

The Storyteller

THE CHERRY MAN

He came whistling along the country road, his cap pushed back on his head, his handsome face flushed with the heat, his clothes dusty. When he reached the door of the great gray mansion, he paused and looked at it, a smile upon his lips.

'I wonder if it is true,' he said, 'and if it is—'

He rang the bell. A stately footman answered it.

'Is Mr. Osman at home?'

'Yes.'

'May I see him?'

The footman hesitated.

'If you would state your business—'

'That I can do only to himself,' answered the young stranger, modestly; 'so tell him that I am here.'

'Your card, please?'

'I have none—he would not know me. Just say that I wish to see him on a matter of importance.'

The footman showed him into one of the side rooms and went away to deliver the message. The stranger looked about him with a curious expression.

'It does not seem odd to me—not a bit,' he said, under his breath. 'Familiar, if anything—'

There was the rustle of shirts, and the sound of a girl's merry voice. Before being aware of the stranger's presence, a young lady advanced into the room, pausing as she came face to face with him.

'Oh, I beg your pardon!' she said, flushing a little. 'I did not know there was any one here.'

With quick eyes she observed the refinement of the handsome face before her, the melancholy dark eyes, and sensitive mouth. 'Has someone taken a message for you? You wish to see someone?'

'Yes—Mr. Osman. Your man has taken the message.'

'Mr. Osman? He is not at all well. I am afraid—He rarely sees strangers, you know.'

'Well or ill, I must see him,' answered the young man, and there was a hint of stubbornness in his tone that made the girl look at him sharply. She opened her mouth to speak again, but another voice reached their ears—a man's tones this time.

'Uncle Robert wants you, Elise.' The next instant a tall, handsome, aristocratic-looking young gentleman entered. 'You desire to see Mr. Osman, sir? He asks me to inquire as to your name and business.'

'It concerns only him and me,' said the young man. 'I wish to see Mr. Osman personally.'

'That is an impossibility to-day.'

'But it is urgent.'

'Then why not tell me what it is? I assure you it will lose nothing by my repeating it. And the Squire will not come down unless positive of its urgency. At least give me your name.'

A light sprang into the stranger's eyes.

'My name is Robert Osman,' he said.

Philip Osman stared at him incredulously.

'My uncle's name? I have never heard of another Robert Osman—you are a relative?'

'I am Robert Osman's son.'

A half-amused smile parted Philip Osman's lips.

'Pardon me,' he said, 'you mean you are my Uncle Robert's son? And you ask me to go to him with such an assertion?'

'If you will not, I must. I am his son Robert. Frank Spears, once his stableman, is dying. I have been known as Robert Spears until yesterday, when the man, fearing that the end was near, told me the truth. I shall relate it as I heard it from his lips if Mr. Osman will see me.'

'You interest me,' said the other, quite cordially; 'of course I know the story of my cousin's kidnapping—I think every one about here knows it. It does not seem possible that you would make such a claim without substantial proofs. You have them?'

'If Mr. Osman will consent to see and listen to Spears—'

'Will you not rely upon my judgment in the matter? You understand that your tale must look plausible? You do not expect my uncle to believe your mere assertion?'

'Oh, no. But Spears is dying—may die at any moment, and his only desire is to see the Squire. As for the story, it is a simple one. Mr. Osman quarrelled with Spears and discharged him. He joined a travelling circus. The following year he visited the town below this and, opportunity presenting itself, he carried off the Squire's four-year-old son and only child. Now Spears is willing to make, and desirous of making, atonement.'

Philip Osman rose.

'If you prove to be my uncle's son and my cousin,' he said pleasantly, 'I shall be glad indeed to see you come into your own. Let us shake hands on it, and trust me to do the best I can for you. To admit you to Squire Osman without preparing him would be somewhat of a risk, believe me. I shall make the way as easy as I can for you.'

'Thank you,' said the stranger with a frank smile. 'I leave the matter in your hands, then, for to-day, and will come back—when?'

'Say Thursday. That will give me ample time.'

'This is only Tuesday—he may die.'

'If there is any immediate danger let me know.'

'If Spears dies!' he muttered under his breath, when Robert left the room. 'Spears will die, sure enough. Jerry!' he called as he heard the front door close, 'Jerry!'

'Yes, Mr. Philip?'

'On no account is that young man to be admitted again to this house. It is the Squire's orders.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Has your visitor gone—and so soon?' asked the bright young voice which had fallen so charmingly on the stranger's ears. 'He wanted to see the Squire, didn't he?'

'How did you find that out?'

'He told me, of course.'

'He told you?' Philip Osman seated himself and looked up into the pretty face. You are not usually interested in strangers, Miss Dupont. Why now?'

'Oh, he had such a fine face—he reminded me of the Squire himself. Didn't he you?' The question was put in a very innocent manner, but Philip Osman frowned at it.

'I don't see anything refined about him—an ignorant countryman—'

Elsie Dupont shrugged her shoulders.

'I may be ignorant as well as he, then,' she said loftily, 'but at least, in spite of my ignorance, I know a gentleman when I see one. And I rarely, with the exception of my godfather, Squire Osman, see one. So, good morning.'

Philip Osman bit his lip.

'I'd like to know how I deserve that, Elise,' he said. His words reached her as she was passing out of the room.

'Because you questioned my good taste,' she retorted. 'I'm going home.'

Jerry, who greatly admired Miss Dupont, went round for her horse. As he helped her into the saddle the young lady bent near him.

'Do you know who your visitor was?' she asked.

'The young man who just left?'

'No, miss,' answered Jerry, 'but Mr. Philip said not to let him in again.'

'Is that so?' She frowned a little. 'Oh, I suppose he was some crank or other. One can't trust appearances nowadays.' She straightened up in her saddle. 'And yet he is so like the Squire,' she said under her breath.

The second day following, the stranger sought admittance once more to the Osman mansion. This time Jerry allowed him to come no further than the stone step outside.

'The Squire's orders, sir, that he is not at home.'

A red flush mounted to the young man's forehead.

'The Squire's orders?'

'Yes, sir. He does not wish to see you.'

'Very well.' The young man turned on his heel quickly, his eyes flashing, his nostrils dilated.

'He shall come to see me,' he said savagely. 'I shall never seek entrance into his home until he acknowledges my right to do so—never.'

Frank Spears, the stableman, died that night. Before his death he made a statement of facts connected with the abduction of Squire Osman's son, and swore to it before a notary. The stranger made a copy of this, and sent it to the Squire. Needless to say, it never reached him, for Philip Osman opened and attended to all the mail. For the first few days the handsome stranger awaited a reply with some anxiety. In a week he would be forced to leave town with the circus, to continue the only life for which his training fitted him, and which he detested with all his heart. His nature had ever shrunk from it, without knowing the reason. He had the soul of a dreamer, content to take things and events quietly, happily, not seeking excitement in any shape or form. He had thought that the revelation of the dying man would open up a more genial world—a world in which he would be at home.

He hesitated over the thought that came to him now, as he walked along the quiet road, arched by beautiful elm trees.