

REDMOND O'DONNELL

LE CHASSEUR D'AFRIQUE.

CHAPTER XVII.—Continued.

"Oh, among his poor patients somewhere—he will be along to see presently. Any news to-night, doctor? I mean—"

"You mean the Scarswood tragedy, of course, ma'am—nobody in Sussex, I believe, talks of anything else latterly. No, no news, and no news in this case does not mean good news. The funeral is over, as you know, and there is no will, and everything falls to that pitiful, pettifoggish little scrow of an attorney, Peter Dangerfield—everything, Mrs. Otis—everything. He's Sir Peter now; and among all the baronets who have reigned at Scarswood since the days of James I., I don't believe such a baronet ever disgraced a good old name. She's not got a rap, not a farthing, ma'am—poor as a church mouse, and poorer, for charity makes itself, if they get a chance, and she can't. She's got to work now, Mrs. Otis—got to go out into the hard world and earn the bread and beef of everyday life. Nursery governess or something of that sort; she isn't qualified even for that, poor thing! poor thing!"

"But, Doctor Graves, this seems a little too dreadful—too cruel. Where are all her friends—all our resident gentry? Must all turn their backs upon her because she chances not to be Sir John's first daughter?"

"She's down in the world, Mrs. Otis, and it's the way of the world to speed the miserable sinner who falls with a parting kick. Still in this case a few have come forward and offered her a home generously enough—the Talbots, for instance, and old Mansfield the lawyer. But she's a young woman of a very uncommon stamp, ma'am, and charity's charity, gloss it over as you may. She has acted very strangely from the first, in the last way any reasonable man expects. But you never can tell by what you previously knew of her how a woman will act in any given emergency. The Turks and other heathens who don't treat them as rational beings are in the right of it. They're not! Don't laugh, Mrs. Otis, it's nothing to laugh at. There's that young woman! Quick-tempered, passionate, proud, generous, loving, just the sort of a young woman to break out into tears and hysterics, and sob and reproaches, making the place too hot for everybody, tearing her hair and rending her garments. Well, how does she act instead? She sits there like a stone, never says a word, never sheds a tear, and broods, broods in sullen silence. Women who don't cry and scold are women to be distrusted, ma'am. If I had seen her in hysteria I would have pitied her; as it is I honestly declare she frightens me. Now then, ma'am, I'll take a look at our wounded snake in the grass, and be off before it gets any later and colder."

He jumped up and stalked away to a large airy chamber opening off this cosy sitting-room. Like everything else in and around the widow's cottage, it was daintily neat and clean. The last rays of the chill January day came through the muslin curtains and fell upon Gaston Dantree, lying motionless upon the bed.

It was an awfully death-like face—in his coffin the man would hardly look more ghastly, more utterly bloodless and lifeless than now. His faint breathing, his fluttering pulse were barely perceptible—no more. His damp, dark hair fell loose and curly over the white pillows, and in all its spectral bloodlessness his rarely perfect face kept its dark Southern beauty still.

Dr. Graves took his wrist between his fingers and thumb, drew out his watch, gave his head a little professional shake, and prepared to count with that owl-like solemnity of visage venerable physicians counting a patient's pulse ever do wear.

And over her coal fire little Mrs. Otis sat and mused sadly enough on the fate of that unhappy young lady who a few brief days ago had been the brightest and most blissful of petted heiresses and happy brides elect.

"And how strange among all the knew—Dr. Graves and all—she should have chosen my Henry to come forward and cure the man she loved," she thought with that glow of pride widowed mothers of only sons always feel. "No doubt she knew, if others are so too stupid to find it out, how clever he is, how good, how thoughtful, how kind! No woman could ever be more tender in a sick room than he; and if it be possible for earthly physician or earthly drugs to bring this illated young man round, Henry is the one to do it. But I doubt it—I doubt it. He looks like death, and he knows nothing or nobody. Hark! here is Henry now!"

Miss Talbot left her at Scarswood, and went home with her brother. About nine o'clock she suddenly made her appearance before the landlord of the Silver Rose, where the woman Vavasor has been stopping, asked to see her, and was shown to her room. Mrs. Vavasor was out; she returned in about half an hour, and they were shut up together until half-past ten. Then Miss Dangerfield left the house alone and on foot, looking more like her own ghost, the landlord says, than herself. Her French maid Ninon let her in a little before midnight—she gave the girl money, bade her good-night and left her. In the morning she was gone. Search has been made but no trace of her as yet has been obtained. My own opinion is that she has made away with herself."

"And my own opinion is, she has done nothing of the sort!" curtly interposed Dr. Graves. "Only arrant cowards commit suicide, and whatever blood flows in Miss Dangerfield's veins, there is not one drop of the coward in it. She will live and to terrible purpose, as Peter Dangerfield, Gaston Dantree, and that other little villain Vavasor will yet find. Katherine Dangerfield, wherever she is in this, is not in the other world—take my word for that."

As he took up his gloves and hat, with the last emphatic words, there came a rap at the door. What presentation was it sent Henry Otis to answer it with such a very unprofessional bound. He threw it open, and—yes—there in the spectral, wintry dusk before him stood the tall, slender, sombre figure—his black robes, his white face, and great solemn eyes—there stood Katherine Dangerfield!

He could not speak a word; the unutterable relief of seeing her alive and there, for a moment almost unmaned him. It was she who spoke first, in that faint, sweet voice that haunted him forever after his life long. "May I come in? It is very cold, and I want to see him."

There was something so forlorn in her look, in her loneliness, in the soft, plaintive tone something so like a spirit about her, that the words he would have spoken died on his lips. She stood before him alive, but surely death was pictured on her face.

"Come in," he said simply; and she glided past him, and into the presence of the other two. "My child!" Mrs. Otis said, with a motherly cry; "thank heaven, you are alive, and have come to us. Sit down; let me warm your hands—poor, little frozen hands. Oh, my child, what a fright you have given us all! Where in the world have you been?"

She sank wearily down in the chair, and 'er her hands lie in the elder woman's warm clasp. "I have been with Hannah," she answered slowly; "at Bracken Hollow, with my nurse. And to-morrow I leave Castleford, and I could not go, you know, without seeing Gaston, poor fellow. I would have come before, but I—I don't know—my head feels all wrong somehow, and I think I have been half asleep all day. And the walk was so long—so long, and so cold—ah me! and I was so dizzy and stupid all the way. How warm your fire is, and how nice it is to sit here!"

Her voice died drowsily away, her head drooped against the back of the chair, her eyelids fell heavily. The three about her looked in one another's startled faces in dead silence. "What did this mean?"

"My child—Miss Dangerfield!" Mrs. Otis murmured. "Oh, look up; don't lie like that, Miss Katherine! Miss Katherine!"

"Yes, papa," she drowsily; "but I am so sleepy, and I don't want to get up to breakfast yet. Has Gaston come? It is cold for him to ride from Castleford to-night—and he hates the cold—poor Gaston! Call me when he comes, papa—I want to sleep now."

Her eyes closed heavily again, her mind was wandering. Her troubles had been too much for her then, after all, and had turned her brain. Dr. Graves bent over her, and shook her slightly.

her face on the floor by the bedside, where she had softly fallen. In one second she was uplifted in Henry Otis' arms and borne out into the light. Her head fell limp over his arm, her eyes were closed, her features rigid. He laid her upon a sofa—the two doctors bent over her—one with his hand on her heart, the other on her pulse. The heart lay still, the pulse beat no longer. Rigid, white, stark she lay, already growing cold.

"Oh, Henry, speak!" his mother cried. "Doctor Graves tell me, has she fainted?" The elder doctor removed his hand from her heart, and stood up very pale himself in the lamplight.

"Not fainted, madam," he said quietly; "dead!"

Sir Peter Dangerfield sat alone in the library of Scarswood; the silken curtains were drawn; firelight and lamplight made the room brilliant; his purple evelyn chair was drawn up before a writing-table littered with deeds and documents, and Sir Peter, in gold-bowed spectacles, was trying to read.

Trying—not reading. For ever between him and the parchment page, a face menacing and terrible kept coming, the face of Katherine, as he had seen her last.

Where was Katherine? Dead or alive, she had sworn to be avenged. Was she dead? He shuddered through all his little craven soul and heart at the thought. Men had looked at him darkly and askance all day, and turned coldly away from him while he spoke. There had been whispers of suicide, what if while he sat here in this warm, lighted, luxurious room, she lay stark and frozen under the stars—dead by her own hand!

There was a tall, smoke-colored bottle on another table, with glasses. He was usually a very anchoretic for abstemiousness, but he sprang up now, with a muttered oath, filled himself a stiff glass of brandy, and drained it at a draught.

"I wish to Heaven I had given her that infernal three thousand, and be hanged to it!" he muttered, flinging himself back sulkily in his chair. "Curse the luck! What's the use of a title and a fortune if a fellow's life is to be bagged out of him in this way? There's that greedy little devil, Mrs. Vavasor, not a penny would she throw off. And now there's Katherine. I wish I hadn't said what I did to her. If they ever find—I mean when they find her—I'll give her that three thousand, if she takes it, and have done with the whole confounded thing. But she's so confoundedly proud that likely as not she'll turn cantankerous and refuse. There's no pleasing a woman any way; refuse it and you insult her, offer it and you insult her more. Oh, come in, whoever you are, and be hanged to you!"

This pleasant concluding adjuration was in response to a rap at the door. A tall, serious footman in purple plush breeches and white stockings appeared.

"Dr. Graves, Sir Peter," spoke this majestic mental, and vanished.

Sir Peter arose and Dr. Graves, hat in hand, very pale and solemn of visage, stood before him. News of Katherine at last. He grasped the back of his chair with one hand and faced his visitor almost defiantly, as one who should say "What ever has happened I at least have had nothing to do with it."

dead. I don't want her to die. It's a prolonged fainting fit, doctor—take my word for it—nothing more. Strong, healthy girls like Katherine don't drop off in a minute like that."

"Sir Peter," the old physician said quietly, "I am sixty-five years of age, and for the past forty years I have seen death in all its phases—lingering and instantaneous. And I tell you she is dead. But we will go to her as you say—you can convince yourself with your own eyes."

But still Sir Peter would not be convinced; would not—could not—"make her dead." He hurried from the room, changed his dress, ordered round his horse, and in fifteen minutes the two men were galloping full speed through the keen, frosty night into Castleford.

The town lay hushed and dark—it was close upon eleven now. Neither spoke a word; the breathless pace did not admit of talk. They reached the Otis' cottage, its whole front lit, and figures flitted rapidly to and fro. And Sir Peter Dangerfield's heart under his rising-coat was throbbing so rapidly, he turned sick and reeled dizzily for an instant, as he sprang from the saddle. The next he halted and followed his leader in.

On the sofa, in the little sitting-room, where they had first placed her, Katherine still lay. They had removed her hat and cloak, and loosened all her clothes, but over that rigid face the solemn seal of eternal sleep had fallen. The had closed her eyes and folded the pulseless hands; and calmly, as though sleeping, and fairer than ever in life, she lay. The haggard look had all gone and a great calm lay upon it.

So Peter Dangerfield saw her again. There were three persons in the room. Beside Mr. Otis and his mother, the old Indian nurse from Bracken Hollow, sad, gaunt and grey, sat close by her nursing, swaying ceaselessly to and fro, and uttering a sort of moaning cry, like a dumb creature in pain. She lifted her inflamed eyes and fixed them with savage hatred upon the pallid face of the baronet.

"Ay," she said, bitterly; "you're a fine gentleman now, little Peter Dangerfield, and you do well to come and look at your handiwork; for you're her murderer, you and that lying, false-faced villain lying yonder, as sure as ever men were murderers. The law won't hang you, I suppose, but it has hung men who deserved it less. I wonder you aren't afraid as you look at her—afraid she will rise up from her death-bed and accuse you."

He returned his tortured face toward her, quite horrible to see in its fear and ghastliness. "For Heaven's sake, hush!" he said. "I never meant this! I never thought she would die! I would give all I am worth to bring her back to life. I couldn't help it—I wouldn't have had it happen for worlds. Don't drive me mad with your talk!"

"Liar!" old Hannah cried, towering up and confronting him; "double liar and coward! Who refused her dying father's request? Who offered her the deadliest and most dastardly insult it is possible to offer woman? And you say you are so good, and ask me to drive you mad! I tell you, if the whole town rose up and stoned you, it would not be half your deserts. I say again, I wonder that dead as she lies there before you, she does not rise to accuse her murderer. Mr. Henry Otis, this is your house, and she thought you her friend. Show yourself her friend now, and turn her murderer out!"

"Hannah, Hannah, hush!" interrupted Mrs. Otis, scandalized and alarmed. Whatever Sir Peter might be, it was not in this good woman's nature to do other than reverence the Lord of Scarswood, the man of eight thousand a year.

But her son stepped forward—pale, cold and stern.

The funeral took place two days after, and they laid her in a remote corner of that little obscure churchyard, among the lowly branches above the grave—a gray cross marked the spot. They laid her there in the twilight of a wintry afternoon, with bowed heads and sad, solemn faces, and the story of Katherine Dangerfield was told and done. One by one they dropped away to their homes, Edith Talbot among the last, still crying behind her veil, and led away by her brother.

And then Henry Otis stood alone over the grave of the woman he loved and had lost. He stood with folded arms while the short, dark gloaming ran on his hat lying beside him, the keen wind lifting his hair unheeded. He had loved her as he never would love any other woman, and this was the end.

KATHERINE. ETAT 17. RESURGAM. That was all; no second name. Who knew what the name might be, or if she really had a claim to any name whatever? And so, while he stood there, the twilight fell, and it was his mother's voice, calling plaintively, that aroused him at last.

"Henry! Henry! come home, dear! You will get your death standing there bareheaded in the cold!"

An hour later, when the slender crescent moon lifted her sickle over the blue sea-line, another pilgrim came to that new-made grave, fearfully, and by stealth.

Peter Dangerfield had not dared to come to the funeral, but he came now to the grave. He was horribly afraid still, but all the same, he could not stay away. It was like a hideous dream to him. Katherine dead!—that bright, dashing young Amazon, whose laugh had rang so clear, whose eyes had flashed so bright! Katherine dead! And they call him her murderer!

He made his way along the little pathway, worn by humble feet, to the spot where he had laid her. The faint new moon flickered on the granite cross. He knelt on one knee, and read the inscription:

KATHERINE. ETAT 17. RESURGAM. What a brief record it was! And, Resurgam—what did that word mean, he wondered, stupidly. Then it dawned upon him "Resurgam" meant "I shall rise again." "I shall rise again!"

From her very grave the dead girl spoke and threatened him. How long he lingered there he never knew. He felt half stupefied, partly by the liquor he had been drinking, partly with abject fear, partly with cold. He was cramped stiff when at last he arose to go. His horse stood outside the little gate. He mounted him, let the reins fall upon his neck, while his head sank upon his breast. How the animal made his way home—how he got into the house, into his own room, into bed, he could never have told. All that shone out vividly from that night in his after life was the dream that followed.

He was wandering through a dark and unknown country—bleak and forsaken. He could see the stars in the sky, the very moon, a solitary fire-tree, and gravestones every where. It was one perpetual graveyard, and a spectral figure, with long, floating brown hair, and waving white arms, beckoned him on and on. He could not see the face, but he knew it was Katherine. He was tired, and sick and cold, and footsore. They dismally road ended at last in a gusty precipice where, looking down sheer thousands of feet below, he saw a seething hell of waters. Then his shadowy guide turned, and he saw Katherine Dangerfield's dead face. The stiff lips parted, and the sweet, strong voice spoke as it did of old:

"Living, I will pursue you to the very ends of the earth. Dead, I will come back from the grave, if the dead can!"

Greek type of feature, the swaying grace of the tall, slight form. A rarely perfect face, and as sweet as perfect, with its dreamy tender eyes, its gravely gentle smile. You would hardly have dreamed, looking at its delusive innocence, how much mischief my Lady Cecil had done in her day, how much, the gods willing, she yet meant to do. Those brown, serene eyes, had "slain thousands and tens of thousands," that delusively gentle smile had driven men blind and mad with the insanity called love. A pearl-faced, hazel-eyed Circe who led her victims down a flower-strewn path with words and smiles of honey, only to leave them stranded high and dry on the desolate quicksand of disappointment, where the bones of her victims bleached. A flirt by nature—a coquette ripe for mischief, a beauty without mercy and without heart—that was her character, as half the men in London would have said and yet—

And yet—and yet—how lovely she looked to-night! how radiant! how spooked! Dressed for some after ball, the loosely-falling opera cloak showed you a robe of rose silk, decollete, of course; soft touches of rich point-lace, a cluster of rich moss roses in the corsage, and lace draperies falling open from the large pearl arm. Looking at her as she sat there, you were half-inclined, knowing all the enormities, to forgive the deeds of darkness wrought by so peerless a siren. Fair and fatal; and when in repose, even with a touch of sadness, there was something in it that made you paraphrase the words of the southern sculptor, speaking of Charles Stuart, "Something evil will befall her, she carries misfortune on her face."

Her companion was a very excellent foil to the fair, pale, pensive beauty of the earl's daughter. Lady Dangerfield was a brunette of the most pronounced type, petite, four-and-thirty years old, and by lamplight, in diamonds and amber silk, still young, and still pretty. Her black hair built up in braids, and puffs, and curls, by the most unapproachable of Parisian hair-dressers, was a marvel of art in itself. There was a flush on either sallow cheek—art, or nature? who shall say?—and if the purple tinting under the eyelids made those black orbs any longer, bigger, brighter, than when they came first from the hand of a beneficent Providence, whose business was it but the lady's own?

For the Earl of Ruyssland—tall, thin, refined, patrician, and fastidious—his wife, fifty odd, with a venerable bald head, shining like a billiard ball, and two tired, gray eyes. He had been a handsome man in his day, a spendthrift, a gambler, a dandy, a member of the famous Beefsteak Club, in his youth. He had run through two fortunes, and now stood confessed the poorest peer in Britain.

Two young men in the stalls had been among the first to take aim at the new-comers, at Lady Cecil, rather, and the longest to stare.

"La Reine Blanche is looking her best to-night. Few reigning beauties stand the wear and tear of three seasons as the White Queen does."

"La Reine Blanche!" his companion repeated. "I always meant to ask you, Delamer, why they called her that. A pretty idea too. Why?"

"From some real or fancied resemblance to that other La Reine Blanche, Marie Stuart—dazzling and doomed."

"Not fancied, Delamer—here is a resemblance—quite striking. The same oval face, the same Greek type, the same expression, half-tender, half-melancholy, half-didactical. If Mary the Queen had a tinge of that beauty, I can understand now how even the hard-headed Scottish commoners were roused to enthusiasm as she rode through their midst, and cried out as one man, 'God bless that sweet face!'"

"That will do, Wyatt. Don't you get roused to enthusiasm; and don't look too long at Ruyssland's peerless daughter; she is like those—whats' their names—sirens, you know, who lure poor devils to death and doom. She's a thorough-paced flirt; her coquetries have been as numberless as the stars, and not half so eternal. She's the highest-priced Circassian in Mayfair, and you might as well love some bright particular star, etc.; and besides it is an courant at the clubs that she was bidden in and bought ages ago by some tremendously Cornish baronet, wandering at present in foreign parts. He's a sensible fellow, gives Queenie—they call her Queenie—no end of margin for flirting, until it suits his suitfulness to return, pay the price, and claim his property. Look at Nilsson instead. She's married, and a Marchioness; but it's not half so dangerous, believe me, as gazing at La Reine Blanche."

"I'm not looking at your La Reine Blanche," Wyatt answered; "I'm looking at that man yonder—you see him?—very tall, very tanned, very military. If Redmond O'Donnell be in the land of the living, that is he."

PART II. CHAPTER I.

LA REINE BLANCHE.

The place was Her Majesty's Theatre—the opera the "Figlio del Regimento,"—the hour after the first act—the time, the last week of the London season—and the scene was brilliant beyond all description. "All the world" was there, and the prima donna was that sweetest of singers, that loveliest of women, most charming of actresses, Made-moiselle Nilsson.

Her Majesty's was full—one dazzling blaze of light from dom to p.quette, tier upon tier of magnificently dressed women, a blaze of diamonds, a glow of rainbow bouquets, a flutter of fans, a sparkle of bright eyes, a vision of fair faces, and lights and warmth, and Donizetti's matchless music sweeping and surging over all.

The house had just settled back in its seats, for a few moments, the whole audience had risen, en masse, at the entrance of royalty. In the royal box now sat the Prince and Princess of Wales, Prince Arthur, and the Princess Louise.

The bell had tinkled for the rising of the curtain upon the second act of the opera when a fashionably late party of three entered one of the proscenium boxes, and a thousand eyes and as many "double barrels" turned instantly in that direction. You saw at once that these late arrivals were people of note, and looking at them you would merely glance at two of the party and then your eyes would have fixed, as countless eyes there did, upon the third face—a wondrously fair face. The party were the Earl of Ruyssland, his only daughter, the Lady Cecil Olive, and his niece Giverna, Lady Dangerfield. And the Earl of Ruyssland's only daughter had been the most brilliant belle of this London season, as she had been of the two preceding, and not in all that dazzling house, not in the royal box itself, looked forth a fairer, sweeter face than that which looked with perfect self-possession over the audience now.

She had advanced to the front at once with high bred composure, drawn back the curtain with one slim, gloved hand and leaned over so slightly forward, with a half smile upon her face. In the musical interlude, before the rising of the curtain for the second time, countless bows and smiles greeted her, whichever way she turned. All the loggnettes in the house seemed for an instant aimed at that one fair face and queenly head, upheld with a steady grace; but to my Lady Cecil that was a very old story, and with all her woman's love and adoration, something of a weary one. She lay back in her chair, after that first sweep of the house, threw back her opera cloak, all silk, swan's-down, and snow cashmere, as seemingly indifferent to all those eyes as though she sat in the theatre alone."

Delamer whirled around, as nearly excited as the principles of his life would allow a dandy of the Foreign Office to be.

"What! Redmond O'Donnell!" the man we met two years ago in Algiers—Le beau Chasseur as they used to call him, and the best of good fellows. By George! you're right, Wyatt, it is O'Donnell! Let us join him at once."

A few moments later, and the two embryo diplomats from the F. O. had made their way to the side of a tall, soldierly, sunburned man who sat quite alone in three tiers behind.

"What? You, O'Donnell! I give you my word I'd as soon have expected to see Pio Nono sitting out the opera as Le Beau Chasseur. Glad to see you in England, dear old boy, all the same. When did you come?"

The man addressed looked up—his dark, grave face lighting into sudden brightness and warmth as he smiled. It was a handsome face, a thoroughly Celtic face, despite the golden tan of an African sun, with blue eyes to which long, black lashes lent softness and depth, profuse dark brown hair, and most desirable curling mustache. It was a gallant figure, straight, tall, and strong as a Norway pine, and with the true trooper surge.