

# *Identified by his Corns*

*An Old Lady's Story*

BY MARY KYLE DALLAS

“It was a most peculiar thing,” said the old lady, taking out her knitting—“altogether quite a singular story; it proves one thing, my dear, and that is that witnesses are not always to be relied upon. People perjure themselves quite unconsciously at every trial, I feel quite confident. Now our butler Ralph, a very good old man, identified Uncle ——. Wait a minute, I think I’d better tell it from the beginning.

“I was sitting on the porch one June evening waiting for my lover. Our house was close upon the Jersey shore, and I could see the ferry below which he would cross to come to me. I’ve no doubt I felt quite as romantic as though that ferry boat I waited for had been a gondola and my porch a balcony in Venice. I was very happy that night—I think I would have been wicked had I felt otherwise;— the pet of my old uncle—rich and, they said, pretty, and in the most perfect health; betrothed, too, to the man I loved from my soul, for I was no cold girl to choose calmly between my suitors and give my hand to the heaviest rent-roll or the handsomest face. I had all that women prize most, and it is no wonder I was glad.

“That night not a shadow lay upon my heart, and yet, as I tripped down the garden path to meet Charlie, the time between those happy hours and great grief could have been counted in moments.

“Charlie was never so gay as I. He used to say that I was his sunbeam and that he came to me to chase the clouds from his heart. He said so that evening.

“‘For I’ve been sad today,’ he said; ‘and had I been a child or a woman should have cried, I am sure.’

“‘Why—what has happened?’ said I.

“‘Nothing.’

“‘And sad at *nothing*?’

“‘O, Nellie,’ he answered, ‘you do not know what it means to be sad for nothing. I’m quite old compared to you. Twenty-eight and you eighteen. Lassie, ten years make a word of difference. I was never sad for nothing at eighteen.’

Then he told me he was happy now, and kissed me, and I sung to him, and soon our songs and laughter mingled. Oh, what a joyous evening it was! I shall never forget it while I live.

It was nine o'clock before my uncle came in. He had been locked in his room all the afternoon, busy with papers, and had had wine and biscuits sent up, instead of coming to tea. I thought, when he came in, that he had better have let the wine alone, for he was flushed and excited, and not like himself. He told us business was a bore, and wondered at himself for sticking to it when he had no need, vowed to give it up, and called for the cards. 'We'll have a game of whist, three with a dummy,' he said; 'and Nellie, tell Ralph to bring us the decanter of port.'

"I brought the cards, but pretended to forget the wine, until he thundered at me, as he never had before, to obey him and give the order.

"I could not help saying to the housekeeper, 'Be as long as you can sending it; I'm afraid uncle has had enough now. He is past seventy, you know, and should be careful, Mrs. Spice.'

"The housekeeper nodded, and managed to keep the decanter back for ten good minutes, but uncle rang the bell so furiously that it came by that time, and then he kept his glass at his elbow for the rest of the evening. We played for tenpences—uncle always insisted on some stake, and, oddly enough, Charlie and I, who were partners, won. It must have been chance, for we knew little of the game. But it angered Uncle Morely.

"'You're in a league to cheat me,' he said; 'I detect you. It's undutiful, disrespectful. You needn't laugh—I'm not joking.'

"I had taken it all for fun at first, but now I saw he was in angry earnest. Alarmed and hurt, and a little ashamed that Charlie should see my uncle so different from himself, I made an excuse to quit the game as soon as possible and left them together.

"I can't cheat *now*, uncle," I said, and went quite away to the end of the room with my crochet work.

"There I sat, wondering at them. I have always hated to see cards played since.

"If they had been gamblers they could not have played more eagerly. If the few shillings they staked had been thousands of dollars, and their all, they could not have been more anxious to win.

"Uncle, who was an old soldier, now and then forgot himself and muttered an oath. Charlie said not a word, good or bad. I sat in the corner, neglected.

"At last I arose and went upstairs, to wake myself, for watching whist players is drowsy work. Perhaps I felt piqued at being forgotten. At any rate, I stayed away for some time. My room was on the second floor, and the door was shut. In that house the walls were thick, and the doors closed well. I had heard no sound, until the lock turned and Mrs. Spice, the housekeeper, burst into the room.

"'Run down, Miss Nellie!' she said. 'They'll stop for *you*! Oh, it's awful! In the parlor, Miss, your uncle and —'

“I waited for no more. Now that the door was open I heard angry voices and a scuffle only too plainly, and rushed down stairs. Just as I entered the room my uncle struck Charles across the face.

“I threw myself between them.

“‘For my sake, stop!’ I cried. ‘Oh, I blush for you both, gentlemen, fighting like the coarsest men in a street fray! See, the servants are looking and listening!’”

“‘Listening, are they?’ cried my uncle. ‘Let them hear this, then: — if you have anything to do with that rascal—if you speak to him again—I’ll turn you out of doors! Ralph, here—look at that man. If he comes here in my absence, kick him out! Marry my niece, indeed! No, my money must go to more honest hands!’

“I clung to Charles’ arm. He was turning white with rage. I whispered:

“‘Oh, for my sake! For my sake!’ And he gasped out:

“‘The old man struck me! I never felt like killing anyone before. I do now! You saw him! He struck me!’

“Everyone heard him—Mrs. Spice, the servants and the two Misses Pinny, from next door, who had come in in terror.

*“I never felt like killing anyone before! I do now!”*

“‘He’s such an old, *old* gentleman!’ said Miss Spice.

“‘Oh, horrid!’ cried the Misses Pinny.

“‘Lor! Aint he ferocious!’ said the housemaid.

“‘Like Jack Sheppard,’ said another voice, belonging to the kitchen. ‘But to be sure, when ‘wine is in wit is out,’ said Ralph, the butler, who spoke from experience.

“My Uncle Morely, out of breath, panted and glowed like a furnace. Charles, white as a corpse, looked at him.

“At last my uncle’s voice thundered forth. ‘Let go of him, you jade; take your hand from his shoulder. He is noting to you now; I’ve forbidden it. Go to your room. And you, sir, out of the house; leave that and this lady forever.’

“‘The first, readily,’ replied Charles; ‘the last, never, save at her bidding.’ And there, before all, he caught me to his breast, kissed me on the lip and brow, and stalked away, amidst the ‘ohs’ and ‘ahs’ of the audience.

“It was a long while before Uncle Morely would retire. He was certainly the worse for wine. One o’clock struck before he shut his bedroom door, and we breathed more freely.

“Then I burst into tears, and Mrs. Spice comforted me.

“‘Don’t take on, Miss Nellie,’ she said, ‘your uncle will make it up with your young gentleman when he’s himself again. Lor, now, old heads can’t stand wine; a glass of sherry gets into mine, I know. Come now, go to bed and make yourself easy.’

“‘Perhaps she might be right, I thought—the whole thing was so trivial and contemptable; but, as for being “easy” that I could not be. I took my seat by my window and looked out.

“‘It was past one. The moon was setting—the trees stood dark and tall against the sky; but, by the last rays of light, I saw a tall figure standing in the shadow of the bushes that bordered the garden path. At first I was frightened; but in a moment I recognized Charlie. When he saw me he came under the window, and whispered:

“‘Come down, Nellie, I want to talk to you.’ And I, who had not yet undressed, waited not a moment, but crept down.

“‘Oh, Charlie,’ I said when I had shut the door, ‘how could you quarrel so with uncle? You knew he was not himself, you should have let him win. He is very old—’

“‘Charlie interrupted me with an exclamation of anger.

“‘He maddened me,’ he said. ‘Why did he drag my father’s name into the quarrel, and tell me that he—had had—had taught me his tricks? My poor father, a better man than the old curmudgeon asleep upstairs. If he—Oh, Nellie, he was insolent beyond bearing.’

“‘Then I knew all. Poor Charlie’s father had been no credit to himself, and no comfort to his wife and son; and, they said, had ended his days as a professional gambler on the Mississippi river.

“‘That was the taunt; and yet uncle had never let the fact stand between us, and I had never thought of it. What was Charlie’s dead father to me, so that Charlie was good, and true, and honest, and a gentleman.

“‘I felt my blood boil for him.

“‘I can scarcely forgive my uncle,’ I said.

“‘Yet there is this excuse—He was not himself.’

“‘A poor one,’ I know. But at first *you* were wrong. How could you take such an interest in a game of cards?’

“I never did until tonight,” said Charles. ‘My mother made me promise to shun play and drink. I never have swallowed as much wine at a sitting as on this evening; and I have never learnt any game by whist—that, imperfectly.’

“Then both were doubly wrong,’ I said.

“Come, it will blow over. Be conciliating. I know my uncle.’

“Charlie looked at me. His eyes flashed.

“Nellie,’ he said, ‘I *hate* that old man, and I always shall. But for you I might have murdered him. You will not obey him and cut me off?’

“Never,’ I said.

“Yet I am poor,’ said Charlie, ‘and he may alter his will if you anger him. He is a cruel old man, darling. Would you cast fortune aside for me?’

“Surely; but he will be kind again tomorrow,’ I said.

“Good night. I’ll meet you by the river, at six tomorrow evening, and tell you what has happened.’

“So we kissed each other; he, never more tenderly, and we parted. I saw him pass along the road, and the shadow, deep and dark, now that the moon was gone; and then went up to my room again, and slept—heavily and long.

“It was nine in the morning when I was awakened by a scratching ay the door. It was my uncle’s pet dog—a terrier, called Beppo. When I let him in he did not as frisk about me, but, coming up to me, slipped his nose into my hand, and howled long and dismally. The moment and the sound were both terrible. They acted powerfully on my nerves. Had I been given to fainting spells, I must have fainted away; as it was, I trembled like a leaf. I spoke to the dog kindly.

“Poor Beppo! what ails Beppo?” I asked.

“The dog howled again, and ran out, down stairs, half way and then back again. I hastily slipped on a wrapper and my slippers, and went to the housekeeper’s room. She was there, picking over the currants for a cake.

“Mrs. Spice,’ said I, ‘has uncle been to breakfast yet?’

“No,’ said she; ‘considering all things he was not likely to rise early.’

“But see how the dog acts,” I said. ‘Mrs. Spice, I am alarmed.’

“Beppo had gone to the door of my uncle’s chamber, and was apparently trying to thrust himself through it. When I spoke he moaned and howled again.

“‘If uncle should be ill?’ said I. ‘Oh, Mrs. Spice, the dog never does this for nothing.’

“We looked at each other.

“‘Would you dare go in,’ asked Mrs. Spice.

“‘Yes—if I could.’

“‘This key fits every door in the hall,’ said Mrs. Spice, taking one from the ring.

“I stretched out my hand for it. Both trembled so that the keys jangled together like castanets. I had hard work to fit mine into the lock. Then I waited a moment before I dared push open the door.

“At last I did so, and looked in; there was no one there. The bed was rumpled, the outer garments my uncle had cast off lying in a heap on the carpet, and the window which opened on the back piazza wide open.

“‘Lor!’ cried Mrs. Spice, ‘he’s got up and gone out!’

“But the dog running to the sill, began to smell something, and howl again.

“I advanced.

“On the sill, on the porch, down to the edge of the flagging, which lay below, were tiny drops of blood—very small, but red and plentiful.

“‘Look!’ I cried, ‘look!’ and Mrs. Spice did look and shriek.

“Ten minutes after, the whole household and half the neighborhood were out in search of uncle Morely. They traced the drops to the river side; there the rising tide had obliterated them.

“But they found no trace of uncle Morely besides those horrible stains.

“When he had left or been carried from the house, he could have worn nothing but his underclothing and a dressing gown. Why he should, in his senses, quit the house in such attire, was incomprehensible.

“It was, in fact, the last thing he was likely to do. The idea of foul play entered every mind at once.

“No one doubted that my uncle Morely had been murdered.

“But by whom? Had he an enemy?”

“The safe in the room he had left remained locked. His watch was on the mantelpiece—nothing was disturbed. Money had not tempted the guilty wretch. What was it?”

“Shall I ever forget the awful moment when the knowledge burst upon me that people suspected Charlie—that there were absolute proofs against him.

“Oh, that terrible quarrel! Oh, those words heard by the Misses Pinney, the housekeeper, and every servant.

“‘I never felt like murdering anyone before, but I do now!’

“People had it all, and more than all, at their finger’s ends. I heard what they said as one might hear the rumbling of a volcano, who stood upon the crater edge unable to move. Terror for Charlie overmastered my grief for my uncle.

“I loved both, but what was death to the ignominy which might await my betrothed husband?”

“Innocent though I knew him to be—I would have staked my soul on that—I never doubted him. Indeed I hoped and prayed that my uncle might be found, and the fearful danger pass. They did, at last, find something in the river. They brought it home, but would not let me look at it.

“There was an inquest. The body was proved to be that of an old man. The height was exact. Ralph the butler identified it.

“There were wounds about the head. Taken in conjunction with those blood spots upon the piazza, they were believed to have been inflicted by some murderous hand. The jury gave a verdict to that effect, and Charlie was arrested, charged with my uncle’s murder.

“I told you I was light-hearted by nature. Perhaps I had been too happy, being only mortal. The sorrow that came upon me was enough to blot out every memory of joy. Sorrow, do I call it? anguish—madness!

“They would not let me see him. Perhaps he fancied I believed him guilty. I could not even write to him.

“People thought me unnatural to love one even suspected of such a crime. So I should have been had I suspected him, but the word of an angel could not have made me do so. I loved him then with a love greater than any I had yet felt for him. I told them so, and hated them for doubting him. They pitied me—the gentlest of them; the others were very bitter.

“For my aunts and uncles and cousins were all come down to the funeral, and had waited for the trial, which was to come off speedily. Imagine my position—I, the niece and the adopted child of the murdered man—they his brothers, sisters and near kinsfolk—all believing that my betrothed

husband was guilty of that fearful crime—all speaking of him with loathing and disgust, and I loving him—loving him—loving him!

“‘Why not arrest *me*?’ I said, bitterly. ‘I wish you would—find proof against me! There would be plenty! Oh, cruel wretches—to seize upon a hasty word to do an innocent man to death!’

“And some answered:

“‘Innocence will prove itself.’

“How could it against such circumstantial evidence? And I was to be a witness—I, whose every word would go against him.

“The day came—oh, horrible day to me—the day when they should try my lover for his life! They took me to the courthouse—I, more dead than alive—and people stared at me as at a show, for I was betrothed to the murderer.

“In a little country place like that, such a murder had not happened for years.

“At last, I dared to turn my eyes to the spot where the prisoner stood, and for the first time since that night when we parted—that night of which they might force me to speak—I saw him. He was worn and pale, but had I doubted it before, I should have known, by the steadfast glance of his dark eye, that he was innocent.

“It met mine quietly, tenderly. It seemed to say ‘Hope, trust, if not in man;s justice, in God’s mercy.’ and it gave me new life.

“Soon, coming out of a sort of dream, I knew that the witnesses were being called.

“The Misses Pinny to tell of the quarrel and Charlie’s threat. The housekeeper to repeat the same evidence. The servants all against him. The lady with whom he boarded, who could only tell that he had staid out until morning, and seemed much agitated on his return.

“After this they tortured me. The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, I must tell. Yet the truth made a false impression on those who heard. It made an innocent man appear guilty.

“I had left the stand, dizzy and faint. I listened to old Ralph, who was giving his evidence.

“I heard the question:

“‘What position did you occupy in the family of the deceased?’ and the answer, ‘I was butler, sir.’

“‘How many years have you been engaged in that capacity?’

“‘Fifteen, sir, with Captain Morely.’



““You recognized the body as that of your master?”

““Yes, sir, I identified him.’

““By what features or marks?”

““Well, sir, generally I knowed him, but in particular by his horns.’

““Hey? what! you rascal! Identified *me* by my *horns*! I haven’t any. How dare you identify me, when I’m not dead? Do you want to hang people, you bloodthirsty wretch? I’ll give you a month’s warning, and no character, for perjury.’

““And elbowing himself through the crowd came my uncle Morely, paler and thinner than usual, followed by a gentleman in black, and stared at as though he was in reality a ghost.

““There he stood, manifesting total contempt of court, giving a piece of his mind to the public generally, and proving himself so entirely alive, well, and in his right mind, that no one dared for a moment to doubt his identity.

““Thereupon, having no further occasion for my senses, I, for the first time in my life, swooned entirely away.

““When I came to myself I was at home, and heard the following story from his own lips:

““In the night—or rather morning, for it was nearly three o’clock—my uncle awoke, feeling hot and oppressed beyond description, and being an advocate of cold water and a determined bather, bethought himself of the river at once. No one being awake, it struck him that there was no occasion for dressing, and accorningly proceeded to the shore in his dressing gown, and without his wig.

““There, according to his own account, he was seized upon by two persons passing in a gig, who insisted upon it that he was an escaped lunatic, carried him off to an asylum, and locked him up.

Before morning the excitement had brought on a brain fever, and for many days he was actually delirious.

““The more I insisted upon it that I was Captain Morely,’ cried my uncle, ‘the more they were determined to call me Jackson, and when the truth was actually discovered, they pretended I was as mad as a March hare, and could give no explanation. I’ll have them punished. I’ll see what the laws of the country say to kidnapping gentlemen on their own property.’

““The doctor under whose treatment my uncle had recovered took another view of the case. He declared that my uncle’s brain fever had been coming on some days, and that he was delirious when he went to bathe. Moreover, that the two assistants sent hastily in search of a mad gentleman named Jackson, escaped from the asylum, were not to be blamed, when, finding on

the shore a bald-headed gentleman in night attire, acting oddly, they seized upon him as their patient, the poor man whose body had been found and identified as that of my uncle.

“It was over what everyone fancied would be my deathbed, that my uncle and Charlie came to a perfect reconciliation, and when I recovered, I fancy we were the happiest three in Christendom.

“As for my uncle, who was past eighty when he died, he had forgiven everyone concerned but Ralph. The old butler lived and died in his service, but at times, his life through, my uncle’s wrath would blaze forth, and he would speak indignantly of ‘the perjured rascal who identified him by his corns.’

“‘When,’ my uncle always added, crossing his yet shapely feet, and regarding them with manifest pride—’when, as I’m a gentleman, I never had but *one* corn in my life, and that was in forty-two, when I wore a pair of tight boots. Identify *me* by my corns! What did the rascal mean?’”

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