

Serial Story.

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IN WHITE RAIMENT

By WILLIAM LE QUEUX.

Author of "Purple and Fine Linen," "Whoso Findeth a Wife," "Of Royal Blood," "If Sinners Entice Thee," "The Day of Temptation," Etc., Etc.

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CHAPTER XVII. IN PERIL.

Without loss of a moment we entered the hansom and drove along Bishop's Road and Westbourne Terrace and thence across Sussex Gardens to Gloucester Square.

Beside me my companion sat pale, erect and rigid, responding only in monosyllables to my questions, and refusing to tell me anything beyond what she had already said—that her cousin was dying. Her manner was strange, as though she were in deadly fear. She wore no gloves, her hat had evidently been placed on her head without the aid of a mirror, and she was without a veil. She had evidently left the house hurriedly, without thought of personal appearance, and this, with a woman of her stamp, was, in itself, a fact which spoke volumes.

I had taken her hand to assist her into the cab, and found it was cold as ice. Her face was the face of a woman haunted by some imminent terror, a white countenance with eyes dark and deep sunken. How changed she was from the bright, pleasant woman who had consulted me under such curious circumstances when I had first taken Bob's place at Rowan Road! Could this change in her be in any way due, I thought, to the tragedy at Whitton? I recollected the singular fact that Mrs. Chetwode had omitted her name and that of Beryl from the list furnished to the police.

Again I glanced at her ashen face as we rounded the corner into Gloucester Square. It was that of a woman absolutely desperate. She was trembling with fear, yet at the same time trying to preserve an outward calm. My suspicion of her was increased.

The hall door having been thrown open by a servant my companion led me through into a pretty boudoir on the left, where, lying fully dressed upon a divan of yellow silk, I saw my love. Her wonderful hair had become disengaged from its fastenings, and fell dishevelled about her white face, and her corsage was open at the throat as though someone had felt her heart.

In an instant I was at her side, and while her cousin held the shaded lamp I examined her. Her great fathomless eyes were closed, her cheeks cold, her heart motionless. Every symptom was that of death.

"Is she still alive?" asked the stricken woman at my elbow.

"I cannot yet decide," I answered, rising and obtaining a small mirror to test whether respiration had ceased. Hers was no ordinary faintness, that I at once saw. The limbs were stiff and rigid as in death, the hands icy cold, the lips drawn and hard set, the whole body so paralyzed that the resemblance to death was exact.

The mirror-test, however, gave me hopes. She was just breathing—so slightly, however, that the circulation of the blood was imperceptible. But there was still life. The last spark had not yet flickered out.

All the startling events of my fearful wedding-day came back to me. From that white throat that lay there exposed I had taken the tiny golden charm which now hung round my own neck, reminding me ever of her. That sweet face with the halo of gold-brown hair was the same that I had seen lying dead upon the pillow in that house of mystery in Queen's Gate Gardens, the same that I had bent and kissed.

I took her hand again. There were rings upon it, but all were set with gems. The bond of matrimony that I had placed there was absent.

For a moment I stood gazing upon her, utterly confounded. But I saw that to save her life no time must be lost; therefore, rousing myself, I obtained her ladyship's assistance to unloose her corset, and then made a further examination.

"This is a serious matter," I said at

last. "I shall be glad if you will send a servant in a cab to Bloomsbury with a message."

"To Bloomsbury. Why?" she asked.

"Cannot you treat her yourself?"

"Not without consultation," I responded, and, taking a card from my pocket, I wrote upon it an urgent message to accompany the bearer at once. She gave me an envelope, one of her perfumed created ones, and, enclosing the card, I wrote the superscription—

"Doctor Carl Hofer, 63, Museum Mansions, Bloomsbury."

Her ladyship at once sent the servant on the message, and then without delay returned to my side.

"Well, Doctor," she asked in a low, strained voice, "what is your opinion? Will she recover?"

"I cannot say," I responded mechanically, my eyes still fixed upon my patient's face, watching for any change that might occur there. At my request her ladyship brought the brandy decanter from the dining-room, and I managed after some difficulty to force a few drops between her cousin's lips.

"Now tell me," I said firmly, turning to the agitated woman at my side, "how did this occur?"

"I don't know."

"But if her life is to be saved we must know the truth," I said, my eyes fixed upon her. "In this matter to prevaricate is useless. Tell me how it is that I find her in this condition of fatal collapse."

"I cannot tell you things of which I myself am ignorant," she answered, with a well feigned air of innocence.

"But surely you know how your cousin was found, and are aware of the events which have culminated thus?"

"There are no events," her ladyship declared, twisting one of her rings nervously round her finger.

"Then I am to understand that this attack is a mystery to you?"

"Entirely."

"How? Describe what you know."

She hesitated—her eyes still fixed upon mine as though calculating the strength of my character. I had not forgotten her strange allusions on the last occasion I had visited there, and how she had with some secret motive endeavoured to fascinate me by her woman's wiles. That very fact made it plain that she was unaware of Beryl's marriage to me.

"I asked you to give your assistance in this matter because I believed that I could rely implicitly upon your secrecy," she responded in a hard tone, "yet you have sent for some friend whom I do not know, and in whom I have no confidence."

"You wish to save your cousin's life?" I inquired.

"Certainly. She must not die," she cried anxiously.

"Then answer my questions plainly, and leave the rest entirely in my hands," I replied. "From your manner I know that you have some secret which you are striving to conceal. Knowledge of this secret will, no doubt, place me in a position to combat this extraordinary attack. If because you maintain silence, she dies, then an inquest will be held, and the truth must come out—and a scandalous truth it will be."

"Scandalous!" she exclaimed with some hauteur. "I don't understand."

"An attempt has been made upon her life," I said, as calmly as I could. "Those who are responsible for this must, if she dies, be discovered."

"An attempt upon her life? How do you know?" she gasped.

I smiled, but made no direct answer to her question.

"I am aware of it by the same means that I know that Feo Ashwicke and Beryl Wynd are one and the same person."

She started quickly. "Who told you that?" she asked, with a strange flash in her eyes.

I smiled again, answering: "I think it would be best if you confided in me in this matter, instead of leaving me to obtain the truth for myself. Remember, you have called me here to save your cousin, and yet, by her side, while her young life is slowly ebbing, we are engaged in a battle of words. Now tell me," I urged; "how did this occur?"

She shook her head. "Shall I begin?" I suggested. "Shall I say that you came up with Miss Beryl from Atworth yesterday quite unexpectedly in order to keep an appointment? That you—"

"How did you know?" she gasped again. "How do you know our movements?"

"I merely ask whether this is not the truth?" I responded calmly. I had noticed that the furniture in the room was undisturbed, and therefore knew that they had returned to town unexpectedly. "Shall we advance a step further? I think, if I am not mistaken, that there was a strong reason for your return to town, and also for keeping your presence in London a secret. That is the reason that you communicated with your friend."

"With whom?"

"With Mrs. Chetwode."

The light died from her face. She swayed slightly, and I saw that she gripped the edge of the little glass topped table to steady herself.

Then her features relaxed into a sickly smile, and she managed to stammer:

"You are really awfully clever, Doctor, to be aware of all these things. Is it clairvoyance—thought reading, or what?"

"Those who have secrets should be careful not to betray them," I responded ambiguously.

"Then if I have betrayed myself, perhaps you will tell me something more of equal interest."

"No," I answered. "I have no desire to make any experiments. In this matter your cousin's life is at stake. It will be at least human of you if you place me in possession of all the facts you know regarding the dastardly attempt upon her."

"I tell you that I know nothing."

"Nothing beyond what?" I asked very gravely.

Again she was silent. I watched the inanimate body of the woman I loved, but saw no change in her. In what manner that state of coma had been produced I knew not, and I was in deadly fear that the last breath would leave the body before the arrival of Hofer, the great German doctor, whose lectures at Guy's had first aroused within me a desire to become a medico-legalist. There was, I knew, but one man in all the world who could diagnose those symptoms, and it was Hofer. I only prayed that he might not be out of town.

"Well," I went on, "it seems that you hesitate to tell me the truth, because you fear that I might divulge your secret. Is that so?"

"I believed that I might trust you to attend my cousin and preserve silence regarding her illness and her presence in London," was the haughty reply. "But it seems that you are endeavouring to ascertain facts which

are purely family affairs."

"The doctor is always the confidant of the family," I answered. "Surely in such a matter as the present you can describe the circumstances in which this attempt has been made upon your unfortunate cousin. I give you my word of honour to respect your confidence."

"But the other—the doctor who is coming?"

"He is an old friend and will promise me to keep your secret," I said. "Come, tell me."

She stood in hesitation, erect, statuesque, her eyes fixed immovably upon me.

"I know you are in trouble," I added in a tone of sympathy. "I am ready to assist you if you are open and straightforward with me. I have already given you my pledge of secrecy. Now, tell me what has occurred."

She wavered in her resolution to tell me nothing. My sympathetic words decided her, and she said in a low, hoarse voice:

"It is a mystery."

"In what way?"

"As you have already said, we left Atworth in order to keep an appointment here. I was entertaining a house party, but made an excuse that one of my Aunts in Cheltenham was dangerously ill. I left, and unknown to my husband or any other person, travelled with Beryl to London."

I noted that she inadvertently used my love's proper name instead of Feo, the name by which she had introduced us.

"The appointment was with Mrs. Chetwode?" I suggested.

"Yes," she answered. "I had arranged to meet her to-day at two o'clock."

"I have read in the newspapers reports of the terrible tragedy at Whitton. It was her husband who was murdered, was it not?"

"Yes," she answered in a tone rather unusual. Then she pursed her lips and held her breath for a single instant. "She has been staying with her sister in Taunton since the awful affair occurred, and came to town purposely to meet me."

"I think, if I mistake not, both you and your cousin were at Whitton at the time of the tragedy," I observed with affected carelessness.

"Oh, no. Fortunately we were not," she answered quickly. "We left the day previously."

That was certainly not the truth; at least Beryl had been there at four o'clock in the afternoon. But I made no remark. It would not be policy to tell this woman of my visit to Whitton and of all I had overheard and seen.

"Well, and to-day? Did your friend Mrs. Chetwode call?"

Again she hesitated and this aroused within me a further suspicion.

"Yes," she replied. "She remained an hour and then left."

"Alone?"

"No, we went with her."

"Where?"

"To visit a friend in Cadogan Place."

"And how long did you remain?"

"About half an hour."

"Cannot you tell me the name of this friend?"

"No," she answered. "It is of no account."

"Did you or your cousin eat or drink anything to-day except here in your own house?"

"Nothing. The person whom we visited offered us port wine, but neither of us accepted."

"No tea?"

"None," she answered. "We afterwards returned home, arriving about five o'clock, took tea here, and dined at half-past six. An hour later, just as we had finished dinner, the servant handed Beryl a card, and she rose, excusing herself on the plea that her dressmaker had called, and saying that she would return in a moment, left me alone to finish my dessert. I waited for her return for fully twenty minutes, then went across to the morning room. The light had been switched off and when I turned it on I saw to my horror that

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