The Red Witch

Or The Wooing Of Constantia.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A sob burst from her. And at this instant the door was opened softly, and Constantia entered.

"In the dark, dear? To sit in the dark like this—oh, it is very wrong of you!" she said, with tender scolding.

She had just parted with Stronge, who had brought her to the hall-door, and she was feeling singularly nervous; but the sight of Lady Varley standing in the moonlight, in her straight, clinging white gown, had somehow given her courage. How could she tell her miserable tale—how warn her of this last crowning act of treachery on her husband's part, if that pale, patient face was plain to her? Better in darkness, where its agony, its cruel indignation might be hidden. Alas! what a terrible task was hers, to make even sadder this already too sad woman!

Then somehow she told her, getting through the hateful story without let or hindrance from Lady Varley, who never opened her lips from the beginning of it to the end.

"I give it to you as I heard it. It may not be true," said Constantia at the close, in a very agony of nervous dread.

"It is true," said Lady Varley. Her voice was quiet, but distinct and cold. "This is the end, then."

"Why should it be?" cried Constantia hotly. "Why should you so tamely give in? Oh, rouse yourself, Yolande, and try to stop this scandal! If one were to go to her—to reason with her—to threaten exposure!"

"What would such as she care about exposure?" said Lady Varley with cold contempt.

"Well, let him be reasoned with," advised Constantia. "He would, in all probability be more open to a good influence than she. But who would you choose to speak to him?"

"No one. I shall go myself tonight," said Lady Varley, with termination. She rose from her chair.

"So late! Be advised, dear, do not," said Constantia, entreatingly. "Or at least take me with you; or—Mr. Stronge."

"Mr. Stronge! Where is he?"

"In the avenue, waiting for me," confessed Constantia, slyly.

Lady Varley regarded her keenly.

"Are you going to marry him?" she asked.

"Yes."

"I am glad of that. Heartily glad. For you at least there is a sure chance of happiness. Well, you and he shall arrange this matter for me—come."

The old town clock struck ten as the train steamed slowly into the station. For once, therefore, it was on time. It was a dark night, murky and rather chill; the wind had risen and there was a suspicion of rain in the air.

As he stepped into the fuller darkness outside he ran up against Featherston.

"Ah! You, Dundas!" said he as if astounded.

"And no other," returned Dundas, laughing. "I might be my own ghost, so satisfactorily have I surprised every one I have met by this sudden return; but the fact is that fellow Hawkins has been troublesome again. You know—I've told you a thousand times, I dare say—how I have sworn to put down these poaching affrays, no matter what time or trouble it costs me; and this morning I had a telegram from Jeffreys telling me of a serious attack made last night on the young pheasants."

"I heard of it; but I really think Jeffreys exaggerated the affair. He's a conscientious zealous fellow, it must be allowed, but point de zele, you know, is excellent advice in most matters. I fear the honest Jeffreys has rather overdone it this time, and given you your journey for nothing. Mrs. Dundas will thank Jeffreys, no doubt. She did not come to meet you?"

"No; in fact, I—er—I didn't tell her I was coming. I thought I'd take her by surprise," said John Dundas, a little shyly, but with such a ring of expectant happiness in his voice as convinced Featherston that his belief in his wife was perfect, and that, as yet, no suspicion had crept in. That he had done a vilely cruel thing in giving a chance for the entrance of this suspicion did not disturb him.

"Mrs. Dundas does not know you are coming, then?" He asked the question to make himself entirely sure of the fact that the comedy promised would not prove a failure.

"No; I really had hardly a moment to send her word," said Dundas, who was beginning to be rather ashamed of the schoolboy longing to take some one unawares that had possessed him when he decided on keeping his sudden home-coming secret from his darling.

All this was news to Featherston, though the sending of the telegram was not. He had squared Jeffreys about that, and close-lipped as he was, had not held back from such a bribe as induced the man to do his bidding. He had only meant, however, to bring back Dundas a day too soon upon the scene, and so spoil Donna's plans, for the present at all events. The future might see him victorious, too! He owed her something, and in this wise sought to pay it.

But now, he told himself, the plot was thickening of its own accord—at least without help from him. How if madame was receiving her friend to-night! The friend was always at her beck and call, he had been told, in season and out of it. How if the two men should meet—the trusting husband, the too welcome lover! Ah! here was a real vengeance laid ready to his hand, without cost of thought, or plan, or plot. A slow smile stole over his face; his hand stroked down his blonde moustache, with a view to concealing it.

He shook hands in the friendliest way, and the night was too dark to permit of Mr. Dundas' seeing the smile of cruel amusement that curved his lips as the last words escaped him. Mr. Dundas disappeared into the windy night, and moved steadily onwards towards his home.

The soft, misty rain that now was falling and beating against his face only seemed to refresh him. He walked rapidly, with an elastic step, feeling that each moment brought him nearer to her. His heart was full of delight. He felt indeed almost absurdly happy, and an inclination to laugh aloud overtook him now and then, as he thought of how her beautiful face would light up with a glad surprise as he stepped into her presence, and how her clear, sweet laugh would ring out when he confessed to her his foolish fancy to surprise her, had brought him to the level of the most youthful love-sick swain.

He at reached the entrance gate at last, and entered the long avenue, now dark as Erebus, because of the overhanging branches. He struck a match, and saw by his watch that it was five minutes past eleven. So late! He hoped she had not gone to bed. If so, his sweet programme would be in a measure spoiled. He felt sufficiently ashamed of his uproarious longing to take some one unawares that had possessed him when he decided on keeping his sudden home-coming secret from his darling.

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