



BY CLAUDIA F. ROMAN SINGER, etc.

# THE WITCH OF TRAGUE

A FANTASTIC TALE BY CLAUDIA F. ROMAN SINGER, etc.

## CHAPTER XXIV—CONTINUED.

"Then how divinely long it all may seem," he answered. "But can we not begin to think, and to make plans for to-morrow, and the next day, and for the years before us? That will make more time for us, for with the present we shall have the future, too. No—that is foolish again. And yet it is so hard to say which I would have. Shall the moment linger because it is so sweet? Or shall it be gone quickly, because the next is to be sweeter still? Love, where is your father?"

Unorna started. The question was suggested, perhaps, by his inclination to speak of what was to be done, but it fell suddenly upon her ears, as a peal of thunder when the sky has no clouds. Must she lie now, or break the spell? One word, at least, she could yet speak with truth.

"Dead," she answered. The Wanderer repeated thoughtfully and with faint surprise. "Is it long ago, beloved?" he asked presently, in a subdued tone, as though fearing to wake some painful memory.

"Yes," she answered. The great doubt was taking her heart in its strong hands now, and tearing it and twisting it.

"And whose house is this in which I found you, darling? Was it his?"

"It is mine," Unorna said. How long would he ask questions to which she could find truthful answers? What question would come next? There were many he might ask, and few to which she could reply to truthfully, even in that narrow sense of truth which found its only meaning in a whispered chance. But for a moment he asked nothing more.

"Not mine," she said. "It is yours. You can take me and yet call anything mine."

"Ours, then, beloved. What does it matter? So he died long ago—poor man! And yet it seems but a little while since some one told me—but that was a mistake of course. He did not know. How many years might it be dear one? I see you still wear mourning for him."

"No—that was but a fancy—to-day. He died—he died more than two years ago."

She bent her head. It was but a poor attempt at truth—a miserable, lying truth, to deceive herself with, but it seemed better than to be the whole truth outright, and say that her father—Beatrice's father—had been dead but just a week.

"It is strange," he said, "how little men know of each other's lives or deaths. They told me he was alive last year. But, it has hurt you to speak of it. Forgive me, dear, it was thoughtless of me."

He tried to lift her head, but she held it obstinately down.

"Have I pained you, Beatrice?" he asked, forgetting to call her by the other name that was so new to him.

"No—oh, no!" she exclaimed, without looking up.

"What is it, then?"

"Nothing—it is nothing. No, I will not look at you—I am ashamed." This, at least, was true.

"Ashamed, dear heart! Of what?"

He had seen her face in spite of herself. Lie, or lose all, said a voice within.

"Ashamed of being glad that—that I am free," she stammered, struggling on the very verge of the precipice.

"You may be glad that, and yet be very sorry he is dead," the Wanderer said, stroking her hair.

He thought to turn the subject to a lighter strain. By chance he glanced at his own hand.

"Do you know this ring?" he asked, holding it before her, with a smile.

"Indeed, I know it," she answered, trembling again.

Very slowly she raised her head. She knew that his hand was close to hers, held there that she might fulfill Beatrice's promise. Was she not free? Could she not give him what he asked? No matter how—she tried to say it to herself and could not. She felt his breath upon her hair. He was waiting. If she did not act soon or speak he would wonder what held her back—wonder—suspicion—next—and then? She put out her hand to touch his fingers, half-blinded, groping as though she could not see. He made it easy for her. He fancied she was trembling, as she was weeping, with the joy of it all.

She felt the ring, though she dared not look at it. She drew it a little, and felt that it would come off easily. She felt the fingers she loved so well, straight, strong and nervous, and she touched them lovingly. The ring was not tight, it would pass easily over the joint that alone kept it in its place.

"Take it, beloved," he said, "it has waited long enough."

He was beginning to wonder at her hesitation, as she knew he would. After wonder would come suspicion—and then? Very slowly—it was just upon the joint of his finger now. Should she do it? What would happen? He would have broken his vow unwittingly. How quickly and gladly Beatrice would have taken it. What would she say, if they lived and met—why should they not meet? Would the spell endure the shock—who would Beatrice be then? The woman who had given him this ring? Or another, whom he would no longer know. But she must be quick. He was waiting, and Beatrice would not have made him wait.

Her hand was like stone, numb, motionless, immovable as though some unseen being had taken it in an iron grasp and held it there, in midair, just touching his. Yes—no—yes—she could not move—a hand was clasped upon her wrist, a hand smaller than his, but strong as fate, fixed in its grasp as an iron vice.

Unorna felt a cold breath, that was not his, upon her forehead, and she felt as though her heavy hair was rising of itself upon her head. She knew that horror for she had been overtaken by it once before. She was not afraid, but she knew what it was. There was a shadow, too, and a dark woman, tall, queenly, with deep, flashing eyes, was standing beside her. She knew before she looked; she looked, and it was there. Her own face was whiter than that other woman's.

"Have you come already?" she asked of the shadow, in a low despairing tone.

"Beatrice—what has happened?" cried the Wanderer. To him she seemed to be speaking to the empty air, and her white face startled him.

"Yes," she said, staring still, in the same hopeless voice. "It is Beatrice. She has come for you."

"Beatrice—beloved—do not speak like that! For God's sake what do you see? There is nothing there."

"Beatrice is there. I am Unorna."

"Unorna, Beatrice—have we not said it should be all the same? Sweet-heart, look at me! Rest here—shut those dear eyes of yours. It is gone now, whatever it was. You are tired, dear; you must rest."

Her eyes closed and her head sank. It was gone, as he said, and she knew what it had been—a mere vision called up by her own overworked brain. Keyork Arabian had a name for it.

Frightened by your own nerves, laughed the voice, when if you had not been a coward, you might have faced it down and lied again, and all would have been well. But you shall have another chance, and lying is very easy, even when the nerves are overwrought. You will do better the next time.

The voice was like Keyork Arabian's. Unstrung, almost forgetting all, she wondered vaguely at the sound, for it was a real sound and a real voice to her. Was her soul his, indeed, and was he drawing it on slowly, surely, to the end? Had he been behind her last night? Had he felt an hour's liberty only to come back and take at last what was his?

There is time yet; you have not lost him, for he thinks you mad. The voice spoke once more.

And at the same moment the strong, dear arms were again around her, again her head was on that restful shoulder of his, again her pale face was turned up to his, and kisses were raining on her tired eyes, while broken words of love and tenderness made music through the tempest.

Again the vast temptation rose. How could he ever know? Who was to deceive him, if he was not yet undeceived? Who should ever make him understand the truth so long as the spell lasted? Why not then take what was given her, and when the end came, if it came, then tell all boldly? Even then he would not understand. Had he understood last night, when she confessed all that

she had done before? He had not believed one word of it, except that she loved him. Could she make him believe it now, when he was clasping her so fiercely to his breast, half mad with love for her himself?

So easy, too. She had to but forget that passing vision, to put her arms about his neck, to give kisses for kisses, and loving word for loving word. Not even that. She had but to lie there, passive, silent if she could not speak, and it would be still the same. No power on earth could undo what she had done, unless she willed it. Neither man nor woman could make his grasping hands let go of her and give her up.

Be still and wait, whispered the voice, you have lost nothing yet.

But Unorna would not. She had spoken and acted her last lie. It was over.

## CHAPTER XXV.

Unorna struggled for a moment. The Wanderer did not understand, but loosed his arms, so that she was free. She rose to her feet and stood before him.

"You have dreamed all this," she said. "I am not Beatrice."

"Dreamed? Not Beatrice?" she heard him cry in his bewilderment.

Something more he said, but she could not catch the words. She was already gone, through the labyrinth of the many plants to the door through which 12 hours earlier she had fled from Israel Kafka. She ran the faster as she left him the farther behind. She passed the entrance and the passage and the vestibule beyond, not thinking whether she was going, or not caring. She found herself in that large, well-lighted room in which the ancient sleeper lay alone. Perhaps her instinct led her there as to a retreat safer even than her own chamber. She knew that if she would, there was something there which she could use.

She stared at the old man's face with wide, despairing eyes. Many a time, unknown to Keyork and once to his knowledge, she had roused the sleeper to speak, and on the whole he had spoken truly, wisely and well. She lacked neither the less courage to die, nor the greater to live. She longed but to hear one honest word, not of hope, but of encouragement, but one word in contrast to those hideous whispered promptings that had come to her in Keyork Arabian's voice. How could she trust herself alone? Her evil deeds were many—so many that, although she had turned at last against them, she could not tell where to strike.

"If you would only tell me!" she cried, leaning over the unconscious head. "If you would only help me. You are so old that you must be wise, and if so very wise, then you are good! Wake, but this once, and tell me what is right!"

The deep eyes opened and looked up to hers. The great limbs stirred, the bony hands unclasped. There was something awe-inspiring in the ancient strength renewed and filled with a new life.

"Who calls me?" asked the clear, deep voice.

"I, Unorna—"

"What do you ask of me?"

He had risen from his couch and stood before her, towering far above her head. Even the Wanderer would have seemed of but common stature beside this man of other years, of a forgotten generation, who now stood erect filled with a mysterious youth.

"Tell me what I should do—"

"Tell me what you have done."

Then in one great confession, with bowed head and folded hands, she poured out the story of her life.

"And I am lost!" she cried at last. "One holds my soul and one my heart! May not my body die? Oh, say that it is right—that I may die!"

"Die? Die—when you may yet undo?"

"Undo? Undo and do. Undo the wrong and do the right."

"I cannot. The wrong is past undoing—and I am past doing right."

"Do you blaspheme—go! Do it."

"What?"

"Call her—that other woman—Beatrice. Bring her to him, and him to her."

"And see them meet?"

"May I not die?" she cried, despairingly. "May I not die—for him—for her, for both? Would that be enough? Would they not meet? Would they not then be free?"

"Do you love him still?"

"With all my broken heart—"

"Then do not leave his happiness to chance alone, but go at once. There is one little act of heaven's work still in your power. Make it all yours."

His great hands rested on her shoulders and his eyes looked down to hers.

"You have dreamed what will very soon be true," she said. "Wait here, and Beatrice will soon be with you."

"I know that I am mad," the Wanderer cried, making one step to follow her, then stopping short. Unorna was already at the door. The ancient sleeper laid one hand upon her head.

"You will do it now," he said.

"I will do it—to the end," she answered. "Thank God that I have made you live to tell me how."

So she went out, alone, to undo what she had done so evilly well.

The old man turned and went toward the Wanderer, who stood still in the middle of the hall, confused, not knowing whether he had dreamed or was really mad.

"What man are you?" he asked, as the white-robed figure approached.

"A man, as you are, for I was once young—not as you are, for I am very old, and yet like you, for I am young again."

"You speak in riddles. What are you doing here, and where have you sent Unorna?"

"When I was old, in that long time between she took me in, and I have slept beneath her roof these many years. She told me all her story, and all yours, waking me from my sleep, and asking me what she should do. And she is gone to do that thing of which I told her. Wait and you will see. She loved you well."

"And you would help her to get my love, as she has tried to get it before?" the Wanderer asked, with rising anger. "What am I to you, or you to me, that you would meddle in my life?"

"You to me? Nothing. A man."

"Therefore an enemy—and you would help Unorna—let me go! This house is cursed. I will not stay in it." The hoary giant took his arm, and the Wanderer stared at the weight and strength of the touch.

"You shall bless this house before you leave it. In this place, here where you stand, you shall find the happiness you sought through all the years."

"In Unorna's question was asked scornfully."

"By Unorna."

"I do not believe you. You are mad, as I am. Would you play the prophet?"

The door opened in the distance, and from behind the screen of plants Keyork Arabian came forward into the hall, his small eyes bright, his ivory face set and expressionless, his long beard waving in the swing of his walk. The Wanderer saw him, and called to him:

"Keyork—come here," he said. "Who is this man?"

"For a moment Keyork seemed speechless with amazement. But it was anger that choked his words. Then he came on quickly.

"Who waked him?" he cried in fury. "What is this?" Why is he here?"

"Unorna waked me," answered the ancient sleeper, very calmly.

"Unorna? Again? The curse of the Three Black Angels on her! Mad again! Sleep go back! It is not ready yet, and you will die, and I shall lose it all—all—all! Oh, she shall pay this with her soul in hell!"

He threw himself upon the giant, in an insane frenzy, clasping his arms around the huge limbs, and trying to force him backward.

"Get go!" he cried frantically. "It may not be too late! You may yet sleep and live! Oh, my experiment, my great experiment! All lost—"

"What is this madness?" asked the Wanderer. "You cannot carry him, and he will not go. Let him alone."

"Madness?" yelled Keyork, turning on him. "You are the madman, you the fool, who cannot understand! Help me to move him—you are young and strong—together we can take him back—he may yet sleep, and live—he must and shall! I say it! Lay your hands on him! You will not help me? Then I will curse you till you die—"

"Poor Keyork!" exclaimed the Wanderer, half-pitying him. "Your big thoughts have cracked your little brain at last."

"Poor Keyork? You call me poor Keyork? You boy! You puppet! You ball, that we have banded to and fro, half sleeping, half awake! It drives me mad to see you standing there, scoffing instead of helping me!"

"You are past my help, I fear."

"Will you not move? Are you dead already, standing on your feet and staring at me?"

Again Keyork threw himself upon the huge old man, and stamped and struggled and tried to move him backward. He might as well have spent his strength against a rock. Breathless, but furious still, he desisted at last, too much beside himself to see that he whose sudden death he feared was stronger than he, because the great experiment had succeeded far beyond all hope.

"That will be hard indeed," Beatrice answered.

"I know that you will, when you know how I have loved him."

"Have you come here to tell me of your love?"

"Yes. And when I have told you, you will forgive me."

"I am no saint," said Beatrice, coldly. "I do not find forgiveness in such abundance as you need."

"And yet you will, and very soon. Whether you forgive or not—that is another matter. I cannot ask it. God knows how much easier it would have been to die than to come here. But if I were dead, you might never have found him, nor he you, though you are so very near together. Do you think it is easier for me to come to you, whom he loves, than it is for you to hear me say I love him, when I come to give him to you? If you had found it all, not as it is, but otherwise—if you had found that in these years he had known me and loved me, as he once loved you, if he turned from you coldly and bid you forget him, because he would be happy with me, and because he had utterly forgotten you—would it be easy for you to give him up?"

"He loved me then—he loves me still," Beatrice said. "It is another case."

"A much more bitter case. Even then you would have the memory of his love, which I can never have—in true reality, though I have much to remember in his dreams of you."

Beatrice started a little, and her brow grew dark and angry.

"Then you have tried to get what was not yours by your bad powers," she cried. "And you have made him sleep—and dream—what?"

"Of you."

"And he talked of love?"

"Of love for you."

"To you?"

"And dreamed that you were I? That, too?"

"That I was you."

"Is there more to tell?" Beatrice asked, growing white. "He kissed you in that dream of his—do not tell me he did that—no, tell me—tell me all!"

"He kissed the thing he saw, believing the lips yours."

"More—more—is it not done yet? Can't you sting again? What else?"

"Nothing—save last night I tried to kill your body and soul."

"And why did you not kill me?"

"Because you awoke. Then the sun saved you. If she had not come, you would have slept again, and slept forever. And I would have let his dream last, and made it last—for him, I should have been the only Beatrice."

"You have done all this—and you ask me to forgive you?"

"I ask nothing. If you will not go to him, I will bring him to you—"

Beatrice turned away and walked across the room.

"Loved her," she said aloud, and talked to her of love, and kisses—"

She stopped suddenly. Then she came back again with swift steps, and grasped Unorna's arm fiercely.

"Tell me more still—this dream has lasted long—you are man and wife!"

"We might have been. He would still have thought me you for months and years. He would have had me take from his finger that ring you put there. I tried—I tell you the whole truth—but I could not. I say you there beside me and you held my hand. I broke away and left him."

"Left him of your own free will?"

"I could not lie again. It was too much. He would have broken a great promise, if I had stayed. I love him so—so I left him."

"Is all this true?"

"To him?"

"To him?"

"It can be but untrue," said Beatrice, still hesitating. "I can but go. What of him?" she asked, suddenly.

"If he were living—would you take me to him? Could you?"

She turned very pale, and her eyes stared madly at Unorna.

"If he were dead," Unorna answered, "I should not be here."

Something in her tone and look moved Beatrice's heart, at last.

"I will go with you," she said, and if I find him—and if all is well with him—then God in heaven repay you for you have been braver than the bravest I ever knew."

"Can love save a soul as well as lose it?" Unorna asked.

Then they went away together.

They were scarcely out of sight of the convent gate, when another carriage drove up. Almost before it had stopped the door opened and Keyork Arabian's short, heavy form emerged and descended hastily to the pavement.

He rang the bell furiously, and the old portress set the gate ajar and looked out cautiously, fearing that the noisy peal meant trouble or disturbance.

"The lady, Beatrice Varanger—I must see her instantly!" cried the little man in terrible excitement.

"She has gone out," the portress replied.

"Gone out? Where? Alone?"

"With a lady who was here last night—the lady with unlike eyes—"

"Where? Where? Where have they gone?" asked Keyork, hardly able to find breath.

"The lady bade the coachman drive her home—where she lives—"

"Home? To Unorna's home? It is not true! I see it in your eyes—witch! Hag! Let me in! Let me in, I say! May vampires get your body and the Three Black Angels cast lots upon your soul!"

In the storm of curses that followed the convent door was shut violently in his face. Within, the portress stood shaking with fear, crossing herself again and again, and verily believing that the devil himself had tried to force an entrance into the sacred place.

In fearful anger Keyork drew back. He hesitated one moment and then regained his carriage.

"To Unorna's house!" he shouted, as he shut the door with a crash.

"This is my house, and he is here," Unorna said, as Beatrice passed before her, under the deep arch of the entrance.

Then she led the way up to the broad staircase, and through the small outer hall to the door of the great conservatory.

"You will find him there," she said. "Go on alone."

But Beatrice took her hand to draw her in.

"Must I see it all? Unorna asked hopefully.

Then from among the plants and trees a great white-robed figure came out and stood between them. Joining their hands, he gently pushed them forward to the middle of the hall, where the Wanderer stood alone.

"It is done!" Unorna cried, as her heart broke.

She saw the scene she had acted so short a time before. She heard the passionate cry, the rain of kisses, the tempest of tears. The expiation was complete. Not a sight, not a sound was spared her. The strong arms of the ancient sleeper held her upright on her feet. She could not fall, she could not close her eyes, she could not stop her ears, no merciful stupor overcame her.

"Is it so bitter to do right?" the old man asked, bending low and speaking softly.

"It is the bitterness of death," she said.

"It is well done," he answered. Then came a noise of hurried steps and a loud, deep voice, calling: "Unorna! Unorna!" Keyork Arabian was there. He glanced at Beatrice and the Wanderer, locked in each other's arms, then turned to Unorna and looked into her face. "It has killed her," he said. "Who did it?" His low spoken words echoed like angry thunder. "Give her to me," he said again. "She is mine—body and soul." But the great strong arms were around her, and would not let her go. "Save me," she cried, in falling tones. "Save me from him." "You have saved yourself," said the solemn voice of the old man. "Saved?" Keyork laughed. "From me?" He laid his hand upon her arm. Then his face changed again, and he laughed died dismally away, and he hung back. "Can you forgive her?" asked the other voice. The Wanderer stood close to them now, drawing Beatrice to his side. The question was for them. "Can you forgive me?" asked Unorna faintly, turning her eyes toward them. "As we hope to find forgiveness and trust in a life to come," they answered. There was a low sound in the air, unearthly, muffled, desperate, as of a strong being groaning in awful agony. When they looked they saw that Keyork Arabian was gone. The dawn of a coming day rose in Unorna's face as she sank back. "It is over," she sighed, as her eyes closed. Her question was answered, her love had saved her.

[THE END.]

Richard Boyle, third earl of Burlington and fourth earl of Cork, reconstructed Burlington House, Piccadilly, after his own ideas.