

REDMOND O'DONNELL

LE CHASSEUR D'AFRIQUE.

CHAPTER XV.—CONTINUED.

She looked up, aroused from her trance. "Send him in, by all means," she said. "Let us see how generous, Peter Dangerfield can be."

"You are," responded Mr. Mansfield, curtly, "and you deal with that poor child in her trouble, may the good, just God deal with you. I shall remain here and take her home with me to-night if she will come."

"I think it extremely likely she will go," he said. "The two-story brick dwelling of Mr. Mansfield, the solicitor, will be rather an awkward change after the gayety and grandeur of Scarswood, but then—beggars mustn't be choosers."

"You have had your day, my lady," he said, "and you walked over our heads with a ring and a clatter. You queened it right royally over us, and now the wheel has turned, and my turn has come. There is not a slight, not a sneer, not an insult of yours, my lady, which I will not repay to-night."

"I'm going out, Ninon—I am going to Castleford. It may be close upon midnight before I return, and the house will probably be shut up. Wait for me at the door in the southern turret, and when I knock let me in."

"No, Katherine—I wonder if your name really is Katherine, by the way; I must ask Mrs. Vavasor: I came here at old Mansfield's request to talk business and money matters. How nice it is for you, my dear, to have so many friends in the hour of your downfall—the Talbotts, the Mansfields, and that heavy dragon, de Vere, who will do anything under Heaven for you—well, except, perhaps, marry you. And you look like a queen uncrowned—to-night, my tall, stately Miss Dangerfield—not good-looking, you know, my dear—you never were that—but majestic and dignified, and uplifted and all that sort of thing. Ah! how are the mighty fallen, indeed! Only a fortnight ago you stood here rutiling like a very princess, on my soul, monarch of all you surveyed; and now—there isn't a beggar on the streets of Castleford poorer than you."

"She stood dead silent, looking at him. How his eyes gleamed—how glibly his venomous tongue ran. His little form actually seemed to dilate and grow tall in this hour of his triumph."

"And that other night?" he went on; "do you remember it, Kathie? Oh, let me call you by the old familiar name to the last! That other night when I—a poor, pettifogging attorney—like I think I have heard Mr. Dantree call me—I had the presumption in the conservatory to ask you to be my wife. It was presumptuous, and I richly deserved the rebuff I got for my pains; I deserved even to be called a 'rickety dwarf!' No one knows it better than I. You the heiress of Scarswood, and I not worth a rap. If I had been good-looking, even like that angelic Dantree, with a face and voice of a seraph; but ugly and a dwarf, and only an attorney without, you served me precisely right, Katherine. You adored beauty, and Dantree was at your feet; you worshipped him, and he worshipped you—fortune; a very common story. What a pity the Fates did not make us both handsome instead of clever. What chance has brains against beauty—particularly in a woman? You served me right, Katherine, and, in return, I am to come before you to-night, and offer you three thousand pounds—mine to give or keep as I please."

"Go on," she said, in a perfectly steady voice. He came a step nearer. What did that strange demoniac light in his eyes mean now? She saw it but she never flinched.

and revenge had given him a diabolical courage to say what he never would have dared to say in cold blood. But at the last word he drew back. He was a coward to the core, and she had shown herself before now to have the furz of a very paider. And they were alone—she might murder him before he could reach the door. His first impulse was flight; and she saw it.

"Stop!" she cried, and he stood as still as though he had been shot. "You coward! You cur!" No words can tell the concentrated scorn of her low, level voice. "You have said it, and now hear me. This is your hour—mine will come. And here, before Heaven, by my dead father's memory, I swear to be revenged. Living, I shall pursue you to the very ends of the earth—dead, I will come back from the grave, if the dead can! For every word you have spoken to-night, you shall pay dearly—dearly! I have only one thing left to live for now, and that is my vengeance on you. The fortune you have taken I will wrest from you yet—the shame, the misery, the disgrace that is mine, you shall feel in your turn. I swear it! Look to yourself, Peter Dangerfield! Living, I will hunt you down—dead I will return and torment you! Now go."

"Katherine," he said, "do go on the stage. You'll be an ornament to the profession, and will turn an honest penny. That speech, that attitude, that gesture, that tone were worthy the immortal Rachel herself. With the stage lamps, and an appropriate costume, a speech half so melodramatic would bring down the house. And if you die, you'll haunt me! Don't die, Kathie—you're too clever a woman to be lost to the world. And ghosts, my dear, went out of fashion with the Castle of Otranto and the Mysteries of Udolpho. Think over my proposal, my dear, and good-night."

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The landlord shook his head. "I don't know, Miss Dangerfield. She goes but very seldom and never stays long. This way, if you please."

"This be Mrs. Vavasor's sitting-room. Take a seat by the fire, Miss Kathie, and I desay she'll be along soon." He went out and closed the door. Katherine stood in the centre of the room and looked about her with a certain amount of curiosity in her face. The room was furnished after the stereotyped fashion of such rooms. A few French novels scattered about were the only things to betoken the individuality of the occupant. The door from the chamber opening from this apartment stood ajar, and looking in with the same searching gaze something familiar caught the girl's eye on a table.

The bed was an old-fashioned four-poster, hung unbecomingly with curtains. Beside this bed was a little table, scattered over with dog-eared novels, Parisienne fashion books, boubonnaires hand-mirrors, and other womanly litter. In the centre stood an Indian box of rare beauty and workmanship. Katherine recognized it in a moment. It was one of hers, a farewell gift from a military friend when leaving India. She remembered how more than once Mrs. Vavasor had admired it among the other Indian treasures in her room, how all at once it vanished mysteriously, and now, here it was—Katherine's short upper lip curled scornfully.

"So," she said, "you are a thief, as well as an intrigante, an adventures. You have stolen my box. Let us see to what use you have put poor little Bessie Brandon's gift." She walked deliberately into the sleeping-room and took up the cushion. It closed and locked with a secret spring—she touched it and the lid flew back. It contained a slim packet of letters tied with ribbon, and an old-fashioned miniature painted in ivory, in a case of velvet ornamented with seed pearls. In every nature there are depths of evil that come to light under the influence of adversity. Who is not virtuous, untempted—who is not honorable, untried? The dark side of Katherine's nature that might have lain dormant and unsuspected even by herself forever in the sunshine of prosperity, was asserting itself now. She deliberately read the address on the letters. The paper was yellow with time, the ink faded, but the firm, masculine hand was perfectly legible still. "Miss Harriet Leclaire, 35 Rosemary Place, Kensington"—that was the address.

She turned from the letters, pressed the spring of the picture case, and looked at the portrait within. Like the letters, time had faded it, but the bold, masculine, boyish face smiled at her with a brightness that even a score of years could not mar. It was the eager, handsome, beardless face of youth in the first flush of manhood, with lips that smiled, and eyes that were alive.

"A brave, gentlemanly face, Katherine thought. 'What could a man like this ever have to do with her? Is this the lover she spoke of, from whom my mother parted her? Are these letters from him? Was her name Harriet Leclaire, instead of Harman? You may keep my Indian box, Mrs. Vavasor, and welcome, and I will keep its contents.'" With the same steady deliberation she put the letters and picture in her pocket, and walked back into the other room. There was a hard light in her eyes, an expression on her face not pleasant to see.

"On the road I am walking there is no turning back. To accomplish the aim of my life I must do to others as I have been done by. Mrs. Vavasor and Peter Dangerfield shall find me an apt pupil. Ah—at last! here she is!" She turned and faced the door. As she did so, it was thrown impetuously open, and the woman she hated stood before her.

It was Mrs. Vavasor's last night in Castleford—her last night; she had made up her mind for ever. The romance and revenge, and the triumph of her life were finished and done. She had wrought out her vendetta to the bitter end. Her price had been paid twice over. With twenty thousand pounds as her fortune, she would return to Paris, launch out into a life of splendor, and end by marrying a title.

"I am still young—still handsome—by gaslight," she mused, standing before the mirror, and surveying herself critically. "I am one of those fortunate women who wear well and light up well. The French are right in saying you can't tell a woman from a great by lamplight. With my twenty thousand pounds, my knowledge of this wicked world, my host of friends, what a life lies before me in my own delightful city of sunshine. Yes, to-morrow I go; there is nothing to linger in this stupid, plodding country town for longer—unless—unless—it be to see her in her downfall!"

She paced softly up and down the little sitting-room. The hour was early twilight, an hour Mrs. Vavasor hated. Hers were no tender twilight memories to come with the misty stars. Gaunt spectres of crime, and shame, and poverty haunted horribly the dark record that lay behind this woman. So the curtains were drawn, and the lamp lit, and the frelight flickered on the masses of braided black hair and the trailing robe of white silk.

Everything had gone so well! She had had her vengeance, and made her fortune at one clever throw, and after a long life of Parisian pleasures and Parisian life floated before her in a rosy mist. With the opera tune on her lips she opened her door and stood face to face with—Katherine Dangerfield.

She stood stock still. The song died on her lips, the sudden swift pallor that overspread her face showed through all the pearl powder she wore. She had said she was a coward, and she was not, but in this hour she stood afraid to the very core, to face this girl she had wronged.

Katherine had arisen and stood behind her, and Katherine was the first to speak. "Come in Mrs. Vavasor—the room is your own. And you need not look such a picture of abject terror. I haven't come here to murder you—to-night."

Her voice was perfectly clear, perfectly steady. An angry salliness came to the older woman's relief. She came in, closed the door, and faced defiantly her foe. "This is a most unexpected pleasure, Miss Katherine Dangerfield. To what do I owe it?"

"And as unwelcome as unexpected, Mrs. Vavasor, is it not? To what do you owe it? Will, there are women alive—or girls, if you will, for I am only a girl—who would have given you back death for less ruin than you have wrought me. Oh, yes, Mrs. Vavasor, I mean what I say—death! But I am not of that sort; I am one of the pacific kind, and I content myself by coming here and only asking a few questions I perceive there was no time to lose. I hear you leave Castleford to-morrow."

"I do." The widow's thin lips were shut in a hard, unpleasant line now, and her voice was sullen. "Permit me to add that I am in somewhat of a hurry, and that the hour is late. I must pack before I retire. I quit Castleford to-morrow by the very first train."

"Ah! Naturally, Castleford can't be a pleasant place for you to remain. You are not popular here at present, Mrs. Vavasor. I will not detain you long. Of course it is at your own option whether you answer my questions or not."

"Of course. What can I do for you, Miss Dangerfield?" She threw herself into a chair, stretched out her daintily booted feet to the fire, and looked across with the same defiant face at her enemy. And yet her heart misgave her. That colorless face, with its tense, set expression, its curious calm frightened her more than any words, any threats could have done.

Katherine turned her grave eyes from the fire, clasped her hands together on the little table between them, and leaned slightly forward as she spoke. "Miss Dangerfield is not my name. You are the only one who knows. Will you tell me what it is?"

"No—decidedly."

stopped forward, interposed her want of authority, and lo! to-day, and for the past eighteen years, I have been a Bohemian—houseless, friendless, penniless, and reputationless. Now, listen—here is the story. No names, mind; no questions when I have done. All you are to know I will tell you. Your father lives—you have hosts of relatives alive, for that matter, but I don't mean you shall ever see or know any of them."

She sank back in her chair, played with her watch-chain, looked at the fire, and told her story in rapid words. "Your mother was just my age when I first knew her—a little the elder, I think—and just married. She wasn't handsome, but somehow she was attractive—most people liked her—I did myself for a time. And she was a great heiress, she was the wife of the handsomest man in England, and she loved him—ah, well, as you loved poor Mr. Dantree, perhaps, and not much more wisely."

"I lived with her—never mind in what capacity; I lived with her, and knew more of her than any other human being alive, including her husband. Indeed after the honeymoon—and how he used to yawn and smoke during the honeymoon—he saw as little of her as possible. She was the woman he was married to, and the woman he loved was as beautiful as all the angels, and not worth a farthing. It's a very old state of things, Miss Dangerfield—nothing novel about it. Your mother was frantically jealous, and having the temper of a spoiled child, made his life—I mean, made your father's life, a martyrdom, with endless tears and reproaches. When she sat sobbing sometimes, swelling her eyes, and reddening her nose, and looking very ugly, I used to pity her, and once I ventured to offer my humble sympathy, and call my—her husband a wretch. Do you know how she received it? She jumped up and slapped my face."

"I am glad to hear it," Katherine said, with composure. "She served you right."

"Ah! no doubt! You would have done the same, I am sure. Well, it was about that time the romance of my life began. Your mother's brother came from Ireland to make her a visit, and we met. He was only twenty; I was your age, seventeen. He was handsome and poor—your mother had got all the money, he all the beauty of the family, I was—my modesty makes me hesitate to say it—considered pretty in those days—that is, in a certain gypsy style of prettiness. It was a style that suited him, at least, and we looked at each other, and fell in love, and earth turned to Paradise, and we were among the blest."

"I don't need to tell you what followed, do I?—the meetings by chance, the appointments, the twilight walks, the moonlight rambles, the delicious blissful folly of it all? No need to tell you—your own experience is recent. Let me skip the sentimental and recent to hard facts. A month passed—courtship progresses rapidly with two people of twenty and seventeen. We were engaged and we must be married at once, or life would be insupportable. But how? Youthful of twenty and girls of seventeen cannot marry clandestinely and yet legally in England, except under very great difficulties—under perjury, in fact. As deeply as he adored me, he was not prepared to perjure himself on my account. We must try a Scotch marriage for it—there was nothing else—and think about the legality afterward. He was poor—I was poorer. What were we to live on after marriage was tried to answer it—we must be married first at all risks—time enough to think of all these prosaic details after."

"No one suspected our secret—his folly and my presumption, that is what they termed it. We had fixed the day of our flight—we had packed our portmanteaus—in less than a week we would be in Scotland, and united as fast as Scotch marriage laws can unite, when all of a sudden my father—your mother's sharp, grave eyes were opened and saw the truth. A note of his to me fell into her hands and she opened it and read it. Not an honorable thing to do—oh, Katherine? It told her all—of our flight in two days, of our proposed marriage—all."

"I have told you, Katherine, that you are like your mother. You are. You have taken all your troubles quietly, and made no outcry, no complaint. She took things quietly, too. Three hours after she got that note she came to me, quiet, composed, and determined."

"Harriet," she said, "I am going into the country for a day—only a day. Pack a few things and be ready to accompany me in an hour."

"I stood confounded. He was away; what would he say when he came back. But it was impossible for me to disobey, and then—only for a day. We would be back in time after all."

speaking. And then I got up and went downstairs and—kept silent, still, and waited."

"Two months passed away—two months, an eternity, then? My order of release came at the end of that time. Old Maskham the butler, was sent for me, and I was taken back to town. I asked him just one question on the road."

"Where was young Mr.—?" and I got the answer I looked for. Mr.— had joined the 1st Rifles, and gone out to Canada a fortnight before."

"I said no more. I went back to town, and your mother and I met. She looked a little afraid of me in that first moment—and she had reason."

"You must forgive my running away and leaving you, Harriet," she said. "It was a whim of mine, a practical joke, knowing how you hate the country, you child of London. It won't happen again, and I have heaps of presents for you that I know you will be charmed with."

"I thanked her, and took the presents— took everything that was given to me, and bided my time. I knew, just as well as though she had told me, how she had laughed and ridiculed her brother into the army, and out of England. I knew it all, and she knew that I knew it, but we never spoke of it—never once—until the hour of her death."

"There, Katherine! that is my story; that is the secret of my hatred of your mother. Don't you think she deserved it?"

"From you—yes," Katherine answered promptly; "at the same time I think she did exactly right. She knew what you were, doubtless, and took the only means of saving her brother. Gentlemen and officers don't as a rule, marry their sisters' waiting-maids."

Mrs. Vavasor sprang to her feet. That random arrow had sped home. "It is false!" she gasped. "I was no waiting-maid—you knew nothing—"

"It is true!" exclaimed Katherine, also rising. "You were a waiting-maid—and I know all I desire to know at present. My mother was a lady, her brother was an officer in the 1st Rifles, my father lives, and will recognize his old servant when he sees her, Harriet Leclaire!"

Mrs. Vavasor stood white, terrified, dumb. Good Heavens! What a fool she had been to speak at all to such a girl as this.

She was singing softly to herself as she ascended the stairs.

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