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A. C. HOSMER.

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THE RED CLOUD CHIEF

A. C. HOSMER, - - Proprietor

FRIDAY, FEB. 13 1885

DARK DAYS.

BY HUGH CONWAY.

Author of "Called Back."

"Yes. I have seen you several times. I have been living at a house six or three miles away. I felt happier in knowing that in case of need I had one friend near me."

I pressed her hands. "Go on," I said, hoarsely.

"He sent me here. He had grown weary of me. I was about to have a child. I was in his way—a trouble to him."

Her scornful accent as she spoke was indescribable.

"Philippa! Philippa!" I groaned, "had you sunk so low as to do his bidding?"

She laid her hand on my arm. "More," she said. "Listen! Before we parted he struck me. Struck—me! He cursed me and struck me! Basil, did you ever hate a man?"

I threw out my arms. My heart was full of rage and bitterness. "And you become this man's mistress rather than my wife?" I gasped. "Neither my love nor her sorrow could stop this one reproach from passing my lips.

She sprang to her feet. "You!" she cried. "Do you—think—do you imagine—— Read! Only this morning I learned it."

She threw a letter toward me—threw it with a gesture of loathing, as one throws a nauseous reptile from one's hand. I opened it mechanically.

"Yes," she said, "you are right in thinking I had fallen low. So low that I went where he chose to send me. So low that I would have forgiven the ill-treatment of months—the blow, even. Why? Because until this morning he was my husband. Read the letter. Basil, did you ever hate a man?"

Before I read I glanced at her in alarm. She spoke with a most feverish excitement. Her words followed one another with headlong rapidity. But who could wonder at this mood with a woman who had such a wrong to declare? She grew calm beneath my gaze.

"Read," she said, despondingly. "Ah, God! I have fallen low; but not so low as you thought."

She buried her face in her hands while I opened and read the letter. It was dated from Paris, and ran so:

"As it seems to me that we can't exactly fit it off together, I think the fairest plan be to end. The simplest way to make my meaning clear is to tell you that when I married you I had a wife alive. She has died since then; and I dare say, had we managed to get on better together, I should have asked you to go through the marriage ceremony once more. However, as things are now, so very, and better stop. You have the satisfaction of knowing that morally you are blameless.

"If, like a sensible girl, you are ready to accept the situation, I am prepared to act generously, and do the right thing in money matters. As I hate to have anything hanging over me unsettled, and do not care to trust delicate negotiations to a third party, I shall run across to England and see you. I shall reach Roding on Wednesday evening. Do not send to the station to meet me; I would rather walk."

The letter was unsigned. My blood boiled as I read it; yet, in spite of my rage, I felt a grim humor as I realized the exquisite cynicism possessed by the writer. Here was a man striking a foul and recreant blow at a woman whom he once loved—a blow that must crush her to the earth. His own words confess him a rogue, a bigamist; and yet he can speak coolly about money arrangements; can even enter into petty details concerning his approaching visit! He must be without shame, without remorse; a villain, absolutely heartless!

I folded the letter and placed it in my breast. I wished to keep it, that I might read it again and again during the next twenty-four hours. Long hours they would be. This letter would aid me to make them pass. Philippa made no objection to my keeping it. She sat motionless, gazing gloomily into the fire.

"You know the man's right name and title?" I asked.

"Yes, from the first. Ah! there I wronged myself, Basil! The rank, the riches, perhaps, tempted me; and—Basil, I loved him then."

Oh, the piteous regret breathed in that last sentence! I ground my teeth, and felt that there was a stronger passion than even love. "That man and I meet to-morrow," I told myself softly.

"But you spoke of a child?" I said, turning to Philippa.

"It is dead—dead—dead!" she cried, with a wild laugh. "A fortnight ago it died. Dead! My grief then; my joy to-day! See! I am in mourning; to-morrow I shall put this mourning off. Why mourn for what is a happy event? No black after to-morrow."

His mood had once more become excited. As before, her words come with feverish rapidity. I took her hands in mine; they were now burning.

"Philippa, dearest, be calm. You will see that man no more?"

"I will see him no more. It is to save myself from seeing him that I come to you. Little right have I to ask aid from you; but your words come back to me in my need. There was one friend to turn to. Help me, Basil! I come to you as a sister may come to a brother."

"As a sister to a brother," I echoed. "I accept the trust," I added, laying my lips reverentially on her white forehead, and vowing mentally to devote my life to her.

"You will stay here now?" I asked.

"No. I must go back. Tomorrow I will come—to-morrow. Look, my brother, you will take me far away—far away?"

"Where you wish. Every land is as one to me now."

She had given me the right, a brother's right, to stand between her and the villain who had wronged her. Tomorrow that man would be here! How I longed for the moment which would bring us face to face!

Philippa rose. "I must go," she said.

I pressed food and wine upon her; she would take nothing. She made, however, no objection to my accompanying her to her home. We left the house by the same way by which she entered. Together we stepped out on the moonlit road. She took my arm and we walked toward her home.

I asked her with whom she was staying. She told me with a widow lady and two children, named Wilson. She went to them as Sir Mervyn Ferrand's companion. Mrs. Wilson, he told her, was a distant connection of his own, and he had made arrangements for her to look after Philippa during her illness.

"What name do they know you by?" I asked.

"He said I was to call myself by the false name, which, for purposes of his own, he chose to assume. But I felt myself absolved from my promise of secrecy. Why should I say in a strange house with strange people by Sir Mervyn Ferrand's request, unless I could show good cause for doing so? So I told Mrs. Wilson everything."

"She believed you?"

"She was bound to believe me. I would have no doubt cast upon my word. I showed her the certificate of my marriage. Whatever she may have thought at first, she saw then that I was his wife. No one else knows it except her. To her I am Lady Ferrand. Like me, she never dreamed to what man's villany can reach. Oh, Basil! Basil! why are such men allowed to live?"

For the first time Philippa seemed to break down. Till now the chief characteristics of her mood had been scorn and anger. Now, sheer grief for the time appeared to sweep away every other emotion. Sob after sob broke from her. I endeavored to calm her—to comfort her. Alas! how little I could say or do to those ends! She leaned heavily and despondingly on my arm, and for a long while we walked in silence. At last she told me her home was close at hand.

"Listen, Philippa," I said; "I shall come in with you and see this lady with whom you are staying. I shall tell her I am your brother; that for some time I have known how shamefully your husband has neglected you; and that now, with your full consent, I mean to take you away. Whether it woman believes in our relationship or not, matters nothing. I suppose she knows that man is coming to-morrow. After his heartless desertion, she cannot be surprised at your wish to avoid meeting him."

I paused. Philippa bent her head as if assenting to my plan.

"To-morrow," I continued, "long before that wretch comes here to poison the very air we breathe, I shall come and fetch you. Early in the morning I will send my servant for your luggage. Mrs. Wilson may know me and my man by sight. That makes no difference. There need be no concealment. You are free to come and go. You have no one to fear. On Thursday morning we will leave this place."

"Yes," said Philippa, dreamily, "to-morrow I will leave—I will come to you. But I will come alone. In the evening, most likely, when no one will know where I have gone."

"But how much better that I should take you away openly and in broad daylight, as a brother would take a sister?"

"No; I will come to you. You will not mind waiting, Basil. There is something I must do first. Something to be done to-morrow. Something to be said; some one to be seen. What is it? who is it? I cannot recollect."

She placed her disengaged hand on her brow. She pushed back her head a little, and gave a sign of relief as she felt the keen air on her temples. Poor girl! after what she had that day gone through, no wonder her mind refused to recall trivial details and petty arrangements to be made before she joined me. Sleep and the certainty of my sympathy and protection would no doubt restore her wandering memory.

However, although I again and again urged her to change her mind, she was firm in her resolve to come to me alone. At last, very reluctantly, I was obliged to give way on this point; but I was determined to see this Mrs. Wilson to-night, so when we reached the house I entered with Philippa.

I told her there was no occasion for her to be present at my interview with the hostess. She looked frightfully weary, and at my suggestion went straight to her room to retire for the night. I sat down and awaited the advent of Mrs. Wilson. She soon appeared.

A woman of about five and thirty; well but plainly dressed. As I glanced at her with some curiosity, I decided that when young she must, after a certain type of beauty, have been extremely good-looking. Unfortunately hers was one of those faces cast in an aquiline mold—faces which, as soon as the bloom of youth is lost or the owners thereof turn to thinness, become, as a rule, sharp, strained, hungry, and severe-looking. Whatever the woman's charms might once have been, she could now boast of very few.

As she entered the room and bowed to me her face expressed undisguised surprise at seeing a visitor who was a stranger to her. I apologized for the lateness of my call; then hastened to tell her its object. She listened with polite impassibility. She made no comment when I repeatedly spoke of my so-styled sister as Lady Ferrand. It was clear that, as Philippa had said, Mrs. Wilson was convinced as to the valid nature of the marriage.

When I told her it was Lady Ferrand's intention to place herself to-morrow under my protection, she simply bowed. When I said that most likely we should leave England, and for a while travel on the continent, she said that my sister's health would no doubt be much benefited by the change.

"I may mention," she added, for the first time taking any real part in the talk, "that your sister's state is not quite all it should be. For the last day or two I have been thinking of sending for the medical man who attended her during her unfortunate confinement. He has not seen her for quite a week. I mentioned it to her this afternoon; but she appears to have taken an unaccountable dislike to him, and utterly refused to see him. I do not wish to alarm you—I merely mention this; no doubt you, her brother, will see to it."

"I am myself a doctor. Her health will be my care," I said. "Then I rose.

"You are related to Sir Mervyn Ferrand, I believe, Mrs. Wilson?" I asked.

She gave me a quick look, which might mean anything. "We are connections," she said carelessly.

"You must have been surprised at his sending his wife away at such a time?"

"I am not in the habit of feeling surprised at Sir Mervyn's actions. He wrote to me and told me that, knowing my circumstances were straitened, he had recommended a lady to cook and live with me for a few months. When I found this lady was his wife, I own I was, for once, surprised."

From the emphasis which she laid on certain words, I knew it was but the fact of Philippa's being married to the scoundrel that surprised her, nothing else. I could see that Mrs. Wilson knew Sir Mervyn Ferrand thoroughly, and something told me that her relations with him were of a nature which might not bear investigation.

I bade her good-night, and walked back to my cottage with a heart in which sympathy, pity, hatred, exultation, and, it may be, hope, were strangely and inextricably mingled.

CHAPTER III.

"THE WAGES OF SIN."

Morning! No Sadie; no life, listless hours for me to-day. Plenty to do, plenty to think about; all sorts of arrangements to make. Farewell to my moody, sullen life. Farewell to my aimless, selfish existence. Henceforward I should have something worth living for—worth dying for, if needs be! Philippa was coming to me to-day; coming in grief, it is true; coming as a sister comes to a brother. Ah! after all the weary, weary waiting, I shall see her to-day—to-morrow, every day!

Although Philippa would grace my poor cottage for one night only, I had a thousand preparations to make for her comfort. Fortunately I had a spare room, and, moreover, a furnished one. Not that I should have troubled, when I went into my seclusion, about such superfluity as a guest-chamber; but as it happened I had bought the house and the furniture complete; so I could offer my welcome guest fair accommodation for the night.

I summoned my stolid man. I told him that my sister was coming on a visit to me; that she would sleep here to-night, but that most likely we should go away to-morrow. He could stay and look after the house until I returned or sent him instructions what to do with it. William manifested no surprise. Had I told him to make preparations for the coming of my wife and five children, he would have considered it all a part of the day's work, and would have done his best to meet my requirements.

He set to work in his imperturbable, methodical, but handy way to get Philippa's room in trim. As soon as this was done, and the neglected chamber made cosy and warm-looking, I told him to borrow a horse and cart somewhere, and fetch the luggage from Mrs. Wilson's. He was to mention no names; simply to say that he had come for the luggage, and to ask if the lady had any message to send.

William was away about two hours; then he made his appearance with some boxes. I was delighted to see those tangible signs that Philippa meant to keep her promise. Till that moment I had been troubled by something like doubt that after all she might, upon calm reflection, rescind the resolution formed in her excitement. Now her coming seemed to be a certainty.

Nevertheless, William brought no message; so there was nothing for me to do but wait patiently until she chose to cross my threshold.

Although my pleasing labors of love were ended, I was not left idle. There was another task to be done to-day. I set my teeth and sat down, thinking quietly as to the way in which it might be best performed. To-night I meant to stand face to face with that black-hearted scoundrel known as Sir Mervyn Ferrand!

I consulted the time table. His letter named no particular hour; but I saw that if he carried out his expressed intention of being here to-night, there was but one train by which he could come; there was but one way from Roding to the house at which Philippa had been staying. He meant to walk, his letter said; this might be in order to escape observation. The train was due at Roding at seven o'clock. The weather was cold; a man would naturally walk fast. Mrs. Wilson's house must be four miles from the station. Let me start from there just before the train arrives, and I should probably meet him about half way on his journey. It would be dark, but I should know him. I should know him among a thousand. There on the open lonely road he Mervyn Ferrand, coming gayly, and in his worldly cynicism certain of cajoling, buying off, or in some other way silencing the woman who had in an evil day trusted to his honor and love, would meet, not her, but the man who from the first had sworn that a wrong to Philippa should be more than a wrong to himself! He would meet the man and be called to account.

I designed no murderous attack. But it was my intention to step the man on his path; to confront him and tell him that his villainy was known to me; that Philippa had fled to me for aid; that she was now in my custody; and that I, who stood in the position of her brother, demanded the so-called satisfaction which, by the old-fashioned code of honor, was due from the man who basely and cruelly betrayed a woman. We'll I knew that it was probable he would laugh at me—tell me that the days of dueling were over, and refuse to grant my request. Then I meant to see if insults could warm his polite blood; if my hand on his cheek could bring about the result which I desired. If this failed, I would follow him abroad, case him and spit upon him in public places.

Truly, as I said, I had now plenty to live for!

The hours went by, yet Philippa came not. I grew restless and uneasy as the dusk began to make the road, up which I gazed almost continually, dim and indistinct. When the short winter's day was over, and the long dark night had fairly begun, my restlessness turned into fear. I walked out of my house and paced my garden to and fro. I blamed myself for having yielded so tightly to Philippa's wish—her command rather—that I should on no account fetch her. But then, whenever did I resist a wish, much less a command, of hers? Oh, that I had been firm this once!

The snow-storm of the previous evening had not lasted long—not long enough to thoroughly whiten the world. The day had been fine and frosty, but I knew that the wind had changed since the sun went down. It was warmer, a change which I felt sure presaged a heavy downfall of snow or rain. There was a moon, a full moon; for clouds were flying across it, dark clouds, which I guessed would soon gather coherence and volume, and veil entirely that bright disc, which now only showed itself at irregular intervals.

The minutes were passing away. I grew nervous and excited. Why does she not come? My hope had been to see my poor girl safely housed before I started to execute my other task. Why does she not come? Time, previous time, is slipping by! In the hope of meeting her I walked for some distance up the road. "Why does she delay?" I groaned. Even now I should be on my way to Roding, or perhaps even on my way.

(To be Continued.)