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"Love in the Wilds"

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

CHAPTER XXVIII.
A Page From a Romance.

Reginald Dartmouth sat and pondered a little while, then rose and walked to one of the saloons. It was a high gala night, and many of the artists from the opera house were filtered through the concert rooms of the duchess. Some were preparing to sing as he entered, and the guests were seated in front of the velvet-covered platform, lounging on the fauteuils and against the huge marble pillars and strolling round the balconies and corridors.

Reginald Dartmouth had little difficulty in finding the count.

His white head was seen shining amid a small group of Italians and Englishmen conversing at one of the deep windows.

As he sauntered toward them the eagle eyes of the old Italian caught sight of him, and a quick smile of welcome and recognition passed over his intellectual face.

He left the group as Reginald Dartmouth came toward it, and, linking his arm through his, said:

"Ah, captain, I have been looking for you everywhere! This place is like a wilderness; our palaces are nothing to it, though they have the name for hugeness. Ah, you English are the grand people in everything!"

Captain Dartmouth smiled.

"And yet we have not eclipsed the fame of your countrymen, my lord. Enough is still left of ancient Rome to remind us of our littleness."

"Ah, Rome!" sighed the count, shooting a sharp glance of scrutiny at the impassable face above him. "Ah, Rome! Poor Rome! Captain Dartmouth, to hear that name is to feel the opening of a wound. Rome! You touch a chord when you speak of it, a chord that is as fresh and as sharp within this old heart as when it first rang out to the grand name. Italy! Rome! There are hundreds—nay, thousands—of Italians ready to die for the mere names."

Reginald Dartmouth looked interested.

"And not only Italians, my lord," he answered, throwing a fire into his low voice that thrilled the heart of the old Italian, "but Englishmen. Rome belongs to all the world in one sense, and when the cry for liberty goes up more than the Italians will help to swell the chorus."

Punctually at the hour appointed he stood in the shadow of the portico waiting for the countess and Madam Campani.

Carriage after carriage rolled away with clatter and importance, but still she did not come; but, as he had almost decided to give the venture up, at least for that night, he saw her splendid equipage dash up, and in a few minutes felt that queer sensation at the heart which always warned him of her approach.

She came down the steps looking more beautiful than ever, flushed and sparkling with the homage of the courtiers who thronged round her eager and anxious to be of some service in connection with her train or bouquet.

As she stepped upon the piece of crimson carpet that lined the way to the carriage he came forward, and with a slight start, she said:

"Senor—captain, we have been waiting. The count is—"

"Here," said that individual, coming down the steps behind them.

The countess placed her hand on his arm and, followed by Reginald, they entered the carriage.

The count, after addressing a few words to the countess in a voice too low for Reginald Dartmouth to hear, bent forward and said:

"I have been communicating to the countess your decision to join us. She is the keystone, the center-piece of the society, and we do nothing without her consent, help, and advice."

Reginald bowed.

"You are wise, my lord," he said, significantly.

The countess bent forward.

"The count tells me you will join us," she said, in a low voice that thrilled through his heart. "Are you aware of the risk, the danger, and responsibilities that attend us?"

Reginald Dartmouth dropped his voice to a murmur with hers and fixed a meaning glance upon her large, dark eyes.

"For the first I know and care nothing; for the last," he said; "I am willing to undertake the heaviest you may see fit to place upon me."

"Good!" she said, musically; "you speak like an Englishman—bravely! It is well, for we have need of brave and wise men. We are going rapidly to our place of meeting. I need not tell Captain Dartmouth that its existence is a secret and that we place more than our lives—our cause—in his hands when we lead him thither."

"Both are more sacred to him than his own life," responded Reginald Dartmouth, earnestly; and the lovely woman, apparently satisfied with the answers to her questions, sank back into the silken cushions.

Half an hour passed and the silence remained unbroken.

Reginald Dartmouth could see by the dim light of the street lamps as the carriage passed them that the count's face was anxious and thoughtful, and that the sweet one of the countess was dreamy and wistful.

His own he kept well within the shadow of the carriage.

Presently the carriage came to a stop and the steps were let down.

The count alighted first and assisted the countess. As Reginald Dartmouth was about to follow two men stepped from out the darkness and threw a cloth of some sort over his head fastening it, with the rapidity developed by constant practice, across his eyes so that he was in total darkness.

Before he could resent the action the countess whispered in his ear:

"It is a form merely and can not be broken—even for you. Take my hand."

He grasped her hand eagerly with a flash of delight.

"For this," he interrupted, pressing it, "I would lose life itself!"

"Hush!" she said in a low voice.

"There are stairs," said the count, on the other side of him. "I will count—one, two three, etc."

And he counted them as Reginald Dartmouth, still led by the small hand of the countess, ascended.

The stairs ceased and, by the sudden glow of heat, Reginald Dartmouth knew that he had entered a room.

There was a dead silence for a minute or two and then a voice said:

"Now!"

At that moment, obeying the signal, the count untied the bandage, and Reginald Dartmouth, opening his eyes, saw that he was in a large room, draped with dark-purple hangings and lighted by a candelabra sus-

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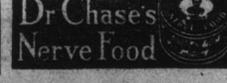
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