

HODA'S SECRET

By SYLVIA CHESTER

CHAPTER I

It was a February morning in Paris. The sun was shining brightly in a clear sky, and the streets and boulevards were crowded.

Rhoda Dering found some difficulty in making her way, and the crowd with her kept up a ceaseless chorus of grumbings as she toiled with a heavy basket. Rhoda had no heed to her servant's words, and walked as quickly as possible, although she appeared as unconscious of the admiring eyes that followed her as the servant's content.

At last they reached a house in one of the smaller streets. Rhoda unlocked a key and a letter from the package and led the way up the flights of stone stairs. It was at the top of the house that she stopped and unlocked the door which gave access to a small suite of

rooms. A little salon was gaudily furnished, the crimson velvet of the sofa and sofa was faded, the walls were in sad need of repainting; it was a dreary room, but a touch of beauty or refinement about it. On the marble-topped table before the window were two candlesticks, the candles half burned down, and a box of cards.

Rhoda took off her hat without a word to the maid. "You had better make haste and get your luncheon ready. I will dust the room," she said, in cool high tones, as a characteristic voice, strong and clear, but curiously hard.

The woman put down the basket on one of the chairs. "I'll cook no more meals in this house," she exclaimed, in shrill tones. "Pay me my wages! You can't expect yourself for the future! I'll do more for you!"

"You know quite well that I can pay you your wages, and, until they get them, you must stay here," declared Rhoda, calmly. "Paris is a place for you to live in without money."

"Where's my money, then? Give me my money." "You shall have it when I have it," she said. "You may be quite certain that I shall get rid of you on the first opportunity."

"Money that's obtained by cheating cards is pretty sort of money to live on, isn't it?" she asked, in shrill tones. "Pay me my wages! You can't expect yourself for the future! I'll do more for you!"

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handsome face. His hair was still black, and he would have looked a young man still but for the haggard lines on his face. Rhoda held out the letter without speaking. Her father took it carelessly, but his face changed as he saw the handwriting. "My brother at last!" he said quickly, breaking the seal. "Well, I thought my last letter would fetch him."

He read the letter, and then, with a laugh, he handed it to Rhoda. "Read it, my girl. It concerns you more than me."

The letter was written in a small, formal hand. There was a crest on the top of the thick white note paper, and the motto "Hold truth dear."

Rhoda read: "Dear Arthur: I have carefully read your letter about your girl, and I see the force of what you say. You tell me she has been educated in a convent, but is still a Protestant. I am glad to hear that this is so. I thoroughly agree with you that your life is not one that should be shared by an innocent girl. My first thought was to suggest to you that you should get her a home in some respectable English family, but my wife wishes her to come here. My own daughter is just eighteen; Rhoda will be able to help her with French and music. You say she is proficient in both. Of course it is quite understood between us that any communication on your part with Rhoda will lead at once to her losing the home I offer her."

I am yours, etc.
George Dering.

"A pleasant letter from a brother to a brother, eh, Rhoda?" said Mr. Dering, as Rhoda folded the letter and placed it upon the mantelpiece.

"When does he think that I left the convent?" she asked.

"That's the joke of it, my dear. He thinks you are still there—that you have been there since your mother died, twelve years ago."

"That means that you told him so."

"Exactly."

"Why?"

Mr. Dering had seated himself upon a chair by the window, and Rhoda turned towards him to ask the question.

"If I had told him you left the convent two years ago, do you think you would have received that invitation?"

"Do you wish me to accept it?"

"By Jove, I do! Look here, Rhoda, you are a clever girl and a handsome girl. I want you back at Dering; things are pretty well played out here. You see what our luck is, and how our funds stand. I intend you to make your fortune at Dering."

"As a governess to my uncle's daughter?"

"Well, not exactly like that. Do you remember what I told you of your aunt Millicent?"

"Of course."

"Well, she's at Dering. Flatter her little weaknesses, my dear, and get your name down in her will. That's one way of making your fortune."

"She is not much older than you," returned Rhoda.

"Not much, certainly. But that's only one way out of the wood for you, though. You can make a good marriage, Rhoda."

"Yes, there is that to think of," the girl answered quietly. She paused a moment, and then said, "I suppose you dwell upon the impossibility of my living with you?"

"Exactly. I used two colors only in my letter—white for you, black for myself; a lamb and a wolf. You were leaving the peaceful shelter of the convent, what was I to do with you? All this, and more, I said. The letter went, and voila! He waved his hand towards the answer. "The first attack has been crowned with victory, Rhoda, my girl. Now it is your turn. Mrs. Amelle will receive you for a week or so. Write from the convent an answer to that letter. Say how glad you will be to embrace your dear relatives, scatter a few French expressions over the pages, talk of your happy convent life and the dear nuns. Avoid all references to me. Then off you go to Dering under some safe escort; but under the same roof with my dear sister, Millicent, and in a month my clever daughter will be first on her list of favorites. Then will come a season in town, a brilliant marriage, and then—why, then you can think of your old father."

"An alluring prospect," said Rhoda, with a bitter smile.

"It's a perfectly safe thing, my dear. I should like to bet on it."

"The cards are more against us than you realize," the girl answered.

"How am I to play the part of a girl fresh from a convent? I have lived with you for two years."

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letter again and read it through. Her father watched her, drumming with his fingers on the table beside him.

"It's our only chance, Rhoda," he said, after a moment. "I am played out, and it's time I left Paris. I didn't like the looks of Marche and Lisle at all this morning; I believe they suspected something last night."

"I am sure they did," Rhoda interpolated quietly.

"I trust be off to Monte Carlo," Mr. Dering continued, "and Lefroy is going with me. You know you hate going there."

"I do not intend to go," the girl answered. "I am going to England—to Dering!"

Mr. Dering jumped up, struck his hands together, and a look of great relief passed over his face.

"That's a good girl! The fact is, Rhoda, I couldn't take you to Monte Carlo this time! We shall be a low lot, and I must keep you out of it somehow!"

"I have never had a chance," the girl said, half to herself. "Why shouldn't I take this chance?"

"You would be a goose if you did not take it, my dear! All you have to do is to forget the past two years of your life and be a little convent maid again!"

"Yes; that is all I have to do," she returned with a bitter smile. She took up her hat and gloves. "I must look after the luncheons," she said. "Sarah is clamoring for her wages again!"

"Confound the girl! What on earth made you have that girl, Rhoda? Coline was worth twenty of her!"

"Coline—was Coline?" said Rhoda, with a bitter smile.

Mr. Dering shrugged his shoulders.

"Let us hope the time is coming when you can afford to be particular, Rhoda. Lefroy is coming to lunch."

you would have another proposal made to you, Rhoda."

"Pray of what kind?"

"From M. Lefroy."

Rhoda turned with a sudden look of intense scorn on her dark face. Her father laughed.

"You are going to Dering, my dear, or I should have advised you to accept it. I owe Lefroy five thousand francs."

"You know I hate him."

"But you must have married him, my dear, if you had not gone to Dering!"

"Never!"

"Well, we need not discuss it. You see we are agreed about my little plan. By the bye," he added, as Rhoda moved towards the door, "how old are you, Rhoda?"

"You know."

"But you do not, my dear; you are twenty. I took leave to alter your age by two years. No woman can object to be two years younger than she is!"

Rhoda turned back into the room and shut the door. She sat down by her father and laid her hand upon his arm.

"Father, I do not think I can do it. I shall not be able to play my part. Write, or let me write, and tell uncle George the truth. Tell him that I have shared your life for these years. He cannot refuse to have me even if he knows the truth!"

Mr. Dering laid down his cigar and put his hand over hers.

"My dear," he said, in a very gentle tone, "I have been a reckless and careless father to you, and I want you to have this one chance. I know Dering; I want you know it. You say, tell George the truth. How is it possible? Look the truth in the face, Rhoda. I have been a gambler and a cheat. You have known this, and you have lived with me for two years. That one thing would cut you off for ever from Dering if it were known."

Rhoda said nothing.

"When you came back from the convent," her father went on after a pause, "I meant to reform—I tried to do it—you know I did, Rhoda. But it was of no use. We have been

good comrades and friends, my girl, but the time has come for us to part. I am in Lefroy's power to some extent, and he and I are going to be partners for the future. If you stay with me, you must marry him, Rhoda."

"Cannot we go away together—go to the colonies—anywhere—and begin a new life?"

"We threshed out that question long ago, Rhoda. No, my dear; do a little for a great good. Go to Dering—it is your rightful home—and try your luck there. Only understand this, Rhoda—the invitation is given to you as you were two years ago. The least hint of the truth would close the doors of Dering to you forever!"

Rhoda's face hardened and her lips grew stern.

"Yes, you are right to blame me," Mr. Dering went on as he watched her face. "I ought never to have brought you into my life. But I knew I could take care of you—and I have taken care of you—now haven't I, Rhoda?"

"Yet you say that they would turn me out of Dering if they knew the truth!"

"They would certainly turn you out of Dering if they knew that you had lived with me for two years!" he answered emphatically. "But they do not know—they never will know!"

Rhoda rose from her seat.

"They shall not know," she said. She paused for a moment and then slowly left the room.

Mr. Dering took up his cigar again and smoked for a little while. But presently he laid it down again and sat looking before him with a heavy frown on his brow. Once or twice he gave a hopeless sigh. His face looked very worn and haggard in the morning light. He was still sitting there when a tap came at the door. It opened before Mr. Dering could speak, and a slim, dark man entered—a man a few years younger than Mr. Dering, with the same haggard lines round his eyes. He had a thin hawklike face and a pair of wonderful black eyes.

(To Be Continued.)