

PATRICIA'S GIFT

The Testing of a Strange Power That a Ring Was Claimed to Have

By CHARLES D. LESLIE

I.

A TALL, dark girl, carrying a dog-whip and accompanied by a small pack of vivacious terriers, came down the lane and halted before the garden gate of a tiny cottage.

"How are you, Mrs. Duff?" she called.

Perhaps the words, though the young lady spoke clearly, would not have reached the ears of the old woman seated in the porch, but the terriers, spying and sniffing at the gate palings, here set up a chorus of barks, and called attention to their mistress.

"Why, Miss Patricia!" cried Mrs. Duff; she hobbled to the gate and dropped an old-fashioned curtesy to the Squire's daughter.

"I came to ask—quiet, you noisy dogs!—how you were, Mrs. Duff?"

"Thank'ee, miss, I be tolerably well."

"What a wonder you are! Do you know I can hardly believe you are a hundred years old," said Patricia; she was twenty herself, a grown woman, and it seemed incredible this old dame should be five times her age.

"I be, miss," said the centenarian, stoutly. "I mind I was born in Bolcombe in 1810, and it's in the church registry, miss."

"I hope you get the soup and pudding regularly?"

"Thank'ee, miss, yes, young Jarge he brings it every evening, the Squire he main good seeing I wasn't born in the parish. But my first 'usband 'e was a Colshott man, and 'e brought me to Colshott just eighty year ago. Your father 'e be the third Squire I've lived under."

"We're all proud of you, Mrs. Duff, you are a link with the past, you know."

"Yes, miss," agreed the centenarian, "three 'usbands I've buried 'ere; and talking of 'usbands, miss," said Mrs. Duff, working round to the subject uppermost in her mind, "be it true what they say in the village, that Sir Hugh and you baint going to be wed?"

"Quite true, Mrs. Duff," said Patricia, in a studiously unconcerned voice. "Sir Hugh and I, as you are aware, have known each other all our lives, but our engagement was a mistake. I realized this, and last week wrote and asked Hugh to release me, which he did."

"Eh, it seems a pity, and him such a fine figure of a man," lamented the attentive listener.

Patricia laughed. "Don't you think I shall ever get such a good chance again?" she asked.

"Nay, nay," protested the Squire's pensioner, loyally. "You be pretty enough to wed a Duke, my dear, and you'll make a great match yet. But I wonder Sir Hugh let you go."

Patricia hesitated a second, and then determined to speak; the news must become known, better tell it herself. "He was glad to be released," she said, smiling calmly, "he wanted to marry a shop girl, and now he's free he's going to do it almost immediately."

"A shop girl! Sir Hugh! Eh, but what would his lady mother have said if she's been alive? It's wrong, miss. I don't hold with the gentry marrying with the likes of we."

"Oh! I believe she's a lady by birth," said Patricia, reluctantly—she was too proud purposely to misrepresent the status of the girl who had supplanted her in Hugh's affections. "Her father was in the Army, Hugh says; but this girl, left an orphan with a capital of a hundred or so, started a flower shop in the Finchley-road in partnership with another girl, and they make a living out of it."

Old Mrs. Duff peered into the proud young face, and Patricia, with her calm, unconcerned smile, gave her look for look. They made a strong contrast—the Squire's straight, tall, handsome daughter in the pride of her youth and maiden beauty, and the bent, aged woman so near the end of life's journey. Not only was there the difference of eighty years between them, but one belonged to the ruling classes and the other to the labouring, and in villages like Colshott this distinction is nearly as great as it was a century ago. Yet Patricia had the feeling she was being pitied, and, heedless of the proverb, "Qui s'excuse s'accuse," went on:

"It's nothing to me personally whom he marries, still, as Hugh's old friend, I think he might have made a more suitable choice."

Mrs. Duff nodded twice. She seemed to be making up her mind. "Will ye come in a minute, miss? I've something I want ye to see."

Patricia left the dogs in the lane, and followed the old dame into the tiny cottage. She wondered if those shrewd old eyes had read the secret she tried to hide—that she hated this unseen rival who had robbed her of Hugh. She had never really loved him, still she had been content to marry him, and she never doubted she stood first with him; and so she had been till another fair face had made him secretly chafe at the chain which bound him to Miss Fordway. Deeming herself neglected she had written breaking off the engagement, expecting the train next day would bring an apologetic lover to her feet; and, instead, a letter gratefully accepting his release, and confessing his love for another, followed two days later by a second announcing his engagement to Julie Rivers. The news hurt Patricia the more as her pride would not permit her to acknowledge it.

Mrs. Duff seated herself in the armchair of state the one living-room possessed, and, after rummaging a cupboard in a corner, produced a little tin box, which she opened. Inside, on a piece of wadding, lay a ruby ring. Patricia took it up and surveyed it with interest. It was old—the workmanship told her that—but valuable, certainly.

"Give her that," whispered the old woman, "'tis a spinster ring."

"A spinster ring! What is that?"

"If a maid wears that ring she'll never find favour in a man's eyes; however rich, however beautiful she be, she'll die unwedded. Give that to Sir Hugh's sweetheart, and he'll never marry her."

"What rubbish are you talking?"

"It's not rubbish," quavered the old woman. "I know its history. I took it, I did, from the dead finger of Miss Doris last year, when I found the poor maid in the river."

PATRICIA started. Doris Haytor, the Vicar's daughter, had for several years been engaged to a Lieutenant in the Navy. Twelve months before he got his step, and the wedding-day was fixed; but a week before it the sailor cruelly jilted his old sweetheart, and the distraught girl had drowned herself. Mrs. Duff had found the body in the river.

"You took it from her finger, Mrs. Duff? You wicked old woman!"

"'Twould only have brought trouble to another of the young ladies at the Vicarage; it couldn't do me no harm."

"But why do you assume—oh! what nonsense it is—that wearing the ring caused Miss Haytor to be jilted?"

Mrs. Duff, fixing her eyes on her listener, set forth her reasons. The ring had come to Doris from a spinster aunt who wore it habitually, and the girl had only worn it a few weeks before her death. When Mrs. Duff found the body she recognized the ring. She had seen it in her youth, and remembered the legend concerning it. It was to the effect that some two hundred years earlier one gipsy girl had murdered another to gain possession of it, and the latter, with her dying breath, had laid the curse on the wearer of the ring.

"'Tis my belief," concluded Mrs. Duff, "that Pasion suspected it brought poor Miss Doris her terrible bad luck, and that he was glad it was gone. Never a question about it did he make."

Patricia listened, frowning at the ring as it lay in the palm of her hand. She had only met the faithless lover once, but she remembered him as a pleasant, unaffected sailor, obviously deeply in love with his pretty sweetheart. And yet just before the wedding day he had jilted her. It was strange. The ring fascinated her.

"Mrs. Duff, I don't believe the legend. I don't believe a word of it, but I've taken a fancy to the ring and I'll buy it of you. I'll wear it myself."

"No, no," shrilled the old dame. "Miss Patricia, 'tis a spinster ring, for sure, and if ye do, 'tis a maid you'll die, young or old."

So genuine was her earnestness that it impressed Patricia in spite of herself. She had no wish to die an old maid; indeed, she was rather anxious to get married, so as to show Hugh she was not wearing the willow for him. Suppose the story were true? It would be easy to test the truth of it—temptation came to her, she yielded.

"Well, I won't wear it myself, but I'll take your advice, Mrs. Duff. I have to answer Hugh's letter announcing his engagement—I'll send it to him for his shop girl."

II.

"My Dear Hugh,—There was no reason to apologize for the fact that you are getting married almost immediately. Accept my good wishes and the enclosed ring as my wedding gift; give it to your fiancée.—Your old friend.—Pat."

"DEAR old Pat," murmured Sir Hugh Dare, laying down the above letter with a sigh of relief, "I believe she'd have run rough-shod over me if we'd married, but she's a good sort, and I'm glad she's forgiven me."

He glanced at the ring, casually wondered where Patricia had bought it, and put it in his pocket. The feeling that he had not treated his old playmate well had worried him since his engagement to Julie. His betrothal to Patricia had been engineered by his mother and the Squire, but he had always had an admiration for her, and had been easily persuaded into the match. And though Pat was an imperious and exigent fiancée, he had been content till that day when he first met Julie—Julie with her gentle brown eyes and soft brown hair. He had gone into the shop to buy some flowers, and found an over-dressed cad making love to a shrinking, frightened girl, who evidently wished him away. Answering the unspoken appeal in the pretty eyes, Hugh had constituted himself Perseus to this modern Andromeda, got rid of the blustering would-be lady-killer with a few cutting words, and straightway fallen in love with the persecuted maiden.

Hugh was a gentleman, and tried to remain one. He did not make open love to Julie, but he could not keep away from the shop. He meant no harm, he just drifted till Patricia unconsciously cut the cord which bound the Gates of Paradise against him.

He did not hesitate. Though Julie served in a shop, she was born in his class, her character was stainless, and he was deeply in love with her; he promptly took advantage of his release by asking her to marry him.

To Julie Hugh was Prince Charming. There was no happier young woman in London when, deeply blushing, she listened to his wooing, and shyly confessed she had loved him at first sight, but had not dared to dream he would ever ask her to become his wife.

Soon after reading Patricia's letter, which came by the afternoon post, Hugh took a hansom for Finchley-road. Julie and he were to dine at the Carlton that night, and he was to fetch her at seven.

She kept him waiting ten minutes and more in the little sitting-room behind the shop; but when she came she looked so sweet, and apologized so prettily, he promptly forgave her, and they entered the hansom as happy as two children going to a party.

On the way he gave her the ring, slipping it on her finger beside the diamond engagement ring she wore, and telling her of Patricia's letter.

Julie was delighted with the ring. "I suppose Miss Fordway will call upon us when we go to the Towers?" she added.

Hugh reflected. After all, Pat's note was very curt, even contemptuous in tone. He doubted if she would recognize Julie, and the Squire would certainly never forgive him.

"No," he answered, "she won't call. I doubt if any of my neighbours will. They won't forgive me for marrying beneath me."

The words slipped out quite naturally, and he seemed so unaware of having said anything rude that Julie, after waiting in vain for some apology for this speech, asked if she should write and thank Miss Fordway for the ring.

"No," said Hugh, and nothing more was said till the Carlton was reached.

Everyone knows the Carlton is one of London's smartest restaurants, and when Hugh had suggested dining there Julie had said she feared her evening frock was hardly up to the Carlton standard. Hugh had replied she looked lovely in it, that the simple white dress was very pretty and chic, almost worthy of its wearer, and the subject had dropped; but when they were seated he surveyed her with a dissatisfied air. Yes, Julie looked provincial, even dowdy, amid the smart toilettes in their vicinity.

"You ought to have had a smarter gown," he said, "you look quite second rate."

Julie flushed, and all her innocent happiness departed. How could he be so brutal, she wondered; the retort that it was his fault bringing her rose to her lips, but she bravely repressed it. Hugh, she saw, was out of temper; he ate little, but drank freely, and there was an obvious change in his manner. She summoned all her wits in a vain endeavour to entertain him, but her talk only seemed to add to his peevishness, and presently in despair she played with her food in silence.

"Why the deuce can't you say something?" he

(Continued on page 23.)