

**FOUND
OUT; A STORY**

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Found Out; A Story by Helen Mathers

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HELEN MATHERS

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A STORY

BY

THE AUTHOR OF

"COMIN' THRO' THE RYE."



LONDON

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ENTERED AT STATIONERS' HALL

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FOUND OUT.

CHAPTER I.

*The love that I have chosen,
I'll therewith be content,
The salt sea shall be frozen,
Before that I repent. . . .
Repent it shall I never, until the day I die.*

THE windows of Mallinger Towers struck out north, south, east and west, bright shafts of light which announced to all whom it might concern that its master was at home, and about to hold one of those elegant revels with which he occasionally delighted the county. One room alone in all the vast pile threw out no beams upon the darkness, nor did it boast any light within, save what was furnished by some pallid moonbeams that struggled through the upper part of a window from which the shutter had fotted, and so made partly visible the desolation of a spot that seemed to be alike shunned by the eye and foot of man.

An indescribable sense of rust and disuse was in

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the air, unutterably bleak and forlorn looked the long vista of polished boards upon which no scrap of furniture rested, no sign of human occupation or life showed, offering a startling contrast to the lofty walls that were peopled, and pauoplied, and most richly set forth by the dead. For here were whole groups of arms and armour, varying in age from the stone period with its simple knife, axe, and arrow fashioned out of flint, down to those equally simple, but more deadly weapons with which science enables man the more readily to slay his brother. Here were no dummies, no show-pieces bought for their curiosity and beauty; each portion of armour had been worn, each arm had been used, and a *virtuoso* would have spent years in the due appreciation of a collection that one man of taste alone had gathered together, and another man of genius had arranged.

If a spy could have cut off his feet, and got a fellow spy to hook him to the wall, then there would be no reason why half a hundred men should not look out upon the deserted chamber, and overhear any ghostly secrets that might be flitting abroad; but as it was, no living thing bigger than a rat could have hid itself in the room, or been for a second concealed from any one who entered.

Flint, bronze, iron and steel, beautiful were the effects produced by their arrangement; each sheaf of weapons with its appropriate suit of armour below, however rude and faulty in some instances: but reaching its maximum of perfection in the cuirass of a Roman, so exquisitely moulded to the form that when represented in sculpture, it is hardly possible to distinguish it from the nude figure.

Here the moonlight touched an Assyrian's shield and *justaucorps*, there an axe-head that thrust by a Gaul into the cleft branch of a growing tree, became so firmly a part of the bough, that flint and wood were welded together into a weapon with which he might defy his enemies; yonder one saw those Grecian arms with whose aim and clamour Homer has filled the earth; not a nation was left unrepresented, not a missile discovered from former ages was absent from this room, the richest in historic wealth, as it was the most shunned, of the whole house. And so it happened that miracles of industry, beauty, and splendid memories of by-gone heroes, rusted unnoticed, and all the art of the man who had grouped them was lost; and this because a trivial thing enough had happened here twenty years ago—the death of a man by his own hand.

Be sure that from beneath many a strangely fashioned helm the spirit of a brave man looked out and despised him as he fell, though his nearest and dearest may have wept over him as bitterly as if he had been carried home from a battle in which he had lost himself only to secure victory to his cause.

Ay, here a coward had slain himself, and under such circumstances that perhaps he would have done worse for himself and his, had he left the room alive. Only from that day forth the fencing-room was closed, and none were known to cross its threshold save the master of the house, who came now and again to practise alone that rapier play in which he had been engaged with his friend, when that friend had slipped the button from his foil, and turning it against his own breast—died.

The master of the house was an adept in the use of arms, and to this extraordinary proficiency might be due the ease, grace and elegance of all his movements, and that look and gesture of vigorous alertness which the constant use of the foil and broadsword invariably bestow; but of late years he had somewhat neglected the practice, and had not in fact entered this room for many months.

But what is that faint sound yonder but the click of a closing panel? And is there not a presence, a step, a flutter as of movement in the deserted place? What is this tall shape, that shrouded in black steals from the shadow of the wall into the moonbeams, and trembling, palpitating, gazes fearfully around as if in search of it knows not whom, in horror of it knows not what! It shrinks as it reaches the centre of the room, and looks down as if in search of the blood-stain it knows to be there, then lifts its hand in an attitude of listening to the ghostly tapping of a branch outside the window, then glances over its shoulder to where—see, is not that a rat stealing towards her?

For it is a woman, and with a stifled cry, she stoops, and with one bare arm sweeps her draperies clear of the floor, then retreats backwards to the wall, where beneath a magnificent Mascarou sword that seems in the very act of descending on her head, she cowers and listens with her whole soul! But there was only the tap, tap of the bough on the pane, the scurrying of invisible armies of rats behind the wainscot, the play of the moonbeams on dented sword, and battered shield, on helmets that gasped, grinned, showed here a dolphin's head outline, and there a pig's snout, anon

a *pot-de-fer* worn by one of Louis XIV.'s soldiers, and now a Russian's, misshapen, with the face of a gargoyle, and seeming to watch with a malevolent leer the shrinking girl whose eyes it had caught. And she was a-cold, a-cold—the very love-warmth within was failing her, and the courage that had brought her hither seemed to her superhuman now that in chill blood she reflected upon it, knowing that any moment the panel might unclose to admit her father.

But whence came this icy stream of wind that she suddenly felt play over her, and who was this that having entered by the window, closed it, and replaced the shutters, then came swiftly up the room, holding out impatient arms into which the girl ran as for her very life?

“Oh, Jack, the rats!”

“Oh, Kitty, *you!*”

They were warm now, and safe. “Imparadised in one another's arms,” and then—for surely a young man is a fool who does not put his kisses first, and his words afterwards—he gave neither himself nor her a chance of speech for a full minute, though of course it was the woman who recovered her voice first.

“This is very wrong, Jack!” she said, reproachfully, hiding her head on his shoulder to avoid a new onslaught.

“Very,” said Jack, “and as delicious as it's wrong. Oh, Kitty, Kitty! Dearest, sweetest, loveliest, truest, *truest* Kitty, to think that I have got you here in my arms, and that I have not seen you these two years, and that you *love* me, and by to-morrow—O! was there ever such a lucky, miserable wretch on earth?”