HE'S BEHIND YOU

BY

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AN ELEVENTH HOUR STORY

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He’s Behind You!

An “Eleventh Hour” story by Elin Gregory
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Blurb:

A pantomime dame taking liberties with the chorus line?
Sounds like a job for Millie Carstairs.

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The view from the kitchen sink wasn’t the most inspiring Pritchard had ever seen. After an adventurous career as a gentleman’s gentleman, firstly during the Great War, then attached to various embassies, he had seen great and gracious sights but none of them had filled him with so warm a sense of satisfaction and contentment. The electric light—and wasn’t that a wondrous convenience—cast a bright sheen across rain damp cobbles and gleamed on the wings of the cars parked in the mews, but didn’t illuminate the lofty black bulks of the buildings beyond. There, men who would probably consider themselves his betters would be dining or deciding whether to go out on the Town and, perhaps, keeping their servants informed of their plans. Not that Pritchard had any complaints. His own little master had trained up lovely.

A movement caught his eye and he smiled at the reflection as his own dear heart stooped to open the oven. “How’s it doing?” Pritchard asked, taking a deep breath of delectable onion scented steam. Toad in the hole. A good meal for such a miserable evening.

“Another ten minutes.” Ron closed the oven door and stepped around the table. He stood behind Pritchard, almost a head taller so able to look out into the dark as well. If they had been an ordinary married couple, instead of what they were, Ron could have put his arms around Pritchard and they might
have shared a kiss. Instead they were two elderly men sharing accommodation and if they both wanted to look out of the same window at the same time that was reasonable. A show of affection could be dangerous, but nobody glancing in could see that Ron was tenderly cupping one of Pritchard’s buttocks.

“Tease,” he said then nodded as he spotted the sweep of headlamps in the dimly lit entrance to the mews. “Put the kettle on. Here they come.”

He had just finished laying the kitchen table when he heard the front door open and an infectious giggle from Ron’s niece, Rita. The door slammed, banishing the chill of the December night.

“Good day?” Ron asked

“Over, thank goodness. Ooh, do I smell onions?” Rita said. Pritchard turned from the table to welcome her but the first person into the kitchen was Pritchard’s friend and employer. Dapper in houndstooth tweeds, Miles Siward grinned at him and put a string bag with four bottles of beer on the table.

“After the day Rita’s had I thought she could do with a pick-me-up but she didn’t want to be late for supper, so we popped into the theatre bar and bought these,” he said. “Shall I pour?”

“Oh please,” Pritchard said and began the process of getting food on plates while Miles hung his jacket on the back of the chair he usually sat in and obtained glasses and a bottle opener. He looked so at home in his shirtsleeves and Fair Isle waistcoat, Pritchard was reminded of the advantages of having
a master like the younger Master Siward. Miles was absolutely prepared to muck in with the rest of them, despite his lofty family background, his well-born connections and his sometimes very edgy profession. When Pritchard had said that they were having toad in the hole for supper and Miles was welcome to join them in return for a small service, he had jumped at the chance. Rita was enjoying her first big engagement as wardrobe mistress at the Scala in Tottenham Street and they were putting her up while she looked for digs both decent and affordable. She was very self-reliant, but it was filthy weather and it could get rough on the tube at weekends. Uncle Ron was inclined to worry. Also, Rita being picked up from the stage door by an obvious toff in a sleek and powerful car would be another kind of safeguard. Gossip travelled fast in the theatre world.

“Coo, that smells nice,” Rita said as she came into the kitchen, Ron at her heels. The family resemblance was considerable. She too was tall and willowy, dressed to the nines, with elegant marcel-waved hair. Miles pulled a chair out for her and they all settled at the table.

“So how did you get on amongst the stage door Johnnies?” Pritchard asked Miles, once the first enthusiasm for eating had worn off.

“Like a fish out of water,” Miles said. “They were all silk hats and white scarves and there was me in my flat cap and greatcoat.”
“Yes but Stan called you inside so you didn’t have to wait in the rain,” Rita pointed out, “showing that you were welcome and wanted.” She fluttered her lashes at Miles who bit his lip and took up her hand to kiss it, which could have been a worry except Ron had made sure that Rita knew the score. “All the girls will be dying to know who you are tomorrow,” she added. “So what can I safely tell them?”

“Friend of the family?” Miles suggested and when Ron nodded he added, “And something in the City because, you know, this is the City and I’m something, or another. So there’s not a word of a lie.”

“Oh, let’s not lie if we can possibly help it,” Rita agreed. She wrinkled her nose at Miles. “I could have let them believe that, oh I dunno, you were the wastrel younger son of an Earl, determined to entice me off the straight and narrow.”

“We can do it that way if you prefer,” Miles agreed. “I do have a silk hat and white scarf somewhere and I’m sure it’s not too late to learn to sneer.”

“I think you’ve both been reading too many novels,” Ron said and Pritchard smiled as both young people fired up to defend their choice of reading matter. But he hadn’t forgotten what Miles had said when he entered the kitchen. He kept quiet while they ate their pudding—Ron’s treacle tart and custard deserved every bit of their respect and attention—but once they’d scraped their bowls clean he brought it up.

“I hope that’s made up for the bad day?” he asked.
Rita shot an accusing look at Miles who flushed.
“Tattletale,” she said. “Honestly, it wasn’t that bad a day, nothing serious. It’s just frustrating when you know someone needs help and there’s not much you can do about it. That’s all.”

“What is it, love?” Ron asked, putting his hand over Rita’s.
“Maybe we can…oh.”
Rita was shaking her head. “Just the usual.”

“Who is it this time?”

“Widow Twanky.” Rita rolled her eyes.

“I thought you were doing Dick Whittington,” Miles said, leaning forward to take her other hand. “What’s this—person doing?”

“Oh bless you.” Rita laughed and so did Ron. “We are doing Dick Whittington but Albemarle Hodge is playing Mistress Warrener, the Dame. He made his name playing Widow Twanky—the definitive performance everyone says. He's a BIG star, the Scala was lucky to get him, and he feels that gives him the right to take liberties with the chorus line. Every time they go past he …” she made a groping gesture and rolled her eyes.

“How horrible.” Miles grimaced. “That certainly adds a new aspect to the line “he’s behind you”.”

“Has he tried anything with you?” Ron demanded, his voice sharp.

Rita snorted. “He better not. Not unless he wants to go on stage with his costume full of pins. Just the chorus girls, but
this time he's picking on one particular girl and she's—well she's just a kid. Looks older, blonde, lovely dancer and a nice singing voice, but she's only sixteen and oh so innocent. She's pretending to be flattered but I can see she’s scared out of her wits. And so can he, the dirty old man.”

Ron gave her hand a squeeze. “You'll need to explain things to her,” he said. “It's a rough life and if she wants to make a go of it she'll need to toughen up.”

“I've tried,” Rita said. “Poor little Elsie. It's affecting her work.”

“I don’t understand.” Miles looked genuinely confused. “Why doesn't someone explain things to Hodge? I mean, doesn't the theatre have a manager?”

“Of course, but what's he going to do?”

“Tell the man he'll be sacked if he does it again?”

“Oh, Mr Siward,” Rita sighed. “You and Elsie make a good pair. Leckwith's not going to say anything to Hodge because he won't care. If he did, Hodge would say that it was all a joke and it’s the girl trying to make trouble.”

“And she'd be sacked and the manager would take his pick out another twenty youngsters desperate to tread the boards,” Ron said. “It's not something we like, but it happens.”

“Yes, well, that doesn't help Elsie does it?” Miles’s cheeks had reddened with anger. “How about if I have a word with him?”

“The assistant stage manager told him off and Hodge claimed the girl was hysterical or something. I dunno. Besides,
I don't think the 'friend of the family' thing would work in Elsie's case,” Rita pointed out. “Her dad works for the Port of London authority and her mum used to teach in Stepney. I'll talk to her again tomorrow.”

“Maybe ask the other girls to look out for her?” Ron suggested and got up from the table. “I'm putting the kettle on. Who'd like a nice cup of tea?”

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Miles’s elegant flat was a far cry from the little mews cottage Pritchard shared with his Ron. The furniture, the fittings and decor, mingling heirlooms with modern conveniences, were a proper reflection of the Siward family’s status, but it wasn’t any more comfortable. For a start he and Ron each had someone to go home to whereas the younger Siward had to endure his solitude gamely, apart from those brief, but ecstatic, times when his own particular friend, Briers Allerdale, had occasion to be in England. Pritchard wouldn’t have exchanged his small home with Ron in it for any amount of fine furniture or central heating but, as he prepared Miles’s breakfast next morning, he did admit he envied the kitchen just a little. The gas stove was a thing of beauty for instance, with a warming cabinet so the ingredients of breakfast could all arrive on the table good and hot. As soon as he heard the snick of the bedroom door, he loaded up his tray and carried it through to the dining table.

Miles, dressed for a day at the office, was standing at the window looking down into the street. It wasn’t until he came to seat himself at the table that Pritchard got a good look at his face.

“Bad night, sir?” he asked.

“Oh no, it was fine.” Miles, whose eyes were shadowed in a pale face, gave him a fair facsimile of a cheerful smile, then
thanked him and tucked into his bacon and eggs. Pritchard wasn’t fooled, so found a small task to do nearby.

“More tea, sir?” he asked when the sound of silver on porcelain died away.

“That would be nice, thank you.” Miles buttered a piece of toast, added marmalade and ate it as though it tasted of ashes.

*Out with it, boyo.* Pritchard wondered whether it was a problem at work or that he was missing Briers Allerdale. Now Pritchard came to think of it, communications from Belgrade had been a bit sparse lately.

It took another five minutes and some uncomfortable shifting in his chair before Miles finally burst out with, “What Rita said last night—you know, about that man Hodge?”

Not at all what Pritchard had expected. “Yes, I do recall, sir.”

“Well, I think we ought to do something about it.” Miles thumped the table with his fist, so gently that the crockery didn’t even rattle. It was obviously not the effect he’d hoped for so he did it again, catching the edge of his plate and flipping his knife onto the floor. “Oh bother. I’m sorry, Pritchard.”

He picked the knife up himself while Pritchard fetched a brush for the crumbs. Once the little damage had been put right Pritchard said, “I believe that Rita will do what she can. But I’m afraid, sir, that such things tend to be accepted as a natural hazard of the job.” *Just like being shot is a hazard of*
yours, Pritchard could have added, but knew Miles could fill that in himself.

Miles grunted. "Not exactly the same as poor eyesight for a clerk or getting trodden on for grooms, is it? I mean the ledgers, long hours and poor light, or the horse, for that matter, don’t actually mean to hurt and humiliate you. It’s not the same thing at all."

"Sir?" Pritchard’s voice had been unprofessionally sharp so he took a deep breath and tried again. "Sir, are you implying that something similar has happened to you."

The angry flush was answer enough but Miles took a deep breath and said, "Yes, it did, and it wasn’t funny, or a hazard of the job or—or anything like that. It was someone taking the opportunity to do harm to another person who wasn’t in a position to object to it. And I see him almost every day and I have to be polite and professional, while knowing exactly what he’s thinking about, the bastard," his voice cracked, "and if you ever mention this to Briers I’ll ... I’ll—"

"Oh I promise. Not a word, sir. I’m so sorry. I didn’t intend to belittle the situation."

"Well, no, I realise that."

"But nevertheless that is what I did. I apologise."

Pritchard scowled. "I suppose if anything similar had ever happened to me I might have been a bit more ... understanding."

"Understanding, yes. A good choice of word. It’s very easy to say ‘put it behind you’ or ‘the man’s a fool, ignore him and
he’ll go away’ but in my experience they don’t unless someone makes them.” Miles jaw had set in a way that Pritchard recognised meant business.

“So what do you intend, sir?” he asked. “While it’s tempting to suggest sauce for the gander—”

“Oh no, that wouldn’t do at all.” Miles straightened in his seat. “Imagine—he’d flap like a—a goose! No. I think he needs to meet a friend of mine.”

“Oddly enough, sir,” Pritchard said. “I was about to suggest that Millie Carstairs might be a solution myself.”

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Millie Carstairs was a handsome, Amazonian young lady who didn’t suffer fools gladly. She was also Miles’s alter ego, employed on those cases where a combination of an attractive young woman, superlative fluency in a dozen different Balkan dialects and sheer nerve might come in handy. Pritchard was completely devoted to the welfare of Miles Siward but had to admit that Millie — he found no difficulty in viewing them as two separate people — had earned a very special place in his heart. Apparently the Secret Intelligence Service valued Millie’s input enough to have issued Miles a carte blanche to keep in practice.

“Confidence is my biggest asset,” he had explained. “So giving new outfits a trial run is essential. One wouldn’t take an untested weapon out on assignment, would one?” And his handler had agreed that one wouldn’t. Pritchard remembered the relish with which Miles had related that particular conversation and his air of triumph as he propped Millie’s silk-stockinged ankles up on the footstool and had added, “Thank Heavens, because I’m having a beggar of a job breaking in these new shoes!”

Rita was more difficult to convince than the gentlemen of the SIS. She flatly refused to have anything to do with what she described as a mad plan.

“I know you mean well,” she said, “but it’s a lot harder to impersonate a woman convincingly than you think.”
Eventually they had to prove it: Rita shared a tube platform with Millie, sat opposite her from Tottenham Court Road to St James’s Park, then followed the stylishly dressed blonde all the way to their Castle Lane Mews doorstep without a second look. It was only when she saw Pritchard open the door and say “Did everything go well, sir?” that she had to admit it might be possible.

“I would never have believed it was you,” she admitted once she had stopped laughing. “Oh goodness, I just love your hat!” Then she joined in the planning with gusto. Pritchard and Ron pitched into the action too. Strings were pulled and favours called in, then on one chilly Wednesday evening they were ready to go.

Stan on the stage-door was a willing ally. He let them in a few minutes before the end of Act Two, with a whispered greeting and a warning to be quiet.

“Come in,” he said, as Pritchard stood aside to allow the lovely Mrs Millie Carstairs to precede him. “Pleased t’ meecha. And anything you can do to take that nasty, ungrateful toad, Hodge, down a peg or two will be much appreciated. ‘Stan, get me a cab’ he says. ‘Stan, nip down to the pub and get me a gin to keep the cold out’ and never so much as a farthing for me trouble. Tight as a mouse’s, he is. And his goings on with those poor girls—just shameful!”

“We’ll do what we can,” Millie promised, taking the hint and tucking a half-crown into his palm. “If you could take that message now, we’ll go straight up to Wardrobe.”
“God bless you, miss,” Stan said.

Millie made it around the first corner before glancing at Pritchard and giving him a huge happy grin. Then they hurried through the backstage warren, the labels on their packages their passport. Chorus girls, waiting to go on, pointed to the huge garment bag Pritchard was carrying, then turned their attention to Millie. She swept past with the absolute assurance of a woman wearing an outfit worth several months’ wages that she has bought and paid for herself. Her plum coloured suit trimmed with silver grey fur—not too much, not too little—was of top quality and the diamonds, bright in her ears, scintillated even in the dim light. Perhaps the skirt was a little tight, but with assets like that who wouldn’t want to show them off?

Rita met them in the corridor outside Wardrobe, made an awed face at Millie’s suit and beckoned them both inside.

“Ready?” she said.

“As we’ll ever be,” Millie promised, setting her parcels on the table. “Do I look tarty enough?”

“Never tarty,” Rita said. “Give us a twirl. Oh! I see. Yes, maybe a little—available?”

“I was hoping for irresistible,” Millie said then looked up at the ceiling as the music swelled above them for the big finale of Act Two. “Oh, here we go then.” She held up crossed fingers.

Pritchard followed Rita into the maze of clothes racks, stopping at a shadowy point where they could see Millie standing beside Rita’s sewing table and the door beyond her.
Now everything depended on Stan’s delivery of an appropriately garbled message and on Hodge grabbing the opportunity to grab something else while most of the rest of the cast members were on stage for the end of Act Two ballet.

Outside in the corridor the rapid click of high heels approached then the door opened and an astonishing apparition entered the room. The enormous polka-dot hooped skirt tilted through the doorway, massive sleeves squeezed then popped back up, a voluminous apron, striped stockings and bright red shoes—all liberally dusted with flour from the obligatory slapstick baking scene—and topped by a heavily made up face under a mob cap perched on a lofty wig of red curls.

*He’s behind you*, Pritchard thought, and crossed his fingers.

“I say,” Mr Hodge’s voice was a low purr as he looked Millie up and down. “I was told the wardrobe mistress wished to see me?”

“She’s just dealing with a delivery,” Millie replied, casting a brief glance over her shoulder, then turning back to inspect the parcels on the table.

Hodge’s lips pursed with annoyance and he tugged the door closed with a click. Pritchard grinned. It looked as though Stan had been worth his half-crown. A star like Hodge wouldn’t be happy to be ignored by what Stan had implied was yet another hopeful chorus girl so it was inevitable he’d want to make his presence felt. Hodge stepped forward, murmuring
something about how much help he could be to a young girl eager to make her way in the business, then Pritchard saw Millie start, eyes widening. Hodge had time for one more little comment, lost in Millie's indrawn breath, then Millie spun on her heel, thrust both arms out in a mighty push and shrieked “How dare you! Help, help come quickly, this man assaulted me!”

“Mrs Carstairs!” Pritchard darted into the light. “I saw everything. Shall I call the police?”

“Madam!” Hodge yelped. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. I patted you on the back. To suggest otherwise is ridiculous!”

“Are you calling me a liar?” Pritchard demanded. “I know what I saw!”

Hodge gabbled indignant rebuttals of the accusation, Millie jabbed a finger into his falsies like a dagger and Rita, still out of sight was stifling her giggles as best she could. Then to compound the confusion, the door opened and Stan entered, followed by Mr Leckwith, the theatre manager and a six foot tall tabby cat.

“What on earth is going on here?” Leckwith demanded. “Young lady, please stop poking Mr Hodge.”

“Mr Hodge, is it?” Millie glared at them all. “I see no reason why I should when he obviously feels entitled to make free with my—my person in the most disgusting and unprovoked manner. Is this truly the type of establishment you run, Mr Leckwith? If so I may have to inform my employers
and we may have to make other arrangements about supplying you.”

Leckwith made a sharp gesture that cut off Hodge's complaints. “Your employers? I thought you were here looking for a job?”

“No no,” Stan interrupted. “I said! I said that Angels had sent someone with the new costumes. I on'y said she 'looked' like a chorus girl.”

“Angels?” Leckwith took a sharp breath. Annoying a representative of London's foremost theatrical costumiers could be a very serious mistake. “I—um—I'm sorry. You are delivering costumes?”

“The samples for the play you are putting on in March,” Millie said, her tone more polite, though she still spared time to glare at Hodge. “Also, dear Rita had asked if, since I was coming anyway, I could bring some more pan and a package of sequins to add to the dame's costume. But in future he can fetch his own sequins if he wants more flash. Mr Leckwith, I understand that in the theatre relationships are likely to be expressed with a little more physicality than the norm, but when a member of your company offers to help my career if I'm 'nice' to him then fondles my—fondles me, it makes me wonder what kind of unwanted familiarities he's offering other members of your cast.”

“And what kind of redress they have if they are unwilling to put up with it?” Pritchard demanded. “I saw what was done, sir. Mrs Carstairs' job is not likely to be affected by having
spoken out against it but can you say the same for the young ladies of your cast?”

“I’m sure that this must be a misunderstanding,” Leckwith said, shooting a glance of pure poison at Hodge. “I have never heard any aspersions cast—”

“I have, sir.” Rita stepped up and gave him a nervous smile. “Possibly Mr Hodge doesn’t realise how upsetting it is for a young lady to be touched like that, especially when she feels that if she complains she might be branded a troublemaker? Or that she might lose her job? But believe me, sir, it is—very upsetting.”

“I should have been told, Rita,” Leckwith muttered, his cheeks an unhealthy purple. “If anyone has any concerns they should, of course, bring them to me.”

“They just have been! And what will you do?” Millie asked, eyebrows high. “I’d suggest that the man wears boxing gloves if he can’t be trusted to keep his hands to himself.”

“This is ridiculous.” Hodge’s voice was shrill with fury. “I merely tried to welcome the young lady. It’s not my fault if she misinterpreted my intentions.”

“Funny, that’s exactly what you said about young Elsie.” The tabby cat had a surprisingly deep and sonorous voice. “She was very upset that you touched her — well, touched her. And when I pointed out that you should apologise you said it wasn’t your fault if she couldn’t take a joke.”

“A joke” Millie’s voice cracked like a whip. She raised a clenched fist. “Please allow me to provide the punchline.”
“NO! We’ve still got to get through Act Three. We will discuss this later, Hodge,” Leckwith said. “And I would like to extend the most sincere apology, Miss—”

“Mrs Mildred Carstairs,” Millie offered Leckwith her hand, as grand as a Duchess, and gave an approving nod when he bowed over it. “An apology is the least I expect. If any of that flour has transferred to my — person — I’ll be sending the theatre my dry cleaning bills.”

“My apologies, Mrs Carstairs,” Leckwith said then paused as the music from the stage crashed to an end. “For now, please excuse me, I need to have a word with Mr Hodge while he changes.”

The show had to go on, after all. Leckwith drove Hodge, protesting, into the corridor and Stan closed the door behind them. They stood in companionable silence waiting until they were sure the theatre manager and dame were out of earshot then Pritchard became aware of a deep rumbling sound.

“Oh give over, Jimmy,” Rita said then dissolved into giggles.

The cat stopped purring then removed his head. Jimmy had a broad cheerful looking face topped with sweat-slick brown hair, and his expression when he looked at Rita was worshipful. “Lord it's hot in there,” he said. “Reet, that was brilliant! You spoke right up. You were polite, dignified but firm. You were brilliant!”

Pritchard glanced at Millie but she was watching Rita and Jimmy with such a soppy look on her face that Pritchard was
sure she was thinking of her own far-away lover. Then it occurred to him that if young Rita had a follower he should probably let Ron know so he could make some enquiries. He cleared his throat and Rita tore her eyes away from the pantomime cat and blushed.

“Oh, um—I'm sorry. M-Mrs Carstairs, this is James Braithwaite, our assistant stage manager.”

“Currently playing Tommy the Cat because his usual ate some bad eels,” Jimmy explained. He gave Millie an appraising glance. “Delighted to meet you, sir, whatever your real name is.”

Millie’s face fell and, all at once, Miles was back. “Oh – um – what gave me away?”

Jimmy held his fingers about a quarter of an inch apart. “A tiny thing. Don’t forget I spend all day with people pretending to be things they aren’t so I sort of look out for it? And I didn’t remember Rita ever mentioning anyone called Carstairs before. But even so it would have been fine except for when you made that crack about providing a punchline.”

“Really?”

“What you said was all right, and I’ve seen plenty of ladies clench a fist, but I’ve never before seen one who automatically shifted her weight ready to throw a better punch.”

Miles’s lips pursed then he smiled. “Light heavy-weight?” he asked.

“Last time I had the gloves on regularly I was a Welterweight but I keep my hand in.”
Jimmy put out a large furry paw and Miles shook it. “Thank you. I’ll have to watch out for that,” he said then straightened up and tilted his head and there was Millie again. “Don’t think it hasn’t been a joy, but I think maybe we had better be on our way.”

“Right, I’ll see you both later,” Rita said. “And thank you both so much. I’m sure it will make a big difference.”

~*~
ACT THREE

That was where it would probably all have ended if Jimmy hadn’t been such a sweetheart and if Rita hadn’t been as smitten with Jimmy as he was with her. He became a regular at the kitchen table and his enthusiastic appetite as much as his obvious love for Rita made Ron warm to him. His background in theatre made him very accepting of relationships – or at least he did not ask any awkward questions—and if Pritchard ever needed to do something that he, Ron and Miles didn’t have the muscle to manage between them, Jimmy was very eager to offer a helping hand. Soon he was so much a part of the family that in February, when Briers Allerdale came home on leave, there was no question that Jimmy should be at the welcome home dinner. He didn’t ask questions about Miles and Briers either, just pretended not to have noticed that Briers and Miles were holding hands under the table. Pritchard caught Ron’s eye and they exchanged a nod of approval. This boy was very nearly good enough for their Rita!

As the evening went on, and the level of beer in the bottles fell, Jimmy happened to mention December and the pantomime. “If I never have to wear that ruddy cat suit again, it’ll be too soon,” he said.

“You wore it very well,” Miles said. “And Elsie? Did she get that part she was after?”
“Yes, she did.” Rita beamed. “Once all that business with Hodge and Millie was over her confidence came right back.”

“Hodge?” Briers asked. “And Millie?”

There was no way Pritchard and Miles could prevent the story from coming out. Jimmy and Rita tossed the narrative ball back and forth between them – such larks! – while Miles’s face got redder. Briers laughed in all the right places but Pritchard had a feeling he wasn’t as amused as he appeared.

“And how did it work out in the end?” Briers demanded. “I hope Hodge is minding his Ps and Qs?”

“Oh yes,” Rita said. “For the rest of the time he was with us, he kept his hands to himself. But once the panto season finished he moved on. He’s in Silver Wings at the Dominion. Who knows what he’s getting up to there.”

Briers nodded then asked a question about the current play at the Scala which completely changed the subject.

The subject may have been changed but it wasn’t forgotten. The following morning, over breakfast, Briers demanded a proper report from both Miles and Pritchard. Pritchard was inclined to tell him to let bygones be bygones, but Miles was heavy-eyed and blissful and not inclined to deny Briers anything he asked for. His report was full, concise and not the least bit self-deprecating. It had been a really successful operation, of which he was justly proud. Briers showed his approval, showered him with praise and buttonholed Pritchard at the first opportunity.
“So,” he said, “will that bastard have stopped interfering with girls, or do you think he’s still at it, in a new theatre, with a new bunch of victims?”

“Oh, still at it.” Pritchard shrugged, one man of the world to another. “That type of leopard never really changes his spots. Partly through habit, and partly because there are no real consequences.”

“Well, I think a little reminder might be in order,” Briers said and gave Pritchard a grin that was almost completely mirthless.

“Sir.” Pritchard knew that arguing was pointless. “I feel very strongly that you shouldn’t go alone.”

“He knows you.”

“I’ll stay out of sight,” Pritchard promised. “And besides, I know the Dominion. There’s this alleyway – a short cut between the stage door and Hodge’s favourite pub...”

“I like the way you think, Pritchard.” Briers accepted a light for his pipe and puffed it with relish. “Tomorrow night, I think.”

“Not tonight, sir?”

“Oh good Lord, no.” Briers grinned at him through a cloud of fragrant pipe smoke. “I haven’t nearly finished showing Miles how pleased I am to be home. The night after will do.”

Which was how, the night after, Pritchard happened to be at the entrance to an alleyway, with his hat pulled well over his eyes, listening to Hodge whimper in panic as he was told in no uncertain terms just what was expected from him in future.
Consequences – that was the ticket. Stakes even higher than those he’d been imposing on the chorus girls unlucky enough to draw his attention. Not a mark on the man, either, as had been agreed. But then, Briers said, you could cause a lot of damage without leaving a bruise.

“Say it again.”

“He’s behind you,” Hodge faltered, his voice shaking with panic.

“And if you touch someone again, without asking first, who’s going to be behind you?”

“Y-you are!”

“That’s right, and what will I be doing?”

“Making me wish I’d never been born.”

“See, that wasn’t hard, was it? Now stay there and count to ten, then go on your way. And remember …”

“You’ll be watching me.”

“Oh yes.”

Pritchard heard Hodge’s gasp as the pressure on his shoulder joint was released, then Briers, soft-footed, swept past Pritchard and into the street. Pritchard fell in beside him and they matched their pace along Tottenham Court Road.

“All well, sir?” Pritchard asked once sure they hadn’t been followed.

“I think I made an impression,” Briers said. His voice had relaxed for the first time since hearing that Miles had deliberately put himself in harm’s way. “No need to worry
about him checking up on us. I think he’ll be far more concerned with his wet trousers.”

“Ah, so no chance he’ll forget this in a hurry?”

“I hope not.” Briers snorted. “Ugh, I can’t bear that kind of thing when it happens to anyone! But when it happens to someone you ... care about it really strikes home, you know?”

“It does indeed, sir.” Come to think of it, Pritchard had never actually come right out and said he loved Ron either, but that ‘care about’ was just as good as, in his opinion. He smiled. “Sounds like a job well done to me, sir. There’s the Rising Sun. Have we got time to for me to buy you a drink?”

Briers glanced at his wrist watch. “Oh go on, just a quick one. We can say my meeting ran late. Not a word to Miles, mind.”

Pritchard would keep his promise just as he would keep his promise to Miles not to tell Briers about the colleague who had put that sad little break in Miles’s voice. What was sauce for the goose was sauce for the gander, and besides, he didn’t want murder done. “Not a word, sir,” he said and lead the way into the pub.

End

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Miles Siward and Briers Allerdale will be back for another Jazz Age adventure in Midnight Flit.