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"Love in the Wilds"

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

CHAPTER XXVIII.
A Page From a Romance.

He had thought it dead—dead and buried with the too faithful Bella, but he discovered that it had sprung from the ashes, and that it burned with a fiercer and more intense fire than before.

As he stood before the mirror and regarded the placid, almost unnaturally calm face reflected there, he murmured, as a man does who hides nothing from himself, who plays at no hide-and-seek with his own conscience:

"I love Lucille, Countess Vitzarelli—I, who thought to love no more! And why? Who shall say? Perhaps because—because—there is the shadow of a likeness in her face and form to her who died for love of me. Perhaps because I have seen by chance behind the mask of peace and prosperity she wears so well. Perhaps because I see a fitting soul to link with mine. For all these reasons, perchance. But—without reason or none, 'tis the same—I, Reginald Dartmouth love her."

And for Reginald Dartmouth to say he loved was to say that he meant to woo and, by fair means or foul, win.

Whose game was empire, and whose stakes were thrones, whose table earth—whose dice were human bones!—Byron.

"And so you think there is something more than appears on the surface in the Vitzarellis?"

The speaker was Reginald Dartmouth, leaning on a fauteuil in the private billiard room of the Duke of Tethers. The person to whom the question was addressed was a foreign diplomat, an astute man of the world, behind the political scenes of every court in Europe, and possessing a key to the most intricate mazes of diplomatic life.

The tone of the question was careless, almost indifferent, touched only with a slight appearance of interest and amused curiosity—nothing more.

Sir Bardolph smiled the smile that had puzzled many a crowned head.

"Perhaps," he said, softly, "we are all something more than appears upon the surface, mon cher capitaine. Men do not wear their hearts upon their sleeves for daws to peck at now—women have long discontinued to do so. Look around you and tell me how much, or, rather, confess how little you know of the secret purposes and aims of this roomful. I am behind the scenes a great deal, and in my fights from land to land, from court to court, see and hear many things; but it is, after all, but scratching the outside lava of the volcano; to reach the fire, to discover where, how, and why the fire smolders and burns, that is impossible. There, in that corner, looking like an idiot or a child of three years, sits one of the puppet-pullers of the world. His name is Lemetoff. See him twittering like a canary to the little old woman at his side. They are talking of the last song, criticising the dresses, and doing it with the greatest interest; but, tongue, but it remains at its post. He is thinking, thinking; deciding, at this moment, perhaps, the day for the Germans to pour down with the cry of war upon the ill-fated Danes, or Austrians, as the case may be."

Captain Dartmouth was silent. The diplomat went on: "As for madam the countess and the white-haired Elrado, their game—I speak not vulgarly, but as one who remembers that we are all 'players' in another sense as well as the theatrical one—their game is broken in two

parts. One, the man's, is Italy; the other, the countess's, is—what shall I say? It may be Italy, for she is an Italian—at least, by repute. Italy is in a transition state. Plots and conspiracies are being hatched every hour. In this room are a dozen men—ay, and women, too—who have sworn at the risk of their lives to uphold the cause of what they call liberty. At the risk of their lives. One and all hold their existence in their hands. They are conspirators, dyed with blood. Let their secret transpire and their heads must pay the forfeit, or they must be banished from their dear Italy, which they would consider infinitely worse. They have pledged themselves to overthrow the present state of things, and have come over here to plot."

"But"—and Reginald Dartmouth smiled subtly—"but too many to hold a secret, they say, is to let it step 'twixt finger and thumb. One may turn traitor."

Bardolph smiled. "No," he said, coolly, "for every man has pledged himself to do more than keep the faith himself; he has taken an oath more terrible and awe-inspiring than I can tell to avenge the cause on him who plays false. Every man knows that if he turned traitor at sunset, before sunrise a hundred—a thousand—men would be on his track, a thousand daggers would be thirsting for his blood. There would be no escape. Let him fly to the ice of Siberia, and the avenger would appear in the shape of the ferryman who carried him over the stream. Let him climb the highest snow peaks of Switzerland, and one of the band would strike in the form of his guide. Here, where safety is most likely to be found, in the ballrooms and public places of London the relentless daggers would be waiting their opportunity. He would find the assassin beside his bed at midnight, would feel his steel as he entered his carriage, or from some flower, tendered by the hand of beauty, inhale the fatal odor of the deadly poison pressed into the service of the terrible band. No, there can be no traitors, for by this time all have learned that from treason the next step is death."

"Can it be possible?" exclaimed Captain Dartmouth. "It reads like a page from one of our popular romances. Secret Society; members pledged by terrible oath; treason punished by death! My dear Sir Bardolph, here are the ingredients for a startling melodrama."

The diplomat smiled. "It is not unreasonable or unnatural that you should receive my revelations rather incredulously. It is an extraordinary state of things, but of its truth there can be no doubt. Nay, more, I think I can give you some proof. See that lady yonder?"

And he glanced in the direction of the Countess Vitzarelli, who at the moment entered the room.

"I see her," replied Reginald Dartmouth, with the slightest flush of emotion.

"She is coming this way," said Sir Bardolph. "Now watch me."

The countess, superb with her southern beauty and princely diamonds, glided toward them.

As Reginald rose and took her proffered hand she smiled and uttered a few words of greeting.

Reginald Dartmouth stroked his mustache thoughtfully. "You observed?" said Sir Bardolph. Reginald Dartmouth inclined his head. "I saw you place your fore-finger against your heart and fancied that the Countess Vitzarelli answered the gesture."

"It was no fancy," replied Sir Bardolph. "That is the secret sign—or, at least, one of them—whereby we know each other."

"You, then, are one of the band?" queried the captain.

"I am a member, or at least cognizant of, nearly all the secret societies of Europe," returned Sir Bardolph.

"And, pardon me; but would not this disclosure that you have just made to me of the sign be considered to savor of treason?"

Sir Bardolph shook his head. "I am a favored individual," he said. "I am allowed a very wide margin. They know that I could quash them all—Communists, Carlists, Reds, one and all—and so they let me alone. Besides," and he rose with a repetition of the diplomatic smile, "it is scarcely a revelation—'tis but a premature initiation, for, if I mistake not, Captain Dartmouth will soon be enrolled among the Vitzarelli followers."

Reginald Dartmouth frowned and shot a glance of anger after the languid, self-possessed figure. He disliked being read more than most men, but he knew his man too well to resent it. Few secrets were such to Sir Bardolph.

(to be continued.)

a moment, indeed until he had elicited the signal of response from the countess, who, with a peculiar smile, full of meaning and significance, pressed her small, taper finger to her side and glided on.

Sir Bardolph sank into his seat with a quiet smile of triumph.

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(to be continued.)

Household Notes.

Rinse cut glass in bluing water. Tapioca makes a delicious thickening for soups.

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Reginald Dartmouth, while replying with reverential respect, saw, with a glance of his quick eyes, that Sir Bardolph had placed one finger on his heart as he rose and kept it there for