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The Daughter of David Kerr

By Harry King Tootle

Illustrations By Ray Walters

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Gloria understood that there was no time to temporize. She must do something and that quickly. Close by where she stood next the bed, and on the side away from the door, was Little Ella's trunk. Behind it on hooks hung a number of garments, and on a chair were more clothes. It was the only chance and Gloria took it.

How she ever maneged to get him, a dead weight, across the intervening space and safely stowed behind the trunk she never knew. She dragged, she hauled, she pulled, she rolled, and the forlorn hope that she would save him yet gave her strength. As she snatched skirts from the hooks and all the clothing from the chair to pile upon him, the pounding upon the door became more and more vindictive. The girl was out of breath, but as she bent over the prostrate form of the man she loved, she managed to gasp.

"Joe, listen to me. If you can hear me, dear, listen. Don't stir, don't you hear me, Joe?" But he was deaf to all entreaties. Seeing this was so, she turned to Little Ella: "Get him to go away. Offer him anything, promise him anything. I'll do it; only keep that man on the other side of that door."

"There's at least two of 'em."

"That doesn't matter—a thousand—it's all the same. Get them to go away."

This was easier said than done, but Little Ella was willing to make the effort.

"You git away from that door, an' leave me alone."

"Open this door, you she-devil," threatened the besieger, "or I'll—"

And then interrupted another voice with a suggestion that made Gloria grow faint.

"Aw! Let's bust it in. He's in there all right."

"Let 'er go," answered the first one.

Then came the heavy thuds as the men threw themselves against the door. The knocking at the gate in "Macbeth" had no more portentious sound in the play than had this attack upon her stronghold to Gloria. She felt all the nervousness of troops under fire that must remain inactive awaiting orders. There was nothing she could do but wait until the door was battered down.

This was not long in happening. As she stood in front of the trunk nervously twisting her handkerchief in her hands, at one last mighty effort the bolt yielded, the door flew open and two men stumbled into the room. Little Ella recognized them both instantly. They were Buck Kelly and Turkey Ryan, notorious denizens of the underworld. If ever there were two vicious-looking cutthroats, these men answered their descriptions. To make their ruffianly appearance worse they bore the marks of their recent encounter. Kelly's left eye had swelled almost closed, and Ryan had a long cut across his cheek where Wright's ring had left its mark with a slashing blow. He had done even more damage than this, but these showed the plainest. Needless to say, their tempers had not been sweetened by the episode.

"You Can't Fool Us With That Soft-Soap Talk."

"Now, damn you—" Ryan began savagely.

"Stop!" Gloria commanded. "What are you doing here?"

Until she spoke they had not seen her, and both men were taken much aback. To find a lady there was something they had not expected.

"What the—" Ryan gasped, but checked himself and then continued in a slightly more respectful tone. "I begs yer pardon, miss, but what are you doin' here?"

"That's none of your business. You clear out, both of you."

This encouraged Little Ella to take her part in the discussion, which she did with her most strident tones.

"What do youse mean, buttin' into here? Beat it, you two. I'm a lady, an' when I have a lady frien' aviskin' me they ain't no place for bums. On yer way."

It was not this tirade which had the most effect upon them. Both quailed before Gloria, who stood eyeing them sternly. Then they looked at each other, and without a word of apology shambled out into the hall.

CHAPTER XX.

If Gloria believed that she had put to flight for all time such gentlemanly assassins as Mr. Kelly and Mr. Ryan, her feeling of triumph did not last long. As the door into the hall was still open she did not dare make a move in Wright's direction. She determined to close the door and pull the washstand in front of it, wedging it under the knob, before trying further to succor the injured man. When she walked toward the door, it again framed the forms of Ryan and Kelly. As a result of a short conference just out of earshot, they had decided to return and get their man.

"What do you want?" Her heart sank.

"We're lookin' fer a man," Kelly snarled.

"And he come into this room, too," Ryan added doggedly. "We don't want to make you uncomf'table, lady, but we gotta git that man."

The way he said it made Gloria feel that he meant business. All she could do was play for time and pray for Mrs. Hayes to return.

"There's no man here," she explained in her most winning manner. "You can see that plainly for yourself. I came over from the mission to take care of this sick woman. You are only making her worse by bursting into her room in such a rude fashion. Please go out gently; she must have it perfectly quiet."

Turkey Ryan so far forgot himself in the presence of his betters as to grin at this explanation.

"We don't want to have to make you give 'im up."

This threat had an unpleasan sound. Hitherto the girl had not feared for her own safety, but his surly remark frightened her. The one thing that kept her steadfast was the thought that she was protecting the man she had loved; yes, the man she now loved more than she ever had. She did not know how he happened to be there; she did not know how he regarded her; she only knew that she loved him, that she would give her life a sacrifice to save him.

Ryan next appealed to Little Ella.

"Ella, that guy come in here. Where is he? We ain't goin' to be scared by any fool girl. She don't know who wants him. Now give 'im up."

"Don't say a word," Gloria told her.

"You gotta stick by us, Ella. This ain't no ordinary job."

At Ryan's injunction to stick by him, Little Ella seemed to waver.

"Don't you fergit who yer friends are. Who keeps you from bein' jugged? Mike Noonan. Who lets you stay here when you can't pay, an' feeds you? Mike Noonan."

"That's so. He has been good to me."

Gloria was quick to catch the note of indecision. "But now I'm going to take care of you."

"Yes, goin' to, goin' to," sneered Kelly. "You know what church promises is. Don' you fergit we gotta stan' together down here, all of us."

It was the old, old appeal of class to serve a selfish end.

"Yes, that's true. I don' want to say anything, but—"

Ryan immediately pressed the advantage he thought he had gained.

"This is yer chanct, Ella. You know what she'd say to you if you was in her house. Are you with us? I'll see you git yours."

It was a moment when a man's life was at stake. Gloria believed that if the woman told and they tore Wright from her she might never see him alive again. She had prayed silently for help to come, but she was still alone. Already she was giving up hope from that quarter and was conscious that upon her own efforts in all probability the very life of the man she loved would depend. To add to her anguish was the fear that he might regain consciousness and betray himself by a moan.

Now it all depended upon Little Ella. It had been a clever stroke, that of Ryan's, asking her how she would be treated in this woman's home. Against this appeal to class prejudice Gloria had not scored.

"I'll tell," said the woman.

The two men looked at each other and smiled.

"Stop!" cried Gloria, looking not at the men, but at the girl who lay pale and trembling upon the bed. "Do you remember what you said a while ago? What you accused me of? You swore that I hadn't loved. Even to my sorrow you shall have proof of it now that I do. The very man whom I'm defending from these bullies is the one man on earth I love." Ryan and Kelly looked at each other in amazement. "You shall see if you loved more than I. You've gone through fire and storm for a man? I'll do no less. If need be, I'll die for this man—here and now—because I love him." The fire died out of her eyes. She stretched out her hands to Ella pathetically and begged humbly, "My whole heart's happiness is here. Are you going to help them try to take him from me?"

The woman, a creature of impulse, was moved.

"You'd better give it up, Turkey. I ain't goin' to let you touch that man."

"Ah, you're a woman," sighed Gloria. "You know a woman's heart."

"Nix on that love spiel, Ella," commanded Ryan. "This ain't no valentine party, lady. You can't fool us with that soft-soap talk. We gotta carry out the boss' orders. Buck, look in that closet."

Ryan recognized that the time for action had come. On his side he had the overwhelming brute force which would enable him to do as he pleased. Kelly had turned to look into the closet when he was stopped by Gloria's outburst. What Ryan had said had reminded her of her own power.

"Stand where you are, you infamous thugs! Must I tell you the truth to be obeyed? If you are above the law, I am higher still. Mike Noonan could have told you who I am. You speak of your boss, then learn the truth."

"What yer givin' us?" jeered Ryan as he advanced toward the place where Wright lay hidden.

"Stand back," she cried. I am Gloria Kerr."

The two men looked at each other in astonishment, and Little Ella sat bolt upright in bed.

"The boss'—"

"Daughter," Gloria finished Ryan's exclamation. "I am the daughter of David Kerr. Now go."

Something in her bearing made them feel that she was telling the truth. Kelly, timid now and apologetic, was the first to speak.

"Well, we didn't know you was—why didn't you say—"

"I guess we'll go see Noonan," was Ryan's method of beating a retreat.

"He can't git away, anyw[illegible]," Kelly whispered to him.

Gloria breathed a sigh of relief as they turned to go, but in an instant the shrill scream from Ella which brought the men back to the center of the room froze her blood.

"The boss' daughter!" It was a witch's screech ending in a peal of unearthly laughter.

Gloria sank into a chair gasping, "What have I said?"

She felt the curse upon her.

"Come back, Turkey, come back," shrilled Little Ella, laughing wildly. "The boss' daughter! The boss' daughter!"

Her thin hands plucked at the coverlid, and her blazing eyes were fixed upon Gloria, who had shrunk into a weak lump in her chair. Only a few moments had passed since all had admitted that Little Ella dominated the situation. That fact she recognized as readily as did the others. Now she determined to make use of her power. Gloria herself had aroused the savagery of the woman by having inflamed her against the boss, not knowing that the creature's rage was directed against her own father.

Feverishly stimulated to an unaccustomed mental acuteness by the thoughts of her wrongs as Gloria had lain them bare, all the cruelty of the woman's nature asserted itself. Revenge with her was sweetness long drawn out. It was the dainty morsel over which the gourmet lingers. It was the tantalizing antics of the cat that gloats over the mouse beneath its paw, and even lets it run a little way to arouse the wild hope that it may yet escape. Having decided upon the ultimate disclosure of Wright's hiding place, Little Ella was now bent most of all on making the daughter of the boss suffer to the limit.

"What's the matter, Ella?" Ryan asked.

"Let them go, I say. Please let them go," Gloria implored.

"You want them to go, do you? Ha! Ha! The boss' daughter! The boss' daughter!"

The last words she uttered in piercing tones horrible to hear as she swayed back and forth, keeping time with her body to the cadence of her cry.

Gloria tried to gather herself together to meet this new attack, but without much success. She felt so weak from the shock that she was only able to rise from her chair with difficulty.

"You're out of your head. You're mad. Keep still, I tell you." The men still standing irresolute, she turned upon them. "Why are you standing there? Leave this room."

Little Ella was enjoying herself hugely. Gloria's every pleading tone was music in her ears. Her eyes burned with excitement. Yet the cruel cat delayed to crush the mouse. Its quivering was too soul-satisfying. Realizing that if she admitted Gloria was the daughter of David Kerr the men would forego their pursuit of Wright, Little Ella knew her best course was to deny the relationship.

(To be continued.

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