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VOL XII. RED CLOUD, WEBSTER COUNTY, NEB. FRIDAY, MARCH 20, 1885. NO 33

RED CLOUD CHIEF

EVERYFRIDAY BY

A. C. HOSMER.

RATES OF SUBSCRIPTION:

One copy, one year - - - - $1 50
One copy, six months - - - - 75
One copy, four months - - - - 50

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THE RED CLOUD CHIEF
A. C. HOSMER, - - Proprietor
FRIDAY, MARCH 20, 1885.

DARK DAYS.

BY HUGH CONWAY.

Author of "Called Back."

The information I acquired as to her antecedents is of no consequence to my story. Whatever her faults may have been, her history was a sad one; indeed it seemed to me that the history of any woman who had been cursed by Sir Mervyn Ferrand's love was a sad one. However, the result of my investigations was, in short, this: Ferrand had married the woman many years ago. They had parted by mutual consent. With his cynical carelessness, he had troubled no more about her; and, stranger still, she had not troubled him. She died on the date given by my informant. The question of identity could be easily settled; so that if ever Philippa chose to claim the rights appertaining to Sir Mervyn Ferrand's widow, she would have no difficulty in making that claim good. But I trusted that years might pass before she learned that the man was dead.

I made my presence in England known to no one; in fact, I felt that in returning to my native country I ran a certain amount of risk. For all I knew to the contrary, there might be a warrant out against me. If suspicion as to the author of that night's work had in any way been directed to Philippa, I, the partner of her flight, could not hope to escape free. However, I comforted myself by thinking that if danger menaced us I should have heard something about it, as after our first hurried start I had made no attempt to conceal our whereabouts. It would have been useless. My mother had friends in England, with whom she exchanged letters. I had an agent and lawyers, with whom, if only for financial reasons, I was bound to correspond. I had been obliged to write to my solicitor William, and instruct him to get rid of the cottage as best he could, and to look out for a fresh place for himself. But all the same I did not care to let it be known that I was now in England.

While engaged upon raking up evidence on Philippa's behalf, I did not neglect to make such inquiries as I could respecting the event which had happened that night near Redhill. I found that, so far as the general public knew, the crime was still veiled in mystery. No one had been arrested; no one had been accused; no reason for the deed had been discovered, and as yet suspicion pointed to no man. Indeed, in spite of the hundred pounds reward offered by Government, it seemed that Sir Mervyn Ferrand's murder was relegated to swell the list of undiscovered crimes. By this I knew that Mrs. Wilson had kept her promise of silence; and now that months had gone by, now that public attention had been turned from the thrilling affair, now that Philippa seemed as far or further than ever from giving any token which suggested the awakening of recollection of what her wrong, her frenzy, had prompted her hand to do unknowingly, I dared to hope that any clue to which remained of a revelation of the truth was reduced to a minimum. These results of my investigations and inquiries gave me immense relief, and my heart was all but gay as, armed with the proofs of the first Lady Ferrand's death, I hurried back to Seville, Philippa, and the happiness which I vowed should be mine.

We were married. Philippa and I were married! Married; and a few months ago I sat lonely, miserable and heart-broken, deeming that the one I loved was lost to me forever! What matters the things which have filled those months, and made them the most painful of my life? To-day we are man and wife, joined together till death us do part!

I said no word as to the result of my inquiries in Liverpool. I had no difficulty in persuading Philippa, who in some things was as simple and trusting as a child, that it was necessary, or at least advisable, she should be married under the name which her first certificate of marriage affected to bestow upon her. She signed her name for the last, it may, for aught I know, have also been the first time, as Philippa Ferrand; and I noticed that she shuddered as she formed the letters.

Although my bride was by birth half a Spaniard, and although I had by now in many ways conformed to the Spanish mode of life, we were still English enough to look upon going away somewhere for a honeymoon as indispensable. It would be but a short trip; and as my mother in our absence would be left at Seville alone, or with servants only, we did not care to go very far away. It so happened that, although so close to Cadiz, we had not yet paid that town a visit, and thought the present a capital opportunity for so doing.

To Cadiz we went, and stayed several days at the Hotel de Paris. We liked the white-walled town, rising and shining above the dark-blue sea, like as I have somewhere seen it described, a white pearl in a crown of sapphires; or, as the Gaditanos call it, farfin de plata, a silver cup. We liked the rows of tall terrace-topped houses. We liked the movement and bustle on the quays and in the port. We liked the walks on the broad granite ramparts, and the lovely view of the busy bay and country beyond it; but all the same we agreed that Cadiz bore no comparison to our beautiful Seville, and the sooner we returned to that gay city the better.

Now that I had gained my desire, was I happy? After all that had passed, could I have been happy during those early days of our wedded life? As I look back upon them, I sit and muse, trying in vain to answer the questions to my own satisfaction. Philippa loved me—she was my wife; come good, come evil, she was mine forever. In so much I was happy, thrice happy. Could I have lived but for the present, my bliss would have known no alloy.

But there was the past! I could not altogether forget the path which had led to such happiness as now was mine. I could be thankful that I alone knew all the horrors and dangers with which that path was studded. I alone knew the secret of that one night. Although I could keep it forever, would it be always a secret?

Yes, and there was the future. Behind the happiness which was mine at present lurked a dread as to what the future had in store for me—for us. It was a dread which day by day grew stronger. The greater my happiness, the more dreadful the thought of its being wrecked. The feeling that my house of joy was built upon sand was always obtruding on my most blissful hours, and not, I knew, without good reason.

Philippa's very avoidance of speaking of her past life lent some justification to my gloomy forebodings. Not once did Sir Mervyn Ferrand's name pass between my wife and me. Not once did she ask me for any further particulars concerning the death of that night upon which, in the height of her short-lived mania, she rescued my cottage. True that upon becoming my wife, and beginning a new and happier stage of life, it might be but natural for her to wish to consign to oblivion the wrong, the shame, the suffering wrought by a villain's craft; yet I was so wrapped up in the catastrophe that silence on the subject seemed strange. Her reticence astonished me. I fancied it must be caused by some vague uneasiness connected with that night—some doubt which she dared not ask to set at rest. It is, I know, not unusual for women, after their recovery from that mysterious disease which had for awhile driven my poor girl distraught, to be able to recall and accurately describe the delusions which had afflicted them during those wandering hours. I myself had in one or two cases noticed this peculiarity, and the authorities which I had studied during Philippa's illness mention it as an indisputable fact. My great dread was that at some moment, perhaps when our happiness was as perfect as it could be, some simple chance, some allusion to certain events, even the bare mention of a name, might supply the missing link, and the fearful truth would be revealed to my wife.

Our return journey to Seville was made by water. Although the Guadalquivir is not a very interesting river, we thought traveling by steamer would be a pleasant change from the journeys in the hot, stuffy, slow trains, full from end to end with the odor of garlic and tobacco; so early one morning we left Cadiz, and were soon steaming up the sluggish, dull, turbid river, with the great flat stretches of swampy land on either hand.

There were not many passengers on board the steamer. The boat itself was a wretched affair, and before an hour was over we wished we had chosen the train as a mode of transit. Mile after mile of the level deserted land through which the river flows passed by, and presented no objects of interest greater than herds of cattle or flights of aquatic birds. Save that Philippa was by my side, it was the dullest journey I ever made.

Of course there were English tourists on board; no spot is complete without them. Two of them, young men, and apparently gentlemen, had seated themselves near us; and after the usual admiring glances at my beautiful Philippa, commenced a desultory talk with each other.

From the unrestrained way in which they spoke, and from the strength of some of their unfavorable comments on the scenery, or lack of scenery, it was clear that they took us for natives, before whom they could speak without being understood. Philippa, of course, looked a thorough Spaniard, and my own face had become so tanned by the sun that I might have been of any nationality.

The young fellows chatted on quite oblivious to the fact that two of their neighbors understood every word they spoke. For some time I listened with great amusement; then the jolting motion of the steamer, the sluggish muddy flow of the stream, the monotonous banks past which we stole, exercised a soporific effect upon me, and I began to doze and dream.

Through my dreams I heard a name, a hated name, spoken clearly and distinctly. I started and opened my eyes. Philippa's head was stretched forward as if she was intent upon catching some expected words spoken by another.

"Sir Mervyn Ferrand," I heard one of our fellow-voyagers repeat. "Yes, I remember him; tall, good-looking man. Where is he now? He was a bad lot."

"Surely you read or heard about it?" said his companion in a tone of surprise.

I touched my wife's arm. "Come away, Philippa," I said.

She made a motion of dissent. Again I urged her. She shook her head pettishly.

"Ah! I forgot where you have been for months," said the second tourist, laughing; "out of the pale of civilization and newspapers. Well, Ferrand was murdered—shot dead!"

"Philippa, dearest, come, I implore you," I whispered.

It was too late! The look on her face told me that nothing would now move her—nothing! She would hear the dreadful truth, told perhaps with distorted details. I groaned inwardly. The moment I had so long dreaded had come. If I dragged her away by force—if I interrupted the speakers—what good could it do? She had heard enough. She would force me to tell her the rest. I could only pray that she would in no way associate herself with the man's death.

"Murdered! Poor fellow! Who murdered him?" I heard the first speaker say.

"No one knows. He was shot dead on a country roadside, just as that fearful snowstorm of last winter began. It seems almost incredible, but the snow drifted over him, and until it melted the crime was not discovered. In the interval the murdered had, of course, got clean away."

"Poor devil! I never heard any good of him; but what an end!"

I was not looking at the speakers. I was noting every change in my wife's face. I saw the color fly from her cheek. I saw her lips and throat working convulsively, as though she was trying to articulate. I saw her dark brown contract as in anguish. I knew that she was clasping her hands together, as was her way when agitated. Suddenly she turned her eyes to mine, and in her eyes was a look of horror which told me that the very worst had come to pass—that the dread which had haunted me was realized! Then with a low moan she sank, white and senseless, on my shoulder.

Though in a whirl of despair, I believe that I assumed a kind of mechanical calm. I seem to remember that the two English tourists offered their assistance; that, as we bore Philippa to an extemporized couch in the shadiest and coolest place we could find, I smiled, and attributed my wife's fainting fit to the heat of the sun, the smell of engines, or something of that kind. Little did those young men guess what their chance words had wrought. Little could they think that in speaking of Sir Mervyn Ferrand's death they had, perhaps, wrecked the happiness of two lives. My heart was full of grief and fear, but I believe I bore myself bravely.

In spite of such restoratives as we could administer, Philippa's swoon lasted for a considerable time. I troubled little about that fact. Indeed, to me it seemed well that syncope should have supervened, and, for a time, banished the dreadful memories which had so suddenly invaded her brain. Could such a thing have been possible, I would almost have wished that her insensibility would continue until we reached Seville. But it was not to be so. By and by she sighed deeply, and her eyes opened. Consciousness and all its dreaded sequence was hers once more.

I spoke to her, but she made no reply. She turned her eyes from mine; she shunned my gaze; she even seemed to shrink from the touch of my hand. During the remainder of that dreary journey not one word passed her lips. She lay with her face turned to the side of the vessel, heedless of the curious glances from fellow-passengers, heedless of my whispered words of love; her own thoughts were her own, sought to the thoughts which led her I trembled to picture whither.

Through all those long wintry hours while the wretched steamboat plowed its way up the broad muddy stream I sat beside her, trying to find some way out of our sorrow. Alas! every road was stopped by the impassable obstacle of Philippa's knowledge of what she had done. For she knew it, I was certain. That look in her eyes had told me so much. The duration of her insanity had been so short that I could gather no comfort from the fact that by some merciful arrangement maniacs who recover their erring senses are troubled little by the deeds they have done in their moments of madness. I felt that in my wife's case my only hope was to endeavor by argument to bring her to my own way of thinking; that is, to consider herself unaccountable by any law, human or divine, for her actions at the time. But I doubted if her sensitive, impulsive nature could ever be induced to take this view of her act. I doubted, had she not been the woman I loved with a passionate love, if I could have quite absolved her from the crime, with the remembrance of her words, "Basil, did you ever hate a man?" still with me.

Yet, strange anomaly, I would, in full sight of course, have shot that man through the heart and have gloried in the deed. But then Philippa was a woman, and had she not been the woman I loved I might have shrunk from the one who, even in her madness, was urged to take such fearful vengeance.

I smiled bitterly as I thought how a chance breath of wind had tumbled my house of cards to the ground. I smiled almost triumphantly as I told myself that, come what might—misery—shame—death—I had won and held for a week the one desire of my life. Nothing could deprive me of that memory.

Home at last! Still silent, or answering my questions by monosyllables, Philippa was brought by me to our once happy home in Seville. My mother with arch smiles of welcome on her comely face, was at the gate of the patio ready to receive us. As she saw her a kind of shiver ran through my poor love's frame. She let my mother embrace and caress her without any display of reciprocal affection.

"Philippa is ill," I said, in explanation. "I will take her to her room."

I led her to the apartment which my mother had in our absence fitted up for us. It was gay and beautiful with flowers, and there were many other careful little evidences of the hearty welcome which was waiting us. Philippa noticed nothing. I closed the door and turned toward my wife.

She looked at me with those wondrous dark eyes, which seemed to search my very soul. "Basil," she said, in a low, solemn voice, "tell me—tell me the truth. What had I done that night?"

CHAPTER XI.

SPECIAL PLEADING.

It was over! She knew! The hope which may have buoyed my spirits, that Philippa's agitation at learning of Sir Mervyn Ferrand's death was but due to the fact that once she loved the man entirely vanished. I could see no loop-hole of escape, no possibility of persuading her that she was fancying horrors which had never taken place. Moreover, although I would have given my life to have saved her from the knowledge of this thing, I could not meet the eyes of her I loved, and lie to her.

I did indeed, if but for the sake of gaining time, attempt to stammer out some evasive answer; but she interrupted me before I had spoken five words.

"Why do I ask?" she echoed. "I know it all—all—all! In dreams it has come to me—the whitened road—the dull dead face—the whirling snow! In dreams I have stood over him, and said to myself, 'He is dead!' But, Basil, my love, my husband, I thought it was but a dream. I drove it away. I said, 'It must be a dream. I hated him, and so I dreamed that I killed him.' Basil, dearest Basil, tell me, if you can, that I dreamed it!"

Her voice sank into accents of piteous entreaty. She looked at me yearningly.

"Dearest, it must have been a dream," I said.

She threw out her arms wildly. "No, no! It was no dream. Even now I can see myself standing in the night over that motionless form. I can feel the cold air on my cheek. I can see myself flying through the snow. Basil, I hated that man, and I killed him!"

The tears were streaming down my cheeks. I seized her hands, and strove to draw her to me. She tore herself from my grasp, and throwing herself wildly on the bed, broke into a paroxysm of sobs. As I approached her she turned her head from me.

"I killed him! killed him!" she whispered in awe-struck tones. "Oh, that fearful night! It has haunted me ever since. I know not why. Now I know! He wronged me, and I killed him! killed him!"

I placed my arm around her neck, and my cheek against hers. As she felt my touch she started up wildly.

"No, no!" she cried. "Touch me not! Shun me! Shrink from me! Basil, do you hear? Do you understand? I have murdered a man!"

Once more she threw herself on the bed, her whole frame quivering with anguish.

"A shamed—a ruined woman!" she muttered. "A villain's forsaken toy, and now a murderess! You have chosen your wife well, Basil!"

"Sweetest, I love you," I whispered.

"Love me! How can you love me? Such love is not holy. If you love me, aid me to die, Basil! Give me something that will kill me! Why did you save my life?"

"Because I loved you then, as I love you now."

She was silent, and I hoped was growing calmer. I was but waiting for the first shock of her newly-born knowledge to pass away, in order to reason with her, and show her that by every moral law she was guiless of the fearful crime. Suddenly she turned to me.

"How did I kill him?" she said, with a shudder.

"Dearest, rest. We will talk again presently."

"How did I kill him?" she repeated with vehemence.

"He was found shot through the heart," I answered, reluctantly.

"Shot through his heart—his wicked heart! Shot by me! How could I have shot him? With what? Basil, tell me all, or I shall go mad! I will not have the smallest thing concealed. I will know all!"

"He was shot with a pistol."

"A pistol! a pistol! How did I come by it? Where is it?"

"I threw it away."

"You? Then you know!"

I bowed my head. I felt that concealment was useless. She must know all.

(*To be Continued.*)

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