

"Love in the Wilds"

OR
The Romance of a South African
Trading Station.

CHAPTER LXVI.
"TRAITOR, AS WELL AS FRIEND!"

"I did not confess without a reason, my lady," retorted Vignes, without a shadow of resentment at her scornful and contemptuous looks and words. "I listened, hoping that I might be of service to you; I now confess that by doing so I have been of service to you."

"You?" she said, with simple wonder.

"Ay, I, my lady," he echoed. "I am an humble individual, an humble worm, my lady; but I have been of service to you."

"How?" she demanded, convinced that this smooth-tongued villain was attempting to extort a further sum from her by playing on her supposed credulity.

"By discovering the person who"—a look of passionate fire stopped him in time—"whom you request Mr. Dartmouth to find," he said.

She looked at him with a piercing glance, but his white, pallid countenance, more like a mask than a face, baffled her.

"Go on," she said.

"I guessed from your ladyship's manner how eager you were to discover this person, and I knew that you would not be close-fisted with a reward to the man who made the discovery. So, my lady, I went to work—you see, I had the clew which Captain Dartmouth could not trace."

And he looked with a significant glance at the locket clasped in the countess's hand.

She inclined her head with the mechanical gesture of an automaton.

"Go on," she said, sternly.

"I went to work, my lady, and traced the young lady, whose portrait is in that locket, to her death."

The countess turned still whiter, till her face looked like marble and her lips stone-like and carved.

After waiting a moment and taking a glance at her, Vignes continued:

"You will be prepared to hear some painful details, my lady—some very painful details."

She gasped as if for breath, and stretching forth her hand, reached a small vinaigrette, with which she wiped off the numb feelings of faintness that threatened to overcome her.

"Go on," she said in a voice almost inaudible; "I am prepared."

Vignes unbuttoned his coat, which fitted his attenuated frame so closely

that his ribs were plainly denoted, and took from his pocket a small packet of letters.

These he held in his hand and, tapping them with his long, lank forefinger, resumed, in the same husky whisper:

"My lady, I came to-night prepared for a refusal and some obloquy. I imagined that your ladyship would refuse to see me, or, perhaps, go still further and have me maltreated—as Captain Dartmouth maltreated me," he added, with a venomous hiss. "That being my purpose, I intended sending one of these letters up to your ladyship with the intimation that the remainder of the series with the story relating to them were in my possession. Your ladyship was kind—and wise—enough to grant me the interview without forcing me to such a device. I am grateful, truly grateful. It has spared your ladyship the shock of a sudden surprise and me some trouble."

As if charmed and horribly bewildered by the intent regard of his viperish eyes, Lucille sat listening speechlessly, almost breathlessly.

After a pause he went on:

"On finding the locket, my lady, I commenced my search. It would be tedious and to no purpose to enter into the particulars of my system of following the clew. I followed it and to some purpose. I was then in the service of Captain Dartmouth. Some business of his favored my visit to Paris. I commenced my search there and discovered that the young lady—my lady's sister—was enticed from her charge by a gentleman, as my lady stated. That gentleman was an Englishman. I learned his name. I followed up the fresh clew which the information gave me and tracked—yes, my lady, that's the word, tracked—him across the Channel home, here, to England. He came with the young lady that he had betrayed, and, using his influence placed her on the stage. She became a dancer, my lady, a ballet dancer—I regret your ladyship's evident pain, but as I forewarned you, the details are unpleasant. She became a ballet dancer and gained considerable notoriety. The gentleman had bestowed upon her an English name, a handsome house, carriages and servants, all that his wealth and her earnings could purchase, but he never married her. My lady, I come to the unpleasant

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PURITY ECONOMY

part of my story. Your sister gained many laurels and much fame, but she lost her betrayer's affection. He deserted her. Yes, my lady, deserted her. Richer and possibly finer game enticed him, and one morning the papers were eloquent with an account of her desertion and subsequent suicide by poison. She died by her own hand for love of the gentleman who had enticed her from abroad and then deserted her."

He paused; the dry, emotionless tones of his husky voice seemed burning into the heart of the listener. She seemed powerless to move, her eyes dilated with horror and almost unbearable anguish, her lips burned as if a seething iron had passed them.

The viperish eyes watched the effect of his words for a few moments; then, in the same tone, he continued:

"This is the bare outline of the story, my lady; for the details I refer you to these letters. You will find in them the name of my lady's sister and the name of her destroyer."

And with a noiseless step he glided to the table and laid the packet upon it.

The countess, with a shudder and a gasp for breath, seized the packet and examined the top letter.

As she did so the room seemed to swim round her, her heart almost ceased to beat, and with a gesture of despair she sprang to her feet, letting the letter flutter to the ground at her feet from her outstretched, nerveless hand.

"My lady is surprised!" said Vignes, with a malicious sneer, as he stooped to recover the letter.

"Your proofs—your proofs!" breathed rather than spoke the countess.

"Those," replied the man, pointing to the letters, "and this," taking from his pocket as he spoke a small miniature and handing it to the countess.

"My lady will remember to have seen that on Captain Dartmouth's watch-chain a thousand times. It opens with a spring—allow me. Ah, it is open!"

The countess looked one long, scrutinizing look at the portrait within it, and then sank upon the fauteuil, her arm falling inert and useless at her side.

There was a pause of some minutes, during which the beautiful woman lay as one stricken motionless and senseless, and the man-reptile stood regarding her with unmoved face and merciless eyes, which sometimes raised themselves and wandered with an envious look round the luxurious apartment.

The minutes passed and Lucille raised her head. Vignes saw with the quickness of his snake species that a change had taken place.

The stony look had given way to one of passionate and dogged determination, the compressed lips had relaxed into a merciless expression of hunger for revenge, the eyes had lost their wild, terror-stricken look and gained a hard, penetrating glance, before which the spy shrank abashed.

There was still silence for a moment, then Lucille broke it.

"How came you by this locket?" she asked, in a low but metallic tones.

"I—I—"

"Stole it?" she interrupted, with a look of disdain. "You took it from—from—his person?"

He nodded.

"These letters you stole likewise?"

"Yes," he said; "and still something more, my lady."

She held out her hand without a look of surprise.

"Give it to me," she said.

He took from his pocket a folded paper and placed it on the table; to which her finger pointed, as if she feared the contamination of his touch.

She took the paper and opened it. At first she did not recognize its import, but after a moment of personal she looked up with a glance of almost sublime triumph.

"Ah, traitor as well as fiend! Your fate is sealed!"

At these words the silent onlooker uttered a hiss of exultation, and Lucille swung round upon him.

"How has he injured you, for nature alone can not have created so base a man?"

Vignes smiled with calm impassibility.

"My lady," he said, huskily, "he struck me."

She regarded him for a moment with a look that went far beyond him; then, as if with an effort, recalled her wandering attention, and, pointing to the heap of gold, said, sternly:

"Go!"

The man glided to the table, took up the money, and without a word left the room as noiselessly as he had entered it.

The countess took up the letters and the miniature and concealed them in her bosom; then, with the folded paper in her hand, consulted her jeweled watch.

"Midnight," she murmured, in the same suppressed and metallic tones.

"Before the next midnight, my sister, thou shalt be avenged!"

CHAPTER LXVII. LIFE'S RIDDLE.

Oh, if there be an Elysium on earth, it is this, it is this!—SCOTT.

Hugh strode along with Sir Charles by his side, and Mr. Reeves hurried after them, as if for dear life.

Hugh had become so injured to and prepared for strange events and extraordinary excitements that he understood this sudden summons as indicating nothing less than, perhaps, a fire at the Warren, or the sudden demise of its fair owner.

In his anxiety to reach the old place he almost forgot the disappointment he was laboring under in regard to Cecil, and, nerved himself into determination of showing no surprise but the event, accident, or intelligence but what it might.

Sir Charles did not feel inclined to break in upon his companion's reverie, so the two hurried on and at last reached the Warren.

(To be continued.)



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