



The Hair of Rosedene

The Game-Keeper's Hut

CHAPTER XXVIII.
THROUGH THE NIGHT.

IT was a wintry night, and yet not an unpeaceful one; there was little or no wind, and the snow fell as softly and as silently as down from the breast of a dove, but it fell quickly and thickly, and the second keeper, as he trudged on his beat through the snow-clad woods, looked like the image which the boys had been hard at work at on the green, ever since the snow commenced to fall. It was a night, with all its peacefulness, in which a man might be tempted to wish himself indoors, and betake himself there if he got the chance; but the under keeper either did not mind the snow, or was too faithful to his duty to think of shirking it. So he trudged on, keeping his gun under the shelter of his coat, and occasionally putting up his gloved hand to wipe the white sky-fleece from his tawny beard and moustache. Once or twice he swung round in his steady trudge and looked with a curiously wistful look at the brilliantly lighted windows of the house, especially at those of the dining and drawing rooms. And he always resumed his onward trudge, after these stray glances, with a sigh that was very mournful and longing. At last he turned off to the footpath which led toward his cottage, muttering: "Too snowy even for a poacher—I may as well get in!"

In a few minutes he came within sight of his solitary home, and having shaken himself like a Polar bear to get rid of the snow from his clothes, and well scraped his heavy boots, he struck a light and entered. It was, of course, all dark and cold, but the second keeper was not a man to be disheartened by a look of welcome, and with business-like promptitude, set to work and ignited a fire, watched it with grave assiduity, and soon had a cheerful blaze and glow all over the little room. Then he lit his lamp, and put on his kettle for tea, and made the other preparations for the same meal, which being at last prepared, he sat down thereto, after a most elaborate ablution and general brush-up, and ate as heartily as a stalwart Englishman should do, who has been tramping about in snow for three hours. Then with the orderly neatness of the most precise housewife, he cleared the remains of the meal away, and of course, got out his pipe.

As he stood up to light it, the gleam of the fire fell upon his face, and for

the first time because hitherto it had been concealed—we can see that it is a frank, handsome face, that would have to be described as a gay and genial one also but for the wistful, waiting expression about the delicate, dark blue eyes. The figure is no less striking than the face; the artist would at once have pictured it clothed in the romantic garb of bygone medieval days, and easily realized how well the gay trappings would have been set off. But it looked graceful and stalwart enough in the rough, dark brown velvet of his class to warrant the aforesaid artist making a sketch of it on the spot. But there was no artist nor anyone else to see it; all was as silent and solitary as the grave, and as he sat over the fire, puffing at his pipe, he looked like a youthful Rip Van Winkle who had awakened—to reverse the scene—in a sleeping world.

He sat for some time, smoking and thinking, and by degrees his eyes softened and his lips moved in that audible soliloquy and self-communing which solitary people invariably grow into. A man must talk, and if there is no other listener, then he must talk to himself.

"Yes," he mused, poking the fire, as if resolved to attract its attention, "say what you like, I am right—I have been quite right all through. What! force myself on a pure, innocent girl, who does not love me!—take advantage of a right over her which I acquired by a trick, and which she yielded by an impulse! Not while I've got an ounce of honor or left! No—I gave her her freedom when she asked for it, and I won't take it from her—certainly not now when she is rich and powerful—not now, certainly! What would the world say?—not that I care for the world!—but what would she think? God bless her! She'd shrink from me as a mercenary villain, who knew what was going to happen, and caught her in a trap! No, you are free from me, dear little one. I can watch over you and guard you still, but it is not for me to break the vow I took never to claim you while I lived!"

He looked at the fire, and his face grew dark; and, mechanically, as if the habit were a confirmed one with him, he slid his hand into the breast of his coat, and drew out a silk neckerchief. It was a lady's, though it was spotted with blood; and he laid it on his hand caressingly, and looked at it as a man looks at the relic of a dead-and-gone love.

I don't think the under keeper was a man given to tears, but there was something suspicious in the way in which he suddenly thrust the stained neck handkerchief into his breast, and reached for the tobacco for a second pipe.

"Yes," he muttered, as he lighted the pipe, "I can watch over her, and there's need for it, if I'm not mis-

taken. Take care, my fine gentleman, how far you go. I can trust her, as I would an angel, but I trust you just as far as I can see you. I'll keep my vow, and lay no claim to her; but, by the heaven above us, if ever there was a dog in the manger, here is one!" and he struck his broad chest with a sudden, passionate thoroughness which was ominous. Then he strolled to the window, and looked out.

"Snowing still! How cozy and comfortable the windows of the house look! There you are, my darling, inside there, like a rare and lovely gem in a casket! My gem—no, not mine, for I yielded you back to yourself, ere I had done more than wear you for a moment on my breast! There you are, my darling, rich and safe, and happy! I wonder are you singing now, or laughing, perhaps, as you used to laugh? It is strange," he broke off, addressing himself with a curious questioning, "I have not seen you laugh, and there is not much laughter in your face! But you must be happy; you have forgotten the old times, that scamp to Basle; you look upon it as an absurd piece of girlish romance, no doubt—no doubt! Yes," and he sighed, "you have forgotten it—and me!"

Then his soliloquy ended, if his musing did not. He went back to the fire and sat down—not to read, but to dream of that which he assured himself she had forgotten.

Meanwhile the mistress of Rosedene, the young heiress whom all the world was envying, as the possessor of youth, beauty and a million of money, and who, therefore, the world argued, must be the happiest of mortals, stood hesitating for a moment outside her own house, undecided which way to fly.

She knew that only a few minutes would elapse before the man from whom she was flying would return to the room and discover her absence; she did not stop to consider from what she was flying, or whether she could not best insure her own safety from his dominant will and bold audacity by seeking refuge in her own apartments. The one idea—flight—away from him and the house—pre-empted; and after that half moment of hesitation she sped lightly across the lawn and the ornamental garden, which ran quite round the house, made for the preserves, drawn there by the instinct which prompts the pursued to seek the nearest shelter that gives promise of concealment.

The snow was thick, and her weight, light as it was, buried her at each step ankle deep in the soft impediment, so that she could not make much progress, but at last, after what seemed an age of minutes, she gained the edge of the shrubbery, and still panting hard like a hunted roe, she leaned against a tree, her ears and eyes strained acutely, her whole frame strung up to its utmost tension.

It was only breathing time she required—not time for thought. That would come after. As she stood there, trembling and panting, it came upon her like a heavy hand laid across her heart. She would have all the rest of her life for thought! For thought and remorse! For what had she done?—the cruellest, the weakest piece of folly that woman had ever committed.

She had sent him from her side at the instigation of a few, perhaps false, certainly uncorroborated words of a strange woman—the man who loved her, who had made her his wife, whom she had loved—and, yes, whom she still loved, though he lay cold and dead in a distant battlefield.

She had sent him to that death. She, a weak, foolish girl, had sent him from her to plunge into a reckless life that had brought him to the grave.

Then there rose before her the stalwart, manly form, and bold, joyous face, so full of life and youthful manhood. She saw him as he stood over her whispering the sweet words of love and passionate devotion. She saw him as he looked that night, though she, blind girl that she had been, had not known him; saw him dash to the onset, with blood-stained sword waved aloft, his voice and very form reanimating his men, and winning the cause for which he died. She saw him—oh, God, how plainly, out here in the snow! lying at her feet, his noble face, which still told its story to her deaf ears and sightless eyes, cool that she had been! wet with the blood and dew of death!



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"Oh, my love! my love!" she cried, throwing up her hands toward heaven. "Take me to you! take me to you!"

But the snow dropped down upon her face in mockery, and no voice answered in his well-remembered tones. "Come!"

Suddenly a sound, which seemed to come from the direction of the house, startled and recalled her to her danger.

The man who exercised so fearful a power over her, from whose inflexible will she was flying, was in pursuit. He would catch her in the snow, and wring consent from her! No! Anywhere—the silent hut in the forest—anywhere out of his reach! With a great gush, but a firm clench of the dainty teeth, the half-demented woman turned and fled into the wood.

Poor Edna! She had just awakened to the full consciousness of the extent of her passion; had just learned to feel what the word "wife" should mean in all its deep and tender mysteries; had just, from her own inner consciousness, discovered that the passion which she had thought she had mastered was still great and powerful, and dominant as a giant's, but to be told, at the same time, that the object of that passion had died, unrecognized, unforgetting, and un-forgiven, at her feet.

She turned and fled.

Before her, in the deep recesses of the forest, there lies, half hidden by the frost and snow, a dark pool; half mad with grief, passion and terror, instinctively she seemed drawn to it.

Even in the woods the snow was thick, it hid the undergrowth from her bewildered eyes, great boughs of trees seemed to rise like ghosts and impede her flight—her strength, made flutinous by excitement and the crisp, cold air, began to fail. She would not be able to reach that awful place of refuge before the pursuer was upon her.

What should she do?

Suddenly, as if in answer to the mentally half-formed question, there shone before her a bright little light. Instinctively she made for it, and found that it shone through the tiny window of the keeper's hut.

(To be Continued.)

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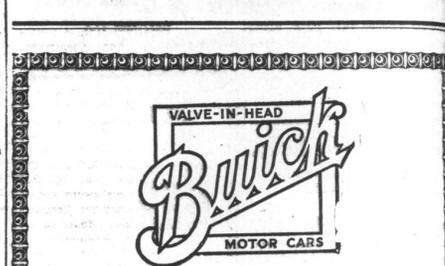
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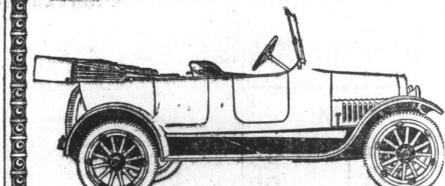
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GETTING SERIOUS.
WARSAW, March 16.
The Bolshevik advance into the Ukraine is assuming serious proportions, according to advices from Transilvania. The objective of the Bolsheviks apparently is the old frontier line of Russia on the west, with probable diversion towards Odessa. General Fetina's Government is recruiting from Winnitza to Poskuraw, and the battle for the possession of Winnitza is continuing unabated.

POLES THREATEN ADVANCE.

BERLIN, March 16.
Despatches to Berlin newspapers from Graudenz allege that the Poles are preparing for a general advance against the Germans, and have notified the German outposts that the armistice is no longer in effect. The despatches say that the Poles are charged with eighty-four violators of the armistice. The German authorities at Loken near Allenstein, it is added, have seized the Polish supplies which were smuggled across the Polish frontier. A non-commissioned officer and five civilians

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