every reckless impulse of my disposition urged me to remain; the challenge I read in the lady's fair face, the unsolved mystery of her identity, all combined in a temptation I found it impossible to resist. For a dance with her, a possible understanding, I was willing to venture life itself.

It must have been nearly nine o'clock when, in company with a young cornet, I rode up to the house given up to festivities, and, turning over our horses to the care of cavalry grooms, climbed the wide steps to the door leading into the hall.

All was a riot of color, rich, bewildering, with smiling faces, and laughing lips everywhere. In such a spot, amid such surroundings, war seemed a dream, a far-off delirium.

My companion disappeared, and, to escape the pressure of those surging back and forth through the wide doorway, I found passage close to the wall, and half circled the room, finally discovering a halting place in the recesses of a window, where, partially concealed myself by flowing curtains, I could gaze out over the brilliant assemblage. Half ashamed of the plainness of my own attire, and feeling a stranger and an alien, I was yet consciously seeking the one face which had lured me there.

Enough conversation reached me to disclose a promised display of fireworks on the lawn, and almost immediately a magnificent bouquet of rockets shot up into the black sky, illuminating everything with a glare of fire. This was followed by the lighting up of the triumphal arch, and the bursting of balloons high overhead. Attracted by the spectacle, I was staring out at the dazzling scene, when a voice spoke at my shoulder.

"It is a relief to see even one soldier present ready for duty."

I turned to look into a pair of steady blue eyes, with a bit of mocking laugh-

ter in their depths, the face revealed clearly in the glare of the rockets.

"Necessity only," I managed to reply. "I can be as gorgeous as these others, had I brought a bag with me."

"No doubt; every British regiment tries to outdo the others in ribbons and gold lace. Really they become tiresome with such foppery in war times. See how they play tonight, like children, the city practically unguarded from attack," she waved an ungloved hand toward the dark without. "I venture there are men out yonder, sir, who are not dancing and laughing away these hours."

My cheeks burned.

"You mean Washington's troops?"

"Aye! I saw them here in Philadelphia before Sir William came," her voice lowered, yet earnest, "and they are not playing at war; grim, silent, sober-faced men, dressed in odds and ends, not pretty to look at; some tattered and hungry, but they fight hard. Mr. Conway was telling us yesterday of how they suffered all winter long, while we danced and feasted here, Washington himself sleeping with the snow drifting over him. You do not know the Americans, for you are not long across the water, but they are not the kind to be conquered by such child's play as this."

"You are an American, then?"

"By birth, yes," unhesitatingly. "We are of those loyal to the king, but—I admire men."

It was with an effort I restrained my words, eager to proclaim my service, yet comprehending instantly that I dare not even trust this plain-spoken girl with the truth. She respected the men, sympathized with the sacrifices of Washington's little army, contracted all they endured with the prodigality of the English and Hessian troops, and remained loyal to the king's cause. Even as I hesitated she spoke again.

"What is your regiment?"

"The Forty-second Foot."

"You have not yet been in action in America?"

"No, but I have just crossed the Jerseys with dispatches."

She shook her head, her cheeks glowing.

"My home was there when the war began," she explained simply. "Now it is hate, pillage and plunder everywhere. We fled to Philadelphia for our lives, and have almost forgotten we ever had a home. We loyalists are paying a price almost equal to those men with Washington. 'Tis this memory which makes me so bitter toward those who play amid the ruins."

"Yet you have seemed to enter into the gay spirit of the occasion," and my eyes swept over her costume.

"Oh, I am girl enough to enjoy the glitter, even while the woman in me condemns it all. You are a soldier—a fighting soldier, I hope—and still you are here also seeking pleasure."

"True; I yielded to temptation, but for which I should never have come."

"What?"

"The date in your eyes this afternoon," I said boldly. "But for what I read there I should be out yonder riding through the night."

She laughed, yet not wholly at ease, the long lashes drooping over her eyes.

"Always the woman; what would you do without my sex to bear your mistakes?"

"But was this a mistake? Did I read altogether wrong?"

"Don't expect a confession from me, sir," demurely. "I have no memory of any promise."

"No, the barest suggestion was all your lips gave; it was the eyes that challenged."

"You must have dreamed; perhaps you recall the suggestion?"

"I took it to mean that you would not be altogether averse to meeting me again through the kindness of some mutual friend."

"No doubt you have found such a friend?"

"I have scarcely seen a face I know tonight," I pleaded. "I cannot even guess from what place of mystery you appeared so suddenly. So now I throw myself upon your mercy."

"I wonder is it quite safe?" hesitatingly. "But, perhaps, the risk is equally great on your part. Ah! the lights go on again."

"And the band plays a Hungarian waltz; how better could we cement friendship than to that measure?"

"You think so? I am not so sure, and there are many names already on my card."

"Do not look," I interrupted swiftly, "for I claim first choice since this afternoon."

"You do?" and her eyes laughed into mine provokingly. "And I had forgotten it all; did I indeed promise you?"

"Only with your eyes."

"Oh, my eyes! I was almost blind, well, for once, at least, I will redeem that visionary pledge," and her glance swept the room hastily. "But I advise that you accept my surrender quickly, sir—I am not sure but this was Captain Grant's dance, and he is coming now."

CHAPTER IV.

The Beginning of Trouble.

Her hand was in mine, my arm already around her waist, when the officer bowed before us. He had been but a dim figure in the afternoon, but now I saw him for a tall, slender man, somewhat swarthy of face, with black hair and moustache, and a keen eye, attired in the green and white of the

Queen's Rangers. He smiled, but with a sarcastic curl to the upper lip not altogether pleasant.

"Your pardon, Mistress Claire," he said boldly, sweeping me with a supercilious glance, "but am I mistaken in believing this walk was pledged to me?"

"By mistake, captain," her lips smiling, her eyes steady. "It seems I overlooked a promise made during the afternoon."

"Oh, indeed," he turned toward me, staring insolently. "The hero of the rescue, I presume."

I felt the restraining pressure of her hand upon my sleeve, and her voice replied calmly, before I succeeded in finding words.

"This is the gentleman who protected me from the mob, if that is what you mean. Permit me to present Captain Grant of the Queen's Rangers, Lieutenant—pardon my having already forgotten your name."

"Fortesque," I stammered, intensely hating the necessary deception.

"Ah, yes—Lieutenant Fortesque of the Forty-second British Foot."

We bowed coldly, neither extending a hand, the captain twisting his moustache as he continued staring at me.

"Fortesque," he repeated slowly. "Fortesque; not of this garrison, I believe."

"No, from New York," coolly. "I regret having interfered with your program."

"Don't mention it; there are other ladies present, and no doubt, your gallant act was worthy the reward; a pleasant evening, sir," and he withdrew aside, stiffly military. Eager to lose as little as possible of the measure, I swung my partner forward, catching glimpse again of the man's face as we circled.

"Pleasant disposition," I ventured, without meaning to be uncivil.

"Oh, very," and her eyes met mine frankly. "But you must not quarrel with him; that is his one specialty, you know."

"Is the warning on your account, or my own?"

"Both, perhaps. Captain Grant's family and mine are neighbors—or were before war intervened—and between our fathers exists a life-long friendship. I could never consent to be the cause of his quarreling with anyone, and I have reason to know how quick tempered he is."

"I have little use for any man who swaggers about seeking trouble," I retorted.

"My brother—my twin brother on the staff of General Lee."

"Did you not inform me your family were loyalists?"

"Yes; it is true," earnestly, her foot tapping the floor, as though annoyed at such persistent questioning. "I have a father and brother in the king's service—but one is a renegade, and I—I—"

"You are what?"

"I am merely a woman, sir, unable to determine whether to finally become loyalist or rebel."

I looked gravely into her eyes until they fell, veiling their revelation of truth behind long lashes.

"Mistress Mortimer," I murmured, bending so close to her pink ear, I felt the soft touch of her hair on my lips, "you dissemble so charmingly as to even puzzle me. But if I leave you now, as you request, I must first have promise of welcome again."

"Then you mean to return—a prisoner? I am always merciful to the suffering."

"No; we are coming back to Philadelphia victors, and soon. I am not afraid to tell you. I have learned much today, and go back to report to Washington that the exchange of British commanders means the early evacuation of the city. When we meet again you will not be a lady of the Blended Rose, nor will I be wearing this uniform."

Her eyes sparkled brightly into mine, then dropped demurely.

"I—rather like the colors you are wearing now, and am sure this dress is most becoming. I—I have a passion for masquerade."

"I recognize that, but have already discovered where I can read the truth beyond the masque—what is occurring now?"

She turned to look, attracted as I had been by the change and bustle about us. A few feet from where we stood conversing, large folding doors, previously concealed by draperies, were suddenly flung wide open, revealing a magnificent dining hall. Dazzled by the magnificent spectacle, I turned to my companion, unable to resist temptation. She must have instantly read the purpose in my face, for she grasped my sleeve.

"No; you must not think of remaining a moment longer. There will be a seat reserved for me, and Captain Grant is coming this way now. Something is wrong, I am sure; I have no time to explain, but promise me you will leave here at once—at once."

Her eyes, her words, were so insistent I could not refuse, although as I glanced about I felt convinced there was no danger in this assemblage, not a familiar face meeting mine. At the instant Grant came up, elbowing his way through the press, and staring insolently into my eyes, even as he bowed politely to the lady beside me.

"At least this is my privilege," he insisted, "unless there be another previous engagement of which I am ignorant."

"Oh, no," and she rested her hands on the green sleeve, smiling from his face into mine. "We were waiting for you to come. Goodnight, Lieutenant Fortesque."

They had taken a step or two, when Grant halted, holding her arm tightly

as he glanced back to where I stood.

"Would Lieutenant Fortesque spare me a moment after I have found the lady a seat?" he questioned politely.

"Gladly, if you do not keep me waiting too long."

"Then there will be no delay. Shall we say the parlor below?"

I moved, conscious of the mute appeal in the lady's face, yet with no excuse for refusal.

"As well there as anywhere, sir."

Once again we bowed with all the punctilious ceremony of mutual dislike, and he whispered something into her ear as they disappeared in the stream of people. My cheeks burned with indignation at his cool insolence. What could it mean? Was he merely seeking a guard? Or was there some-

thing else concealed behind this request? In either case I knew not how to act, and yet felt no inclination to avoid the meeting. Studying over the situation I pushed my way through the crowd across the floor of the ballroom. There were a few people still lingering on the stairs, but, except for the servants, the parlors below were deserted. I walked the length of one of the great rooms, and halted in front of a fireplace to await Grant's coming. I was eager to have this affair settled, and be off. I comprehended now the risk I had assumed by remaining so long, and began to feel the cords of entanglement drawing about me. There was a door opposite where I stood, and, starting toward it, I saw it open slightly, and, back in the darkness, the beckoning of a hand. Startled, yet realizing that it must mean me, I stepped closer, gripping the hilt of my sword, half suspecting treachery.

"Quick," and I recognized the deep contralto of the voice. "Don't stop to question; there is not a moment to lose."

CHAPTER V.

The Threat of Swords.

Stepping from the glare of those gleaming parlor lights into the gloom of that narrow passage, blinded me for the instant, yet a moment later, I became aware of the distant glimmer of a candle, the faint reflection revealing the girl's face.

"Please do not talk; do not ask anything—yet," she urged hurriedly, noiselessly closing the door at my back, and as instantly gripping my sleeve. Her breath came quickly; her voice trembled from suppressed excitement. "Come with me, beyond the light yonder."

I followed her guidance, bewildered, yet having every confidence the reason for this mysterious occurrence must be fully justified. The passage curved slightly, terminating at a closed door. Scarce a reflection of the candle reached us here, yet my eyes were by now sufficiently accustomed to the gloom so that I could trace the outlines of her face. A vague doubt took possession of me.

"You are causing me to run away from Grant," I protested blindly. "You are making me appear afraid to meet him."

"No, it is not that," swiftly. "He was not coming to you personally at all—you were to be arrested."

"What! He knew me then?"

"I am not sure—some one did, and mentioned his suspicions. Captain Grant was glad enough of an excuse, no doubt, but he, the soft voice faltering, "he made a mistake in twitting me for being friendly toward you."

"And you came to warn, to save me!" I exclaimed, pressing her hand.

"That was nothing; I could do no less. I am only glad I knew the way."

"You mean how you might reach me first?"

"Yes; if came to me in a flash when he first left me alone, only I was not certain in which parlor you would be waiting. I ran through the kitchen and down the back stairs; I helped him."

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the officers plan their decorations, and in that way learned of this private passage beneath the stairs. It was easy, but—oh, listen! they are in there now!"

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"I do believe you; I could not connect you with deceit, but I am bewildered at this sudden exposure. Does Captain Grant also suspect my identity?"

"I think not—not yet, at least, for if he did you would be under arrest. But there are others here who would recognize you just as I have. There is no mystery about it. I was in Philadelphia when the Continental troops were here, and you were pointed out to me then. No, we have never met, yet I was sure I recognized you this afternoon."

"I was pointed out to you by whom?"

"My brother—my twin brother on the staff of General Lee."

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