

what the smile meant he had not the faintest idea.

"Why not?" she said. "Yesterday I was an anarchist. To-day I am—God knows what."

"A very admirable and well-balanced young woman, who tends a wounded man at the point of death."

She tossed down the wine, and broke into an almost soundless laugh.

"That's better," said Saunders. "There's some colour in your cheeks now."

"So the Red Virgin is growing beautiful before your eyes?" she mocked.

"Handsome is as handsome does," he quoted.

"Then what of yourself?"

"I am full of virtue, and therefore exceedingly beautiful," he replied chaffingly. "Gad! that young friend of yours was as heavy as a fatted bullock."

She laughed in turn, and looked him up and down with a glance of mockery. Then with an abruptness that was almost incredible she flamed into white-hot rage.

"Jest on," she cried savagely. "Play the hero with a sneer at your own heroism. Save life and make a mock of it. Suffer pain, and gibe at your own agony."

"Red Virgin—"

"Enough!" she said, turning her steps to the door, "I am going."

"Not yet."

"I say, I am going," she repeated fiercely.

"And I said, not yet," he reiterated calmly.

She came back to him with a wild light in her eyes, faced him squarely, and thrust her face within an inch of his.

"Do you command?" she demanded.

"I do."

"Summon the guard, lock the door, arrest me," she cried dramatically.

"Calm yourself, my girl," he said soothingly. "The door is unlocked, and I have no intention of summoning the guard. Nevertheless, I say, remain."

She glared at him for a full half-minute, and then the rigidity went out of her frame; she staggered back, and sank into a chair.

"Why am I to remain?" she asked in dull tones.

"Because I want you."

"You want me?"

"I want your help."

"In what way?"

"Karl's person has been seized by the Arch-duke. He has been spirited away to some anarchist haunt in the Morast. I want you to help me to rescue him."

"YOU want me—the Red Virgin—to rescue the King from the hands of anarchism."

"I do. After all, as you said just now, you are a different person from the anarchist of yesterday. I am fighting on the right side, the side of order and justice and mercy. I believe you can help us as no one else can help."

She hung her head, and pressed her hands to her temples.

"Yes, I am a different person from yesterday," she said in a monotonous, almost weary, voice. "Yesterday I was the Red Virgin, a strange plant growing in a fetid soil. To-day I am a woman in a palace—a courtesan."

"You use words of which you do not know the meaning," he said in astonishment.

She rose abruptly to her feet, and tossed back her shock of ruddy hair. The colour that had crept into her pale, freckled cheek had deepened to carmine, and a weird light burned in the depths of her green eyes. She had always been stately; for the moment she was positively beautiful.

"Am I not fair enough for—for a courtesan?" she demanded.

Saunders shrugged his shoulders. "You are too fair—within and without," he said.

She laughed wildly.

"Listen to what I have to say," she went on, "and then tell me that I am too fair."

Saunders shifted uneasily. He had a vague notion that something horrible was going to happen. This strange creature, weird product of a degraded civilization, was the prey to a frenzy of emotions he could only

guess at. Her limbs were a-tremble and her lips quivering. The frail temple of her emaciated body was being shaken by some supernal force that was almost blasting her poor starved brain with its intensity. He regretted giving her the wine. Her nervous system was not used to it—not fitted for it. He could have ended the uncomfortable scene by curtly dismissing her to the streets from which she had come. But two things restrained him. He needed her help for political reasons. She needed his, and in a way she did not comprehend.

When he spoke it was in studied, matter-of-fact tones.

"Time presses," he said. "I have to join my wife, who may be anxious on my behalf. Will you help us or will you not?"

"At a price—yes."

"THE Red Virgin used not to ask for rewards for well-doing.

However, anything in reason."

"Anything in reason!" Her voice shrilled to a scream. "Do you suppose I want a common reward for violating my life-long principles?"

"I don't see that your principles are suffering—on the contrary. But as your assistance would be invaluable, I shall not haggle in the bargaining."

Again she broke into her harsh laugh.

"You want the body of a king," she cried, "and I want—"

"What?"

With a sudden emotion she seized him violently by both shoulders.

"Was there ever such a one as you?" she demanded passionately. "Such a hero and such a scoffer, so wise and such a fool, so seeing and so blind, so compassionate and yet so ice-bound? I want you—you. Cannot you see? You are my king, as Karl is King of loyal Grimlanders. Nay, you are more. I have no religion, I believe in no God, but to me, you are—"

Saunders wrenched himself free, and raised his left arm in a commanding gesture to check the coming blasphemy.

"You are mad—overwrought," he said sternly. "The Red Virgin has stood for purity in a quarter where all else was tainted."

"Purity!" she echoed bitterly. "I was no more pure than the small child is pure, or the infant temperate. My purity was distaste, not virtue. Those who are never tempted cannot boast if they do not fall. But to-night the Red Virgin has vacated her tenement, and the world-spirit has entered the empty house. I live as I have never lived before. There is a meaning in life where there was no meaning before. Anarchism, the religion of sterility, is scorched and withered by the new-born flame in my breast. Can one disbelieve in God, when the powers of Heaven and hell are in one's own heart?"

Saunders muttered two Anglo-Saxon mono-syllables, of which the second was "rot!"

"You mentioned 'purity,'" she continued. "If chastity is purity, I am pure, and I do not intend to be otherwise than pure. I shall not 'fall,' for I am already 'fallen.' The soul that was within me, the soul of the Red Virgin, is dead. Love, the love of a woman for a man, has entered in and there is neither purity nor impurity in my heart"—her voice broke in a tearless sob, and she sank to her knees before him—"only worship."

Saunders' lips framed themselves as if to whistle, but were twisted in the act into a sad smile.

He was no more disgusted than he was tempted—he was merely touched. There was nothing vulgar in her adoration—perhaps nothing physical. For the second time in his life he passed his hand lightly over her red locks.

"Poor, poor Red Virgin," he murmured.

She gazed up at him with hungering eyes.

"Surely a woman may worship her master," she begged.

"Yes, yes," he said gravely. "Only her master should not be somebody else's husband. It is better still," he added reverently, "if he should not be mortal man at all. But get up, Red Virgin, and let me ask you a few sensible questions."

(To be continued.)



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