

"Love in the Wilds"

—OR—
The Romance of a South African Trading Station.

CHAPTER LXIV.
BACK FROM THE CAPE.

Reginald Dartmouth sprang to his feet and made a step toward him, then sank into the chair again and, with a mocking laugh, said:

"I see—I see; you are mad; you must be. How and why are you here?"

"I am here to save you from your just punishment, Reginald Dartmouth!" said the old man, calm and cold as ever; "to save you, if it be possible; but I feared, nay, I fear still, that you will weave your own halter yet. Look, sir; this will speak more plainly perhaps."

And he held out the will, but at a safe distance.

Reginald Dartmouth glanced at it and shuddered.

"What is that?" he said, in a low voice, that struggled to be mocking still. "What piece of villainous concoction is that, you old thief? For I begin to think you are more rogue than fool. What is it, I ask you?"

"Squire Darrell's last will!" replied Mr. Reeves.

"Well, sir! And if it be, why wave it before my eyes? Why do you bring it here? I am well acquainted with its contents."

"And I," said Mr. Reeves. "Before another day has passed the world will be also. Then it will require at your hands an answer to this question: who stole this will and buried it out of sight? Still more: Who, stealing it, rebbed its maker of his last few hours, and so committed murder?"

At last the captain was roused. With a bound he sprang at the old man, his face drawn and livid, his hand outstretched like a claw to grasp the precious paper.

But Mr. Reeves had been prepared. Quick as thought he struck the small hand-bell lying under his hand, and, before its warning note had died away, the curtains at his back were parted, and two figures stood revealed.

Reginald Dartmouth stood transfixed, turned to stone; his upraised hand fell to his side nerveless and purposeless.

"What—what," he cried, huskily, "does all this mean? Charles Anderson—Rebecca! Oh, I see; a nice plot—a nice plot! But you will find we are too many for you. So, you old thief," he exclaimed, turning his blazing eyes to the old lawyer again, "this is your important business! A vile scheme for extorting money, I suppose! Fitting accomplices—a dishonorable, worn-out rouse; a mad, disap-

pointed old maid! Ha! ha! Go on! Play it out, sir; play it out!"

Mr. Reeves, with a look of ineffable scorn, turned to the two silent figures.

"You see," he said, "as I told you, mercy was thrown away! He will be hanged, and nothing short of it."

Something in the stern, contemptuous tones started and awed the dauntless villain.

With an oath he sank into the chair again and looked up with a ghastly smile.

"Come," he said, "play it out! Let me hear. What is this will?—it is a will, you say. What is its purport? Where did you find it?"

"We found it where you hid it, Reginald Dartmouth," answered Sir Charles, sternly, "buried in the old well, at the mention of which you shrank like a whipped hound."

"It's purport," went on Mr. Reeves, "is in favor of the rightful heir—Hugh Darrell. To him is left the estate and money you have first stolen and then squandered."

"And is this all? Is this the matter you make so dramatic a situation from?" retorted the wily captain.

"Well, sir, granted all you say, that this will is genuine—grant it for the moment, though without doubt we shall be able to prove it's a forgery and send you three rogues all together to Botany Bay—grant it, I say, what follows? Hugh Darrell is dead, I am the next heir, and I still own the Dale and am left powerful enough to make you smart for this!"

With another glance at the white face of Rebecca, as much as to say, "You see—it was useless!" the old lawyer touched the bell again and Mrs. Lucas and Doctor Toddy entered.

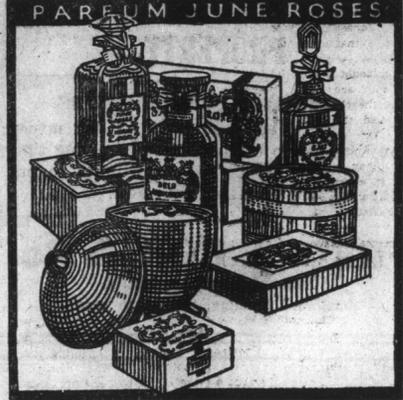
They shrank from his gaze as they would have done from that of a leper and stood beside Rebecca.

"Look!" exclaimed the lawyer pointing to them. "Here are the witnesses. Will you hear them give an account of Squire Darrell's last moments? Shall they tell you what you know already too well? Shall they go through the story of the struggle and the shrieks, the overturned candle, and the livid marks round the murdered man's throat?"

With a groan of baffled hate, fury, and horrible dread the snared reptile shrank into the shadow of the wall.

"Hush—hush!" he breathed, huskily. "What is—all this? I tell you it

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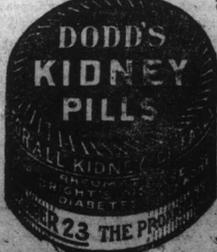


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is a vile—conspiracy—conspir-a-cy!"

"You still remain hardened and obdurate? You will not confess?" asked Mr. Reeves. "Then I ring again, this time to summon the detective who waits outside to arrest you!"

"Stop!" shrieked the hunted man. "I—the will—will! It is void, useless, and Hugh Darrell is dead! I have certain proof of his death. He is dead—dead!"

At that moment a noise of horses' feet, followed by the clattering of wheels and a babel of men's voices, reached the room.

"Dead!" wailed Rebecca, and staggered against the wall.

"Yes, dead!" repeated the wily villain, seizing his advantage. "Now where is your will?—waste paper—waste paper!—unless Hugh Darrell rises from the grave to claim his own!"

The clatter came nearer, grew louder, the door was burst open with one blow from an iron hand and a stalwart figure with a tanned, stern face stood in the opening!

CHAPTER LXV.
THE UNMASKING.

Things ill got have ever had success. —SHAKESPEARE.

We have scotch'd the snake, not killed it.—Ibid.

To attempt to describe the utter astonishment and consternation that filled the bosoms of the six persons who turned their eyes upon the stalwart figure in the door-way would be courting failure.

For a moment or two there was a solemn, awful silence; then Rebecca broke it with a cry and a word: "Hugh!"

At the same time she and Mrs. Lucas, sobbing and ejaculating incoherently, turned to him and caught his arm.

Then the old lawyer and doctor pressed forward to shake hands, leaving Sir Charles and Reginald Dartmouth where they had stood before he entered, staring still.

Hugh Darrell—for it was he—shook

the hands outstretched to him, and murmured a few words to the women hanging on his arm, then turned, with a puzzled and somewhat frowning brow, to the other two gentlemen.

Mr. Reeves, the first to recover his composure, hastened to explain.

"Mr. Darrell," he said, "your arrival is opportune—nay, miraculously so. This person"—indicating Reginald Dartmouth, who stood keenly watching his handsome kinsman, with white face and glittering eyes—"this person is Reginald Dartmouth, your cousin."

Hugh, disengaging himself, gently, strode forward and held out his hand.

With a mocking smile, Reginald Dartmouth would have taken it, but the old lawyer, with an indignant flush, stepped in between and caught Hugh's hand before Reginald Dartmouth's had touched it.

Hugh looked up with a glance of amazement, the other with an evil frown.

"It may seem strange and unaccountable," said Mr. Reeves, answering Hugh's look; "but wait till you hear a statement I have to make before you touch that man's hand in fellowship."

Hugh's hand dropped to his side, and, looking round slowly, he said, in his old, deep, and melodiously grave voice:

"For Heaven's sake, be quick, sir! I seem to be in a dream. You tell me that is Reginald Dartmouth, my cousin: you forbid our shaking hands! What does it all mean? Where is my father?"

Rebecca burst into tears, Mr. Reeves turned aside.

Hugh read his answer in those signs, and dropped his head, with a groan.

"This accounts for all the changes I have seen," he said, after a moment's silence, in a low, sorrow-stricken voice. "My father is dead and this gentleman is the owner of Dale, I suppose."

(To be continued.)

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