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"Love in the Wilds"

OR
The Romance of a South African Trading Station.

CHAPTER LXV.
THE UNMASKING.

Reginald Dartmouth nodded; but Mr. Reeves, seemingly provoked beyond endurance by his cool insolence, exclaimed:

"Not! How dare you say 'Yes,' sir? Hugh Darrell, the dale is yours and has been yours since the moment the breath left your father's body. This is no time for explanation; but you see before you a villain, who, by a series of daring crimes, has usurped your estate and squandered your property! Silence!" he continued, his swarthy, calm face working with passion as Reginald Dartmouth made a step forward and seemed about to speak. "At the moment of your entrance," he continued, turning to Hugh, who looked from one to the other with a bewildered but stern expression of interrogation—"at the moment of your entrance I was taking him with his crimes. Here beside you are the witnesses who can and will hang him; here beneath my hand lies the last will of your father, which the villain made way with for an earlier one leaving the estate to him. This one, the last and valid one, bequeaths all to you save a small sum to him. Read it—read it."

And he held it out. Hugh took it and glanced at the heading; then, with his eyes full of tears, shook his head and returned it.

"I can not read it," he said, simply; "my brain is in a whirl. Rebecca, what is all this I hear?"

Rebecca could only sob, at first, and murmur: "It's all true, Hugh; all true." Then Hugh turned to Reginald Dartmouth.

"And what say you to this accusation, sir?" he demanded, sternly. Reginald Dartmouth, who had been watching the faces around him with keen attention and noting every tone as well as every word of each speaker, replied, with a coolness that his face and livid lips belied:

"What have I to say, Mr. Darrell—for I presume you are the long-lost Hugh Darrell? Simply this, and this only: that I do not deign to answer such absurd and groundless accusations as this person has made."

And as he spoke he drew himself up with an air of defiance. Hugh regarded him with a long and piercing gaze.

"So that is your reply, sir?" he said, with slow distinctness. "It sounds to me somewhat guilty. But we will hear what Mr. Reeves has to say. And you, sir; may I beg the honor of your name?"

And he looked at Sir Charles. "This gentleman," said Mr. Reeves, "is Sir Charles Anderson, a cousin of Miss Goodman. He has been a true friend, although an unknown one. He it was who discovered this will, and through his means we have been able to lay a still greater crime at this man's door."

Hugh held out his hand with a grave courtesy. Sir Charles took it and pressed it eagerly, glancing at Rebecca as he did so.

"Now, sir," said Hugh, turning to the lawyer, "let us hear your statement."

Mr. Reeves, with his hand on the table and his eyes fixed upon Reginald Dartmouth, commenced to speak; but the accused interrupted him with a scornful gesture.

"Pardon me," he said; "I have listened to a long tirade once before this

evening. I have traveled far—beguiled hither by a false and dishonorable ruse—I refuse to submit to further indignity. Your absurd romance, sir, can be recited in my absence, I presume. Whether it can or not, I must beg to be allowed to depart. Business of an important nature compels my immediate return to town," he continued, with calm nonchalance, addressing Hugh. "If you wish to communicate with me, either through this person, your solicitor, or personally, Mr. Darrell, here is my London address."

And with a scornful air he threw his enameled card upon the table and made a movement toward the door. Mr. Reeves stepped before him. "Softly, sir!" he exclaimed, in his hard dry tones. "Your presence can not be so easily dispensed with. You will please consider yourself our prisoner!"

"Your prisoner?" repeated Reginald Dartmouth, with a dark sneer. "Pray, sir, how long have you held the office of parish constable?—nay, do not trouble to answer, but first produce your warrant."

Mr. Reeves's face darkened. "You wish to drive me to extremities?" he said, significantly. "I do," retorted Reginald Dartmouth, defiantly. "Produce your warrant, or let me pass."

Mr. Reeves stood aside.

"Go!" he said; "and make good your start. Before an hour has passed the warrant you desire shall follow you." With another sneer the wily villain turned to shoot a glance of hate around and left the room.

Hugh passed his hand across his brow and, with a heavy sigh, sank into the chair Reginald Dartmouth had vacated.

Was it for this he had returned? To find his father dead—dead? To unmask a villain?

No—he had come post-haste to meet Cecil, the fair, sweet-faced lad that had crept into his heart.

Where was he? As he lifted his eyes and looked upon the clutter of horses' thoughts, he rose and crossed over to where Rebecca and Sir Charles were conferring in an agitated under-tone with the lawyer. Mrs. Lucas and Doctor Toddy had left the room.

Mr. Reeves turned as Hugh approached and held out his hand. Hugh shook it, but spoke to Rebecca, who had risen and now stood with downcast eyes before him.

"Rebecca," he said—"I must call you by the old name—we shall all awake directly. Tell me; are you glad to see me?"

"Oh, so glad; so very glad!" answered Rebecca, with a burst of emotion. "Hugh, Hugh, why have you stayed away so long? Why did you leave your father to that sinful man?"

Hugh's face darkened. "Because—"

There he broke off. "We will have no more explanation to-night. Sir Charles, you will comprehend my utter ignorance when I tell you that I know not if I am safe in offering you the hospitality of the Dale. Nay," he continued, turning sadly to Mr. Reeves, "I scarcely know that I am not wrong in calling it the Dale, it is so changed."

Mr. Reeves groaned. "Changed, indeed," he said. "What I have to tell you—But, there; as you say, there must be no explanation to-night. You have ridden far and fast, and—glancing at his rough, workman's clothes—were in unsuitable and uncomfortable garments. Miss Goodman has been begging me to offer you shelter beneath the roof of the Warren until the Dale can be made ready."

"Come, Hugh; do come!" pleaded Rebecca. "Mr. Reeves and all of you come and help me to bear all this, or I shall give way. Oh, Hugh, Hugh, why did you stay away?"

She seemed so excited and overwhelmed by a combination of feelings that Sir Charles judged it best to gently remove her from the apartment, and, aided by Mrs. Lucas and Dr. Toddy, got her to the carriage, which was waiting.

Leaving her in their charge, and whispering some soothing words, Sir Charles returned to the library, where, notwithstanding his decision not to enter into explanations, Mr. Reeves was telling the newly-arrived heir the story of the hidden will; the still darker suspicion of foul play in connection with the squire's death he had wisely determined not to communicate until a more fitting time.

Hugh listened with his face concealed by his hand, but the two could see that he was weeping, and that the story of his father's death was affecting him more than anything, and leaving no room in his mind for the recital of Reginald Dartmouth's evil deeds.

Mr. Reeves traced the course of events—with the before-mentioned omission—up to Hugh's sudden and opportune arrival, then broke off with:

"But, there, I've done what I had sternly decided not to do, harassed and tortured you, already wearied, much wearied, by the story of the whole affair. Now, sir, ere I am silent let me ask you one question. How came you—was it chance or design that brought you here at this critical moment?"

Hugh looked up with a strange expression and a dash of color that was almost a blush.

"Not chance, certainly," he said, with hesitation. "You have only just arrived in England, of course?" said Sir Charles.

"No," said Hugh; "I have been in England some time."

"Indeed!" echoed the lawyer, staring at him over his spectacles as he rose and paced the room, and muttering, inwardly:

"Just the same as ever—reserved and eccentric."

"Yes," said Hugh, with a strange smile. "I have been in England, a prisoner in the docks."

Mr. Reeves glanced at his clothes. "Prisoner—docks! Good Heavens!" he exclaimed.

The idea of the heir of Dale being a prisoner and in the docks seemed incredible.

Hugh smiled sadly.

"The story is too long or I'd tell you," he said, wearily. "As to how I came upon the scene at this late hour I may say that I came—by appointment."

"By appointment?" exclaimed Sir Charles.

The lawyer was too astounded to speak, but rang the bell.

"I'm forgetting everything in my astonishment," he said. "Here, in your own house, may I presume to order you some refreshment, Mr. Darrell?" Hugh shook his head.



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