

THE DIVA'S RUBY

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SYNOPSIS.

Baraka, a Tartar girl, became enamored of a golden bearded stranger who was prospecting and studying herbs in the vicinity of her home in central Asia, and revealed to him the location of a mine of rubies hoping that the stranger would love her in return for her disclosure. They were followed to the cave by the girl's relatives, who blocked up the entrance, and drew off the water supply, leaving the couple to die. Baraka's cousin Saad, her betrothed, attempted to climb down a cliff overlooking the mine; but the traveler shot him. The stranger was revived from a water gourd Saad carried, dug his way out of the tunnel, and departed, deserting the girl and carrying a bag of rubies. Baraka gathered all the gems she could carry, and started in pursuit. Margaret Donne, (Margaret de Cordova), a famous prima donna, became engaged in London to Konstantin Logotheti, a wealthy Greek financier. Her intimate friend was Countess Lovelace, known as Lady Maud, whose husband had been killed by a bomb in St. Petersburg, and Lady Maud's most intimate friend was Rufus Van Torp, an American, who had been a cowboy in early life, but had become one of the richest men in the world. Van Torp was in love with Margaret, and rushed to London as soon as he heard of her betrothal.

CHAPTER II.—Continued.

Lady Maud laid her left hand affectionately on the man's right, which was uppermost on hers, and her voice rippled with happiness.

"If you had only said a lark instead of a hen, Rufus!" she laughed.

"We could get along a lot better without larks than without hens," answered her friend philosophically. "But I'll make it a nightingale next time, if I can remember, or a bald eagle, or any bird that strikes you as cheerful."

The terrible mouth had relaxed almost to gentleness, and the fierce blue eyes were suddenly kind as they looked into the woman's face. She led him to an old-fashioned sofa, their hands parted, and they sat down side by side.

"Cheerful," he said, in a tone of reflection. "Yes, I'm feeling pretty cheerful, and it's all over and settled."

"Do you mean the trouble you were in last spring?"

"N—no—not that, though it wasn't as funny as a Sunday school treat while it lasted, and I was thankful when it was through. It's another matter altogether that I'm cheerful about—besides seeing you, my dear. I've done it, Maud. I've done it at last."

"What?"

"I've sold my interest in the Trust. It won't be made known for some time, so don't talk about it, please. But it's settled and done, and I've got the money."

"You have sold the Nickel Trust?" Lady Maud's lips remained parted in surprise.

"And I've bought you a little present with the proceeds," he answered, putting his large thumb and finger into the pocket of his white waistcoat. "It's only a funny little bit of glass I picked up," he continued, producing a small twist of stiff writing paper. "You needn't think it's so very fine! But it's a pretty color, and when you're out of mourning I daresay you'll make a hatpin of it. I like handsome hatpins myself, you know."

He had undusted the paper without speaking, it lay open in the palm of his hand, and Lady Maud saw a stone of the size of an ordinary hazel nut, very perfectly cut, and of that wonderful transparent red color which is known as "pigeon's blood," and which is almost impossible to describe. Sunlight shining through Persian rose-leaf sherry upon white silk makes a little patch of color that is perhaps more like it than any other shade of red, but not many Europeans have ever seen that, and it is a good deal easier to go and look at a pigeon's blood ruby in a jeweler's window.

"What a beautiful color!" exclaimed Lady Maud innocently, after a moment. "I didn't know they imitated rubies so well, though, of course, I know nothing about it. If it were not an impossibility, I should take it for a real one."

"So should I," assented Mr. Van Torp quietly. "It'll make a pretty hatpin anyway. Shall I have it mounted for you?"

"Thanks, awfully, but I think I should like to keep it as it is for a little while. It's such a lovely color, just as it is. Thank you so much! Do tell me where you got it."

"Oh, well, there was a sort of a traveler came to New York the other day selling them what they call privately. I guess he must be a Russian or something, for he has a kind of an off-look of your husband, only he wears a beard and an eyeglass. It must be about the eyes. Maybe the forehead, too. He'll most likely turn up in London one of these days to sell this invention, or whatever it is."

Lady Maud said nothing to this, but she took the stone from his hand, looked at it some time with evident admiration, and then set it down on its bit of paper, upon a little table by the end of the sofa.

"If I were you, I wouldn't leave it around much," observed Mr. Van Torp carelessly. "Somebody might take a fancy to it. The color's attractive, you see, and it looks like real."

"Oh, I'll be very careful of it, never fear! I can't tell you how much I like it!" She twisted it up tightly in its bit of paper, rose to her feet, and put it away in her writing table.

"It'll be a sort of souvenir of the old Nickel Trust," said her friend, watching her with satisfaction.

"Have you really sold out all your interest in it?" she asked, sitting down again; and now that she returned to the question her tone showed that she had not yet recovered from her astonishment.

"That's what I've done. I always told you I would, when I was ready. Why do you look so surprised? Would you rather I hadn't?"

Lady Maud shook her head and her voice rippled deliciously as she answered:

"I can hardly imagine you without the Nickel Trust that's all! What in the world shall you do with yourself?"

"Oh, various kinds of things. I think I'll get married, for one. Then

I mean. You taught me to say "better," didn't you?"

Lady Maud tried to smile. "Of two, yes," she answered. "You are forcing my hand, my dear friend," she went on very gravely. "You know very well that I trust you with all my heart. If it were possible to imagine a case in which the safety of the world could depend on my choosing one of you for my husband, you know very well that I should take you, though I never was the least little bit in love with you, any more than you ever were with me."

"Well, but if you would, she ought," argued Mr. Van Torp. "It's for her own good, and as you're a friend of hers, you ought to help her to do what's good for her. That's only fair. If she doesn't marry me, she's certain to marry that Greek, so it's a forced choice, it appears to me."

"But I can't—"

"She's a nice girl, isn't she?"

"Yes, very."

"And you like her, don't you?"

"Very much. Her father was my father's best friend."

"I don't believe in atavism," ob-

answered the millionaire, almost humbly. "You see I don't always know. I learnt things differently from what you did. I suppose you'd think it an insult if I said I'd give a large sum of money to your charity the day I married Mme. Cordova, if you'd help me through."

"Please stop," Lady Maud's face darkened visibly. "That's not like you."

"I'll give a million pounds sterling," said Mr. Van Torp slowly.

Lady Maud leaned back in her corner of the sofa, clasping her hands rather tightly together in her lap. Her white throat flushed as when the light of dawn kisses Parian marble, and the fresh tint in her cheeks deepened softly; her lips were tightly shut, her eyelids quivered a little, and she looked straight before her across the room.

"You can do a pretty good deal with a million pounds," said Mr. Van Torp, after the silence had lasted nearly half a minute.

"Don't!" cried Lady Maud, in an odd voice.

"Forty thousand pounds a year," observed the millionaire thoughtfully. "You could do quite a great deal of good with that, couldn't you?"

"Don't! Please don't!" She pressed her hands to her ears and rose at the same instant. Perhaps it was she, after all, and not her friend who had been brought suddenly to a great cross-road in life. She stood still one moment by the sofa without looking down at her companion; then she left the room abruptly, and shut the door behind her.

Van Torp got up from his seat slowly when she was gone, and went to the window, softly blowing a queer tune between his closed teeth and his open lips, without quite whistling.



"What a Beautiful Color!"

I'll take a rest and sort of look around. Maybe something will turn up. I've concluded to win the Derby next year—that's something anyway."

"Rather! Have you thought of anything else?"

She laughed a little, but was grave the next moment, for she knew him much too well to believe that he had taken such a step out of caprice, or a mere fancy for change. He noticed the grave look and was silent for a few moments.

"The Derby's a side show," he said at last. "I've come over to get married, and I want you to help me. Will you?"

"Can I?" asked Lady Maud, evasively.

"Yes, you can, and I believe there'll be trouble unless you do."

"Who is she? Do I know her?" She was trying to put off the evil moment.

"Oh, yes, you know her quite well. It's Mme. Cordova."

"But she's engaged to Mons. Logotheti—"

"I don't care. I mean to marry her if she marries any one. He shan't have her anyway."

"But I cannot deliberately help you to break off her engagement! It's impossible!"

"See here," answered Mr. Van Torp. "You know that Greek, and you know me. Which of us will make the best husband for an English girl? That's what Mme. Cordova is, after all. I put it to you. If you were forced to choose one of us yourself, which would you take? That's the way to look at it."

"But Miss Donne is not 'forced' to take one of you—"

"She's going to be. It's the same. Besides, I said 'if.' Won't you answer me?"

"She's in love with Mons. Logotheti," said Lady Maud, rather desperately.

"Is she, now? I wonder. I don't much think so myself. He's clever and he's obstinate, and he's just made her think she's in love, that's all. Anyhow, that's not an answer to my question. Other things being alike, if she had to choose, which of us would be the best husband for her?—the better,

served the American, "but that's neither here nor there. You know what you wrote me. Do you believe she'll be miserable with Logotheti or not?"

"I think she will," Lady Maud answered truthfully. "But I may be wrong."

"No; you're right. I know it. But marriage is a gamble anyway, as you know better than any one. Are you equally sure that she would be miserable with me? Dead sure, I mean."

"No, I'm not sure. But that's not a reason—"

"It's a first-rate reason. I care for that lady, and I want her to be happy, and as you admit that she will have a better chance of happiness with me than with Logotheti, I'm going to marry her myself, not only because I want to, but because it will be a long sight better for her. See? No fault in that line of reasoning, is there?"

"So far as reasoning goes—" Lady Maud's tone was half an admission.

"That's all I wanted you to say," interrupted the American. "So that's settled, and you're going to help me."

"No," answered Lady Maud quietly; "I won't help you to break off that engagement. But if it should come to nothing, without your interfering—that is, by the girl's own free will and choice and change of mind, I'd help you to marry her if I could."

"But you admit that she's going to be miserable," said Van Torp stubbornly.

"I'm sorry for her, but it's none of my business. It's not honorable to try and make trouble between engaged people, no matter how ill-matched they may be."

"Funny idea of honor," observed the American, "that you're bound to let a friend of yours break her neck at the very gravel pit where you were nearly smashed yourself! In the hunting field you'd grab her bride if she wouldn't listen to you, but in a matter of marriage—oh, no! It's dishonorable to interfere." "She's made her choice and she must abide by it," and all that kind of stuff!"

Lady Maud's clear eyes met his angry blue ones calmly.

"I don't like you when you say such things," she said, lowering her voice a little.



Went to the Window, Softly Blowing a Queer Tune.

"Well—" he said aloud, in a tone of doubt, after a minute or two.

But he said no more, for he was much too reticent and sensible a person to talk to himself audibly even when he was alone, and much too cautious to be sure that a servant might not be within hearing, though the door was shut. He stood before the window nearly a quarter of an hour, thinking that Lady Maud might come back, but as no sound of any step broke the silence he understood that he was not to see her again that day, and he quietly let himself out of the house and went off, not altogether discontented with the extraordinary impression he had made.

Lady Maud sat alone upstairs, so absorbed in her thoughts that she did not hear the click of the lock as he opened and shut the front door.

She was much more amazed at herself than surprised by the offer he had made. Temptation, in any reasonable sense of the word, had passed by her in life, and she had never before understood what it could mean to her.

She was eight-and-twenty years of age and a widow, and now it came to her suddenly in a shape of tremendous strength, through her trusted friend, who had helped her for years to help others. It was real temptation. The man who offered her a million pounds to save miserable wretches from a life of unspeakable horror, could offer twice as much, four, five, or ten millions perhaps. No one knew

the vast extent of his wealth, and in an age of colossal fortunes she had often heard his spoken of with the half-dozen greatest. "You can do quite a great deal of good with forty thousand pounds a year."

Van Torp's rough-hewn speech rang through her head, and somehow its reckless grammar gave it strength and made it stick in her memory, word for word. In the drawer of the writing table before which she was sitting there was a little file of letters that meant more to her than anything else in the world, except one dear memory. They were all from rescued women, they all told much the same little story, and it was good to read. She had made many failures, and some terrible ones, which she could never forget; but there were real successes, too, there were over a dozen of them now, and she had only been at work for three years. If she had more money, she could do more; if she had much she could do much; and she knew of one or two women who could help her. What might she not accomplish in a lifetime with the vast sum her friend offered her!—the price of hindering a marriage that was almost sure to turn out badly, perhaps as badly as her own!—the money value of a compromise with her conscience on a point of honor which many women would have thought very vague indeed, if not absurd in such a case. She knew what temptation meant, now, and she was to know even better before long. The prima donna had said that she was going to marry Lo-

is squeezing the life out of it. She called Margaret her "chickabiddy" and spread a motherly wing over her, without the least idea that she was rearing a valuable lyric nightingale that would not long be content to trill and quaver no longer.

Immense and deserved success had half reconciled the old lady to what had happened, and after all Margaret had not married an Italian tenor, a Russian prince, or a Parisian composer, the three shapes of man which seemed the most dreadfully immoral to Mrs. Rushmore. She would find it easier to put up with Logotheti than with one of those, though it was bad enough to think of her old friend's daughter marrying a Greek instead of a nice, clean Anglo-Saxon, like the learned Mr. Donne, the girl's father, or the good Mr. Rushmore, her lamented husband, who had been an upright pillar of the church in New York, and the president of a trust company that could be trusted.

After all, though she thought all Greeks must be what she called "designing," the name of Konstantin Logotheti was associated with everything that was most honorable in the financial world, and this impressed Mrs. Rushmore very much.

Logotheti was undoubtedly considered honest, and Mrs. Rushmore made quite sure of it, as well as of the fact that he had an immense fortune.

At Versailles, with its memories of her earlier youth, the prima donna wished to be Margaret Donne again, and to forget for the time that she was the Cordova, whose name was always first on the opera posters in New York, London and Vienna.

She traveled incognito. That is to say, she had sent her first maid and theatrical dresser Alphonsine to see her relations in Nancy for a month, and only brought the other with her; she had, moreover, caused the state-room on the channel boat to be taken in the name of Miss Donne, and she brought no more luggage to Versailles than could be piled on an ordinary cart, whereas when she had last come from New York her servants had seen 87 pieces put on board the steamer, and a hat-box had been missing after all.

Mrs. Rushmore came out to meet her on the steps in the hot sunshine, portly and kind as ever, and she applied an embrace which was affectionate, yet imposing.

"My dearest child!" she cried. "I was sure I had not quite lost you yet!"

"I hope you will never think you have," Margaret answered, almost quite in her girlish voice of old.

She was very glad to come back. As soon as they were alone in the cool drawing room, Mrs. Rushmore asked her about her engagement in a tone of profound concern, as though it were a grave bodily ailment which might turn out to be fatal.

"Don't take it so seriously," Margaret answered with a little laugh; "I'm not married yet!"

The elderly face brightened.

"Do you mean to say that—that there is any hope?" she asked eagerly.

Margaret laughed now, but in a gentle and affectionate sort of way.

"Perhaps, just a little! But don't ask me, please. I've come home to forget everything for a few weeks."

"Thank heaven!" ejaculated Mrs. Rushmore in a tone of deep relief. "Then if—he should call this afternoon, or even to-morrow—may I tell them to say that you are out?"

She was losing no time; and Margaret laughed again, though she put her head a little on one side with an expression of doubt.

"I can't refuse to see him," she said, "though really I would much rather be alone with you for a day or two."

"My darling child!" cried Mrs. Rushmore, applying another embrace, "you shall! Leave it to me!"

Mrs. Rushmore's delight was touching, for she could almost feel that Margaret had come to see her quite for her own sake, whereas she had pictured the "child," as she still called the great artist, spending most of her time in carrying on inaudible conversations with Logotheti under the trees in the lawn, or in the most remote corners of the drawing room; for that had been the accepted method of courtship in Mrs. Rushmore's young days, and she was quite ignorant of the changes that had taken place since then.

Half an hour later, Margaret was in her old room upstairs writing a letter, and Mrs. Rushmore had given strict orders that until further notice Miss Donne was "not at home" for any one at all, no matter who might call.

When the letter already covered ten pages, Margaret laid down her pen and without the least pause or hesitation tore the sheets to tiny bits, inking her fingers in the process because the last one was not yet dry.

"What a wicked woman I am!" she exclaimed aloud, to the very great surprise of Potts, her English maid, who was still unpacking in the next room, the door being open.

"Beg pardon, ma'am?" the woman asked, putting in her head.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)



Went to the Window, Softly Blowing a Queer Tune.