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"Love in the Wilds"

—OR—
The Romance of a South African Trading Station.

CHAPTER LXVIII.
RETRIBUTION.

"Where is the secretary?" he asked of the discreet footman, who stood behind the hall porter, ready to receive the coat and hat of his lord and master.

"The secretary, sir?" replied the footman, staring. "Did he not go with you, sir?"

"No," curtly answered his master. "Where has he gone?"

The man does not know; he explains with evident fear and trembling that Mr. Stanfield had the Captain's cob saddled and brought round and started within half an hour or so of the captain himself.

The master stared for a moment with astonished anger, then paced the grand mosaic-tiled hall and ascended the wide and Turkey-carpeted stairs. "Tell Mr. Stanfield to wait my bell within his room," he said, and passed on to the room that at infinite expense had been made sound-tight and secretive as the tomb.

At the door he turned again, and in a voice which sounded unnaturally indifferent gave orders that any lady wishing to see him should be admitted at once, without question.

This done he touched the secret spring and entered the room.

It smelled close and stifling; and with a long breath of weariness and suppressed excitement the defeated schemer, by the aid of a small taper, proceeded to light the small opal-studded lamp.

Then he sank into a chair, disregarding his hat, that fell on the floor and rolled beneath the table.

He sat staring at the wall, quiet at last, to think.

But he can not; all he can do is to sit quiet and motionless, tracing the pattern of the wall-paper, and murmuring:

"The will found! Hugh Darrell returned! The Dale lost!"

Gradually the stupor disappeared, cleared off before the exercise of his stern will, and he raised himself a little in his chair and resumed the tracing of the paper.

But another and more fearful feeling superseded the stupor.

He can think; but of what did he think?

Not of the future, which alone he desired to ponder and consider, but of the past—the black, hideous, crime-stained past!

Across the splendid Turkey carpet, moving with the slow, monotonous regularity of a shadowy, phantom, de-

sert caravan his past deeds parade. He sees himself on the wall, a vicious, heartless, yet ambitious man, a club lounge and gambler.

He sees a weak, beautiful woman—girl, rather—clinging to him with all the trusting helplessness of a wrongful love.

On glides the panorama and shows him himself, changed not, but developed into the schemer for the squire's wealth.

Darker grows the picture, and he recoils in the chair as he sees the weak, girlish form of the ballet girl hanging upon him and withering beneath his cruel, heartless, unmanly words of desertion. He sees what he has not seen in reality, but pictured often, that graceful form, that girlish, trusting face lying dead—dead—upon the floor; dead by her hand, which his cruelty has nerved to—suicide!

Ah! He shrinks, cowers beneath that picture there upon the gaudy carpet till the cold drops of perspiration stand like icicles upon his white brow. But the panorama goes on and grows darker.

Now comes another girlish form, shrinking from his unhalloved mockery of love—shrinking, flying—and leaves a white-haired old man, who, raising himself on his bed, shrieks for mercy, while the murderous hands choke the life-breath from his old, parched lips.

Still on, and more swiftly, the phantom glides past, and the pictures change and glow with gold. The shrinking, fascinated plotter beholds himself enshrined in success.

Wealth flows about him in rivers of gold. Luxury waits upon his footsteps, and another woman crosses his path—this time a stately, queenly form, with a coronet upon her brow and a dreamy look of undying purpose within her eyes.

The silent, solitary watcher sees that this is the woman, Lucille Vitarelli, his last dupe, who is to meet him to-night—for whom he now waits.

And as he looks, half waking from his sleepless dream, with a mocking smile at the phantoms his overwrought brain has conjured up, the figure of the woman is obscured by a dark shadow and is already, somehow or other—how, he knows not—the likeness of treason and death.

This is the last strain upon his calmness.

With a suffocating cry he rises from the chair and staggers upright.

"Mercy!" he shrieked. "Mercy! Help!"

But the walls gave back the sound that could not pierce them.

He might shriek with the agony of the lost, outpoured in one long yell, and the dreadful room would keep his despairing rage confined and unheard.

Oh, it was fearful! Never was death more hideous! Outside the footsteps of the passers-by echo with irregular fitfulness. Outside, separated from him by a few bricks, are living men and women, who could save him if they could but hear.

But no, no, there was no help; and, maddened by the thought, he sprang upon the first masked face, and as he sprang received the glittering steel in his heart.

Once, twice, thrice the weapons pierced his quivering form; and then as he lay, a mere lump of lifeless, blood-stained clay, curled by the last agony upon the gaudy carpet, the unseen, unknown avengers of treason

The visions were dispelled, but the reality was approaching; for, even as he pressed his hot hand across his fevered forehead, he mutters, hoarsely:

"I have been asleep and dreaming. I am tired, worn out, and not myself. Let me be calm—Lucille will be here soon!"

The door opened noiselessly and the queenly form of Lucille, Countess Vitarelli, stood before him.

He almost believed himself still mocked by a dream; but a long look at the figure, which he noted almost unconsciously was garbed in black, and at the face, which was white as death and strangely stern, he knew that it was her in the flesh.

"Lucille!" he cried, springing forward. "You have come, my queen? I am ready and waiting. I am tired, and have just returned—"

He stopped, struck silent by the expression of her white face.

It had become stone-like and rigid with majestic hate and scorn.

"Lucille!" he breathed, stepping back and staring at her. "What—for the love of Heaven—what is the matter? Are you ill? Has aught happened? Speak!"

She spoke.

"Reginald Dartmouth, look upon that!"

And she extended her white arm, in the hand of which was a small miniature.

He approached, frozen with astonishment, and, bending, looked.

Astonishment gave place to fear, and as he recognized the small, girlish face, he thrust his hand within his bosom, as if to feel for something.

His hand fell to his side and, with a look of fear, he muttered:

"Gone!"

"Know you that face?" came from the stern lips of the countess.

He could not deny it; something intangible yet all-powerful compelled him to speak the truth.

"Yes," he breathed, fearfully, "it is—"

"The woman—nay, the child—you ruined, deserted—murdered!" broke in the stern, stone-like voice of his confronter. "The face of the poor, helpless ballet girl whom you left to die—the face of Ida Vitarelli, the sister I have sworn to avenge!"

Hard, metallic, awful in its unchanging monotone, the voice spoke these words.

Their effect was still more awful.

The listener shrank, cowered, and at last fell speechless, breathless, huddled up, like a man stricken with palsy, in the large, luxurious chair.

Pitiless as the stone she resembled, the Italian approached and held out a long slip of paper.

His eyes stared at it unmeaningly, senselessly.

"Look at this, murderer," she said, "and know thyself a still-baser, viler reptile—a traitor! Whatever crimes those cowardly, fensh hands have wrought Heaven alone may know; but this, their last, waits for punishment!"

At the last word he resumed something of his old tigerish courage, and, with a growl of fiendish rage, he sprang from his chair to clutch the convincing paper.

But before his trembling, claw-like fingers could grasp it the accuser stepped back, the door opened as noiselessly as before, and two dark, shadowy forms stood between him and her.

He turned and looked, his hair stood on end as his starting eyes confronted the hideous masks of crape and the flashing, murderous eyes that pierced them.

"Mercy!" he shrieked. "Mercy! Help!"

But the walls gave back the sound that could not pierce them.

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Jnc28, eod, it

departed and left the sound-tight room closed upon its awful occupant.

CHAPTER LXIX.

"WE ARE TOO LATE!"

Short is the date in which ill acts prevail. But honesty's rock can never fail.—STEELE.

Within a few hours Hugh Darrell and the constables had come up with their game and were knocking at the door of his retreat.

The hall porter, thinking the summons that of the secretary returned, hastened to unfasten the huge door, and started back with consternation on seeing three police officers and a gentleman, who, without further parley, quietly stepped into the hall and demanded to see Captain Dartmouth.

"Captain Dartmouth?" repeated the funky, losing the little presence of mind he ever possessed.

"Yes—your master," sternly replied Hugh. "Come, sir; no hesitation. We have a warrant for his apprehension."

The inspector, as an addendum, produced the formidable document.

"Warrant? Bless me!" echoed the man. "Well, gentlemen, the captain is in his room—first door to your right. Here, James; show these gentlemen to the captain's room," and as Hugh, followed by the officers, bounded up the stairs, he retreated to his sentry-box, muttering:

"Warrant, eh? Well, I always thought the captain was no good by his looks. Where's my quarter's salary to come from if he's taken, I wonder?"

Hugh, following the no less startled footman, entered the unoccupied ante-chamber to the captain's private room and cast his stern eyes round the splendid apartment with one anxious glance.

(To be continued.)



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Not What the Parson Meant.

With many sobs and repetitions, the good woman had told her tale of woe to the vicar.

It was full of "E ses" and "I ses to 'im," but the clergyman listened patiently till she had finished.

"I'm sorry, my dear lady," he said sympathetically. "Certainly your husband does seem to treat you rather unkindly; but remember that you took him for better or for worse."

"Well, it's allus bin for wuss, s'far as I kin see," replied the visitor, dabbing her eyes with what only politeness could call a pocket-handkerchief.

"Have you tried to cure him with kindness?" pleaded the vicar. "Have you tried heaping coals of fire on his head?"

"No, I ain't, sir," replied the woman, grateful for the new idea. "So far, I've only tried 'ot water."

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