

Serial Story.

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IN WHITE RAIMENT

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CHAPTER XI.

VOICES OF THE NIGHT.

From my place of concealment I was able to watch the major closely without risk of detection.

His presence there boded no good. He had crept slowly up the avenue until within sight of the house, and was intently scanning the gray party assembled on the lawn. Was it possible that he had walked behind me and watched me enter there?

He was scarcely so smart in appearance as the day when he led my bride up the aisle of the church, and had afterwards handed me the cigarette, but nevertheless he retained the distinctly foppish air of the man-about-town. For a few moments only he remained there eagerly scanning the distant group, then, as though reassured, he turned on his heel, and retraced his steps towards the lodge.

Determined to watch his movements I followed him until he gained Hounslow station, and there I saw him turn into a low-built old-fashioned inn, where I afterwards discovered he had been staying for a couple of days' past.

That some conspiracy was being formed I could not doubt; therefore I set myself to keep strict watch upon him, a no easy matter, for from hour to hour I feared that he might recognise me. It was he who had petitioned the Archbishop for the special license for our marriage; he who had with some mysterious motive posed as the father of the woman I now loved. Surely she must have known that he was not her father, and, if so, she herself had taken part in a plot which had so nearly cost her her life.

But was she not dead when I found her lying there? Most certainly. I could have sworn before any coroner that she was lifeless. The puzzle was bewildering.

The major's movements might possibly give me some clue. It was fortunate that we had met.

At a cheap clothier's I had purchased a rough second-hand suit, and a bowler hat, much the worse for wear, and these I had assumed in order to alter my appearance as much as possible, for a well-dressed man in a silk hat is somewhat remarkable in a place like Hounslow. About nine o'clock that same night, while I stood idling about the station with my eye ever upon the inn opposite, my vigilance was suddenly rewarded; for the major emerged leisurely, carefully lit a cigar, and then strolled across the railway bridge and down the road towards Whittington. Darkness had not quite set in, therefore I hesitated to follow him; but fortunately I had explored the neighbourhood thoroughly during the past few hours, and knew that by crossing to the opposite platform of the station I could gain a foot-path which led through fields and market gardens, emerging into the high-road almost opposite the gates of the park.

This byway I took, and hurrying down it, arrived at a point near the lodge fully five minutes before he appeared along the road. The gates were, however, closed.

Would he ring and demand admittance, I wondered.

When about two hundred yards from the gates he suddenly halted, glanced up and down the road as though to make certain that no one was watching, and then bending down squeezed himself through a hole in the wooden fencing and disappeared. He evidently knew that the gates were locked, and had already discovered that mode of entry, if indeed he had not broken away the palings himself earlier in the day.

Without hesitation I hurried forward over the grass by the roadside, so that he might not hear my footsteps, and discovering the hole in the paling, entered after him. I found

myself in the midst of hawthorn bushes and thick undergrowth, but, pausing and listening intently I soon detected which direction he had taken by the noise of breaking twigs. For some ten minutes I remained there, fearing to move lest the noise might alarm him, but when at last he was out of hearing I crept forward, breaking my way through in the direction of the avenue. The night was hot, and so still that each sound seemed to awaken the echoes.

What if he had paused, and, becoming alarmed, was now awaiting me! I pushed forward as cautiously as I could. It was quite dark, and I could discern nothing in the obscurity of the copse. At last, however, the brambles having scratched my hands and face, and my clothes having been badly torn, I emerged into the drive up which I had passed that afternoon. I stood listening, but could hear no sound beyond the howling of a distant dog and the roar of a train on its way to London. I strained my ear to detect in which direction the major had gone, for a footstep on the gravel can be heard a long distance in the silence of the night. All was, however, quiet—a stillness that somewhat unnerved me, for it occurred to me that he might be lurking somewhere among the dark bushes and perhaps watching me with secret satisfaction.

With the greatest caution I crept on, walking noiselessly over the grass in the direction of the house. As soon as the old mansion came into view I saw that lights burned in many of the windows, and from the drawing-room, where the open doors led on to the lawn, came the lively strains of dance music.

From where I stood I could see the high lamps, with their shades of yellow silk, and now and then bright dresses dashed past the long windows. A couple of figures were strolling up and down before the house. I could see their white shirt-fronts in the darkness, and knew that they were men smoking and enjoying the night air. The waltz ceased, and as I listened a sweet female voice broke forth, singing to a piano accompaniment a selection from Bizet's "Les Pêcheurs de Perles" that charming song "Je crois entendre encore." The voice was full of rich melody, and had evidently been trained. Was it, I wondered, that of my mysterious wife?

The two men at last tossed away their cigar ends and entered the house; thus I became encouraged to approach closer, cross the lawn and peep through one of the side windows of the drawing-room. It was, I saw, a long, low, old room, comfortably furnished in a bygone style. Across the ceiling were great caken beams, dark and mellow with age, while most of the furniture dated from the early part of the century. Fully a dozen people were there, but as I peered around I was disappointed not to see my love. I had risked detection and discovery to obtain sight of her, but she was not present, neither was her cousin Nora. Most of the guests seemed smart people, judging from the women's toilettes, and all were talking about with the air of laziness which overcomes one after a good dinner. Dancing had ended, and as I watched, a young, dark-haired girl approached the piano, and at somebody's suggestion commenced to sing a song by which I knew that she was French. It was a song familiar to me in the days when before entering the hospital school I had lived in Paris, that ditty so popular in the cabarets of the Montmartre. "Tu t'en iras les pieds devant." She sang merrily, and was loudly applauded. It was evident that the knowledge of French among the guests was not, as is so often the case, a pretence, for they laughed heartily at the comic expressions, and grinned when there was anything particularly "risqué." It was certainly not the

song for a drawing-room, and the fact that it had been demanded showed plainly that the company was not a very prudish one. But alas! Society has sadly degenerated during the past decade. Ten years ago music-halls were regarded as palaces of Satan, into which no respectable woman dare enter; but nowadays it is quite the correct thing to spend an evening at the music-hall, and mothers do not hesitate to take their daughters to hear songs calculated to bring a blush to the face of a virtuous girl.

How is it that at the end of this century respectable women ape the dress, the manners, and even the slang of the "demi-monde"? To be fast is to be chic—a fact which is surely to be regretted by those who still hold the Englishwoman as the pure type of all that is sweet and adorable. It seems to me very much as though in the lounge of the music-hall, that carpeted promenade of Aspalia, the line dividing the "monde" from the "demi-monde" is so fine as to be almost indistinguishable. The smart woman of to-day is not very far removed from those unfortunates of her sex whom she calls "creatures," yet whose mores in skirts and millinery she is so fond of imitating; whose career she will denounce in fiction, and whose argot she argots of the bar, the restaurant, and the night-club, is fast creeping into her vocabulary. Smartness is almost invariably a synonym for the manners of a "cocotte."

I peered in through those windows, eager for a glimpse of Beryl. Surely she was not like those others? No. I recollected her calm dignity and sweet grace when I had spoken to her. She, at least, was high-minded and womanly. I was glad she was not there to hear that song.

The singer sat down, having finished amid roars of laughter, and when the conversation was resumed; but at that instant I became conscious of someone passing near me, and had only just time to draw back into the shadow and thus escape observation. It was one of the guests, a man who lounged slowly along, the glowing end of his cigar shining in the darkness. Alone, he was apparently full of reflections, for he passed slowly and mechanically onward without noticing me. Unable to see his face, I could only detect that he was rather above the average height, and by the silhouette I saw that he stooped slightly.

The encounter, however, caused me to recede from the house, for I had no desire to be detected there and compelled to give an account of myself. I was in shabby clothes, and if found in the vicinity might be suspected of an intention to commit a theft.

Where was the major? He had certainly entered there, but had escaped my vigilance by passing through the thicket. I had been there nearly half an hour yet had not been able to re-discover him. The lawn on one side was bounded by a light iron fencing, beyond which was a thick wood, and upon this fencing I mounted and sat to rest in full view of the house and the long windows of the drawing-room. In the deep shadow of the trees I waited there, safe from detection, listening to the music which soon recommenced, and wondering what had become of the man whom I had tried

to follow. He seemed to have avoided the house, and gone to the opposite side of the Park.

Not far away lay the great lake, tranquil in the gloom, mirroring the stars upon its unruffled surface, and disturbed only by the rustle of a rat along the bank, or the plaintive cry of a teal as she made her way among the dry rushes.

Although I could actually see into the circle of the assembled guests, yet I was so far off that I could distinguish the women by the colour of their gowns. Had Beryl returned to join them, I wondered, I was longing for a single glance at her dear face, that face sweeter than any other in all the world.

A woman in a cream dress, cut low at the neck, came suddenly to the doorway and peered forth into the night, as though in search of someone, but a moment later she disappeared, and again the piano broke forth with the pretty minuet from "Manon."

I had, I felt certain, been there almost, if not quite, an hour; therefore I was resolved to make a tour of the Park in an endeavour to find the man whose suspicious movements had so interested me earlier in the evening. With that object in view I leaped down upon the lawn, crossed it until I reached the edge of the lake, which I skirted until I gained a rustic bridge which crossed the tiny brook that rippled over the stones and fell into the pool.

Of a sudden I heard a sound. It was quite distinct, like a half suppressed cough. I halted in surprise, but no other movement reached my ear. Could I have been mistaken? The noise sounded very human, yet I knew that in the darkness of night the most usual sound becomes exaggerated and distorted. Therefore reassured, I continued my way by the narrow unfrequented path, which, leaving the lake side, struck across the park and led me by a stile into a dark belt of wood.

Scarcely had I entered it, however, when I heard human voices distinctly. I halted and listened. An owl hooted weirdly, and there was a dead silence.

I wondered whether the persons I had surprised had detected my presence. I stood upon the narrow path holding my breath, so that I could catch every sound.

A couple of minutes passed. To me they seemed as hours. Then again the voices sounded away to the left, apparently on the edge of the wood. Noiselessly I retraced my steps to the stile, and then found that from there ran a path inside the iron railing, whither I knew not. But somehow down that path two persons were in consultation.

Treading carefully so that my footsteps should not be overheard I crept down the path until of a sudden I caught sight of a woman's white dress in the gloom. Then, sufficiently close to overhear, I halted with strained ears.

I was hidden behind a high hazel bush, but could just distinguish, against that reddish glare which shines in the sky of the outskirts of London on a summer's night, two silhouettes, those of a man and a woman. The former had halted and was leaning against the railing, while the latter, with a shawl twisted about her shoulders, stood facing him.

"If you had wished you could certainly have met me before this," the man was grumbling. "I've waited at the stile there a solid hour. Besides, it was a risky business with so many people about."

"I told you not to come here," she answered, and in an instant I recognised the voice. They were the sweet, musical tones of the woman who was my wife.

"Of course," laughed her companion, sardonically. "But, you see, I prefer the risk." And I knew by the deep note that the man who stood by her was the major.

"Why?" she inquired. "The risk is surely mine in coming out to meet you!"

"Bah! Women can always make excuses," he laughed. "I should not

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