

Serial Story.

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IN WHITE RAIMENT

By WILLIAM LE QUEUX.

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

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CHAPTER XXIII.

A COUNTER PLOT.

"I have no knowledge yet of who the woman is," responded Hoefler in answer to my question. "I only know that her name is La Gioia. But you are aware of her identity, it seems."

"No. Like yourself I only know her name." He glanced at me rather curiously through his big spectacles, and I knew that he doubted my words. I pressed him to explain by what means he had made the discovery, but his answers were ambiguous. In brief, he believed that I knew more than I really did, and therefore declined to tell me anything. He was extremely eccentric, this queer old dabbler in the occult, and I well knew that having once adopted a plan in the pursuit of an inquiry no power on earth would induce him to deviate from it.

Fully an hour I remained in that atmosphere full of poisonous fumes, watching a further but futile analysis that he made, and afterwards took leave of him.

I went back to Bayswater, wrote a letter of resignation to the doctor who had employed me, and then went forth again upon my round of visits. The practice was large and scattered, and several cases were critical ones, therefore it was not until nearly eight o'clock that I returned again, fagged and hungry, only to find the waiting-room filled with club patients and others.

The irregularity of meals is one of the chief discomforts of a busy doctor's life. I snatched a few moments to swallow my soup, and then entered the surgery, and sat there until past nine ere I could commence dinner.

Then over my coffee and a pipe I sat at ease, thinking over the many occurrences of the day. Truly it had been an eventful one, the turning-point of my life. I had telegraphed to my mother telling her of my good fortune, and in response had received a word of congratulation. One of the chief gratifications which the thousand pounds had brought to me was the fact that for a year or so she would not feel the absolute pinch of poverty as she had done through so long past.

And I was invited to Atworth! I should there have an opportunity of being always at the side of the woman I loved so madly, and perhaps be enabled to penetrate the veil of mystery with which she was surrounded. I was suspicious of the baronet's wife—suspicious because she had made her first call upon me under such curious circumstances. How did she know me; and for what reason had she sought my acquaintance?

She had endeavoured to flirt with me. Faugh! Her beauty, her smartness, and her clever woman's wiles might have turned the heads of the majority of men. But I loved Beryl. And she was mine—mine!

Reader, I have taken you entirely into my confidence, and I am laying bare to you my secret. Need I tell you how maddening the enigma had now become; how near I always seemed to some solution, and yet how far off was the truth? Place yourself in my position for a single moment—adoring the woman who, although she was actually my wife, was yet ignorant of the fact. And I dare not tell her the truth lest she might hold me in suspicion as one of those who had conspired against her. So far from the problem being solved, each day rendered it more intricate and more inscrutable, until the continual weight upon my mind drove me to despair. My fear was for Beryl's personal safety. The major and his associate had already shown themselves perfect ar-

tists in crime, therefore, to be armed against them was imperative. But in Wiltshire, living beside her, I would be enabled to watch over and protect her. Hence my anxiety for the days to pass in order that I might journey down to Atworth.

At last, on a close overcoat afternoon in the middle of September, when the hot sun seemed unable to penetrate the heavy veil of London smoke and the air was suffocating, I left Paddington, and in due course found myself upon the platform of the wayside station of Corsham, close to the entrance to the Box tunnel, with Sir Henry and his wife awaiting me. The former was a tall, smart-looking, elderly man, with grey hair, and a well-trimmed grey beard, who, on our introduction, greeted me most cordially, expressing a hope that I should have "a good time" with them. I liked him at once; his face was open and honest, and his hand-grip was sincere.

We mounted the smart dog-cart, and leaving my baggage to the servant, drove out into the high road, which ran over the hills looming purple in the golden sunset haze to Trowbridge. Five miles through that picturesque, romantic district, one of the fairest in England, skirting the Monk's Park, crossing the old Roman road between Bath and London, and having ascended the ridge of the steep known as Corsham Side, we descended again through the little old-fashioned village to Atworth by a road which brought us at last to the lodge of the Hall. Then, entering the drive, we drove up to the fine old Tudor mansion, low and comfortable-looking, with its long facade almost overgrown with ivy. One of "the stately homes of England," it stood commanding a view of the whole range of the Wiltshire hills, the trees and park now bathed in the violet of the afterglow.

From the great hall the guests came forth to meet us in old English welcome, and as I descended Beryl herself, fresh in a pink cotton blouse and short cycling skirt, was the first to take my hand.

"At last, Doctor Colkirk!" she cried. "We're all awfully delighted to see you."

Our eyes met, and I saw in hers a look of genuine welcome.

"You are very kind," I answered. "The pleasure is, I assure you, quite mutual."

Then my host introduced me to all the others.

The house, built in the form of a square, with a large court-yard in the centre, was much larger than it appeared from the exterior. The hall, filled as it was with curios and trophies of the chase—for the baronet was a keen sportsman, and his wife, too, was an excellent shot—formed a comfortable lounge. Both had travelled a great deal in India and the East, and most of the objects there had been acquired during their visits to the colonies. The room assigned to me was a bright, pleasant one, cheerily furnished with old-fashioned chintzes, while from the window I could see across the lawn and the deep glen beyond, away over the winding Avon to the darkening hills. Charming was the view, while the flower-scented air, after stifling London and the stuffiness of sick rooms, was to me delightful.

At dinner I was placed next my hostess, with Beryl on my left. The latter wore a striking gown of turquoise blue which, cut low at the neck, suited her admirably. Her wonderful gold-brown hair had evidently been arranged by a practised maid, but as I turned to her before she seated herself, I saw at her throat an object which caused me to start in surprise. Suspended by a thin gold chain around her neck was a small ornament in diamonds, an exact replica of that curious little

charm, shaped like a note of interrogation, which I had taken from her on the fatal night of our marriage— which I wore around my neck at that moment. As I looked it sparkled and flashed with a thousand brilliant fires. Could that strange little device convey any hidden meaning? It was curious that, having lost one, she should wear another exactly similar.

We sat down together chatting merrily. The baronet's wife was in black lace, her white throat and arms gleaming through the transparency, while her corsage was relieved by crimson carnations. Around the table, too, were several other striking dresses, for the majority of the guests were young, and the house party was a decidedly smart one. The meal, too, was served with a stateliness that characterised everything in the household of the Perrepoint-Lanes.

I watched my love carefully, and saw by her slightly flushed cheeks that my arrival gave her the utmost satisfaction. At table there, before the others, I was unable to refer to the uncanny affair at Gloucester Square, therefore our conversation was of frivolous trivialities—the heat in town, and the slowness and unpunctuality of the trains.

It was in the drawing-room afterwards, when we were sitting together, that I inquired if she had entirely recovered.

"Oh, entirely," she replied. "It was extraordinary, was it not? Do you know whether Dr. Hoefler has visited the house again?"

"I don't know," I responded. "He's so very secret in all his doings. He will tell me nothing—save one thing."

"One thing? What is that?"

"He has discovered the identity of your vis' tor in black."

"He has?" she cried quickly. "Who was she?"

"A woman whom he called by a curious foreign name," I said, watching her face the while. "I think he said she was known among her intimates as La Gioia."

The light died in an instant from her face.

"La Gioia!" she gasped, her breast rising quickly. "And he knows her!"

"I presume that, as a result of his inquiries, he has made this discovery. His shrewdness is something marvellous. He has succeeded in many cases where the cleverest detectives have utterly failed."

"But how can he have found her?" she went on, greatly agitated by my statement.

"I have no idea. I only tell you this, just as he made the announcement to me—without any explanation."

She was silent, her eyes downcast. The ornament at her throat caught the light and glittered. My words had utterly upset her.

"I must tell Nora," she said, briefly, at last.

"But I presume that you know this person called La Gioia?" I remarked.

"Know her?" she gasped, looking up at me quickly. "Know her? How should I know her?"

"Because she visited you as messenger from this friend, whose name you refused to tell me."

"I did not know it was her," she declared, wildly. "I cannot think that it was actually that woman."

"You have, then, a reason for wishing not to meet her?"

"I have never met her," she declared in a hard voice. "I do not believe she was actually that woman!"

"I have merely told you Hoefler's statement," I answered. "I do not know who or what she is. The name sounds as though she were an actress. Did he tell you anything else?" she demanded. "Not another word beyond what you have already said?"

"He only told me that he had discovered her identity."

"He has not found out her motives in visiting me?" she cried quickly. "Not yet—so far as I am aware."

She breathed more freely. That she desired to preserve the secret of this woman whom she feared was plain. But for what reason it was impossible to guess. Indeed, from her attitude it seemed very much as though she were actually unaware that her visitor and La Gioia were one and the same person. I saw by the twitching of her lips that she was nervous, and knew that she now regretted allowing Hoefler to prosecute his inquiries into the curious phenomena.

That she should be thus disturbed pained me, and I was angry with myself for having approached the unwelcome subject. Why should I not remain there beside her during my visit and seek to tranquillize her rather than to upset her thus? I had come here to protect her from any evil that might lurk in her path. My place was there, to comfort her and if possible to render her bright and happy. Was she not my wife?

And as I sat there with her, feasting my eyes upon her peerless beauty, I thought it all over, and arrived at the conclusion that to discover the watchful, and never for a single instant show my hand.

I was suspicious of the baronet's wife, and regarded her rather as an enemy than as a friend. She had forced herself upon me with some ulterior motive, which although not yet apparent, would, I felt confident, be some day revealed.

Fortunately at that moment a smart woman in cream went to the piano, and commenced to play the overture from Adams' "Poupee de Nuremberg," rendering silence imperative. And afterwards, at my suggestion, we rose and strolled along to the billiard room, where we joined a party playing pool. She handled her cue quite cleverly for a woman, and was frequently applauded for her strokes.

Of the agitation caused by my words not a single trace now remained. She was as gay, merry and reckless as the others; indeed, she struck me as the very soul of the whole party. There was a smartness about her, without that annoying air of manliness which has, alas, developed among girls nowadays, and all that she did was full of that graceful sweetness so typically English.

The billiard room echoed with laughter again and again, for the game proved an exciting one, and the men of the party were, of course, gallant to the ladies in their play. There was a careless freedom in it all that was most enjoyable. The baronet was altogether an excellent fellow, eager to snouse everybody. What, I wondered, would he say, if he knew of the vagaries of his smart wife—namely, that instead of visiting her relative she had run up to London for some purpose unknown. One fact was plain to me before I had been an hour in his house. He allowed her absolute and complete liberty.

We chatted together, sipping our whiskies between our turns at the game, and I found him a true type of the courteous, easy going English gentleman. I cannot even to-day tell what had prejudiced me against his wife, but somehow I did not like her. My distrust was a vague, undefined one, and I could not account for it.

She was eager to entertain me it was true, anxious for my comfort, merry, full of smart sayings, and altogether a clever and tactful hostess. Nevertheless, I could not get away from the distinct feeling that I had

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