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"Love in the Wilds"

—OR—

The Romance of a South African Trading Station.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

AT THE SHRINE OF MAMMON.

Better be with the dead whom we to gain our peace have sent to peace, Than on the torture of the mind to lie in restless ecstasy.—SHAKESPEARE.

The Dale was in a state of bewilderment and confusion.

Never had the most intellectual of its inhabitants ever dreamed in his most lucid moments of the glorious state of things regnant at the hall.

From a quiet, sleep, do-nothing agricultural village it had sprung into a land flowing with milk and honey.

Aladdin's palace could not have been so beautiful or so quickly erected as the magnificent mansion which had been conjured out of old Squire Darrell's Dale.

Outside it resembled, so an old pensioner said, the palace of the Doges; inside, said the woman who helped scrub the boards, it was like fairy-land.

Certainly no expense had been spared—in the literal sense of the word—and the results were wonderful.

Had the squire risen from his grave in the old, moss-grown church-yard he would have been puzzled to find his way to the Hall through the paradise of shrubberies, terraces, Turkish gardens, alcoves with statues, Eden-like walks and groves, and when he, at length, had reached the hill, he certainly would not have recognized in the palatial pile that towered in all the glory of marble and granite above the old oaks, the venerable home of his forefathers.

The magician—gold—had waved his wand over the old Hall and turned it into a palace.

And now the owner of the magnificent palace, and the enormous wealth it represented, was coming down to it, and what was more, coming down prepared for a colony of titled and illustrious guests.

Rumors of his magnificence and ostentation, as displayed in town, had

reached the county families round the Hall, and they were all, with one exception, on the qui vive of expectancy, awaiting with feverish anxiety the arrival of the invitations which they were led to expect.

We need scarcely say that the exception was Miss Rebecca Goodman. Had the new Hall been renovated with plates of gold and ornamented with tiles of Peruvian silver; had the army of footmen, grooms, coachmen, stablemen, to say nothing of the host of valets, been multiplied by ten, she would have accepted no invitation issued by Captain Dartmouth, the usurper, as she styled him, of the rightful heir—Hugh Darrell.

Noy, more; she had forbidden any one of her domestics to speak his name or that of the new Hall in her presence; and not content with unarmored hostility, was eagerly and indefatigably marshalling her unseen and unsuspected forces to fight and, if possible, oust the high and mighty, the popular and powerful Captain Dartmouth, from his inheritance.

Had that individual known all that the quiet little woman dared and did actually plan to do, he would, we think, have chosen some other place than the Dale wherein to air his magnificence, and kept a sharper guard on his neighbor at the Warren.

But Captain Dartmouth suspected nothing. He was too much engrossed by his other all-important affairs to pay any attention, or give any thought, to Miss Rebecca, and so the mine was sprung under his feet.

At last the day arrived. The London road was, at early dawn, all astir with dust and rapidly running carriages.

Postillions in scarlet and outriders in yellow, coachmen in purple, and footmen in claret and laces, were to be seen all bound for the Hall.

The master of the grand place had arrived two days beforehand.

A distant relation, old enough to lend propriety to the gathering, and unimportant enough in other respects, had consented to play the fictitious farce of hostess, as the captain's aunt, and a duchess lent her brilliancy to give it the highest tone.

Every guest was to do as he or she liked; it was to be Liberty Hall in every respect—none were to consider themselves bound to any programme.

Breakfast would be served in the small banquetting-room from nine till one. Cold viands were to be found at seven in a small buffet in the large hall. Dinner—at which all would meet—at seven.

The grand drawing-room was lighted up at dusk. Every visitor had his special servants allotted to him and his special apartments.

Ingenuity had been tortured to invent some fresh novelty in luxury and comfort.

Carriage after carriage arrived and delivered its load of admiring guests. By the first night all had arrived

save the Vitzarellis, and they were on their way. For the day little was done by the company save to gather in groups and inspect and marvel at the extravagance and magnificence of the place.

But the night began with a ball, which the duchess, leaning on the host's arm, opened.

A thousand wax candles, sparkling in costly candelabra, lighted up the scene.

"It is magnificent—past all belief!" simpered her grace in the captain's ear. "Something to be remembered for a lifetime."

Then, as Reginald Dartmouth acknowledged her grace's laudations with a calm, cold smile of pleasure, the magnificent band burst forth with a grand strain of harmony, a sudden cessation of the conversational busing came for a moment, and the ball commenced.

Everybody was in raptures. The music was splendid, the floor exquisite, the decorations and the lighting magical.

"What a happy fellow Dartmouth must be!" exclaimed Leon St. Leopold, in a stage whisper, to his partner, Lady Marigold.

"Yes," assented the lady. "But see; there he comes—do you think he looks quite happy?"

"Oh? Well, perhaps not—the responsibility of such enormous wealth, you know, eh? Do you follow me? Or, perhaps—"

"He is in love," murmured the young lady, with an appropriate casting down of the eyes.

"Oh, no!" laughed her partner; "that's impossible. Every man in his regiment knew that he had no heart. You can't love without one, can you?"

And the aristocrat laughed with enjoyment at his weak joke.

There certainly was not a look of perfect happiness upon the captain's face; it wore the shadow of an impatience which was gnawing at his heart.

Still, crowded round and almost worshipped by a throng of mammon devotees, he succeeded in wearing the same soft smile, and very few noticed the light cloud upon his white brow.

The ball was at its height. The duchess had danced her allowance of quadrilles. The strains of a waltz were floating through the perfumed air when the sharp rattling of a postillion's horn rang out, and in another moment the tread of many horses' feet sounded upon the spacious drive, together with the clashing of their riders' whips and the shouts of the grooms.

A sudden but slight flush mounted to Reginald Dartmouth's face, and he left the ball-room as the hall door was swung open and "The Count Vitzarelli" was passed from mouth to mouth with sonorous unction by the line of footmen.

Before the major-domo with his silver stick could step forward to receive them, Reginald Dartmouth came hastily toward them and, with outstretched hand, said, in the voice he knew so well how to render impressive:

"My dear count and countess, the honor of your presence beneath this poor roof overcomes me."

Then, waving the functionary aside with his long hand, he himself, with an air of the deepest and most profound respect, led them to the apartments allotted to them, Lucille leaving upon the count's arm and followed by Madam Campani.

The count was gratified and somewhat relieved by this gracious reception, and pressed his host's hand with fervent friendship.

The beautiful countess moved her lovely eyes round the gilded corridor and bent them upon Reginald Dartmouth with a smile that sent the blood coursing madly to his heart.

"Is Captain Dartmouth a magician, that he has raised such a fairy-like place?"

"No magician, countess, but a slave," he said, with a low bow, and laying his hand, smothered in ruffles and glittering with diamonds, to his heart.

"A slave!" she repeated. "Captain Dartmouth would have us give him credit for an impossibility, madam—turning to Madam Campani. "Come, sir, if you are the slave you have more than once assured me, we command you to make cause with madam here that she permit us to join you erstwhile."

And she turned, with a silvery laugh, to the chaplain. The count laughed.

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"Tut, tut! Dartmouth, we will join you within an hour, Madam Campani notwithstanding."

And Reginald Dartmouth, filled with a strange delight—for he had not expected that his last guests would leave their rooms that night—returned to the ball-room.

"Now, who says Dartmouth isn't a happy man?" whispered St. Leon, as the captain entered, with a smile of joy on his face and a gleam of triumph in his eyes.

The tidings of the last arrival went round like lightning, and when the lovely countess passed between the lace curtains, thrown aside by a dozen obsequious retainers, and entered the dazzling atmosphere of the ball-room, every eye was fixed on her with the curiosity and interest with which her beauty and wealth had inspired every one.

Among the large crowd of courtiers that instantly buzzed round her was Sir Charles Amerson. Seating himself beside her on the satin fanteuil he, without loss of time, commenced the light gossip of which he was so perfect a master.

"How beautiful!" exclaims your ladyship," he replied, in a low tone, in answer to an exclamation of delight uttered by Lucille as she looked round the room. "It is, as everybody has been saying on every opportunity, simply magical, and the magician can too highly extolled. Did you of so much enchantment in so little time."

The countess shook her head with a light laugh.

"No, no; it is really and truly what you English call magnificent. Captain Dartmouth is a wizard."

(To be Continued.)



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