

RHODA'S SECRET

Continued From Last Issue

"I had hoped so much that you would come with us next week," the Frenchman went on, drawing a stopper to her.

Mr. Dering glanced at them both and then dusted himself with his handkerchief. M. Lefroy went on in a lower tone.

"Can I not persuade you? England is cold; English people will not understand you. Mademoiselle, I entreat you, do not go to England!"

"England is my native country," Rhoda answered, meeting his passionate gaze with cold steady eyes. "I go to my own people, Monsieur Lefroy. My father will join me soon, I hope. I have no wish to leave England again."

"You have no pity for the friends you leave behind?"

"I have no friends. There is no one in the world except my father who has the right to claim that title."

"Not your dear English friends?" said Lefroy, with a low bow. "You forgot them—your kind good English relatives."

"I should have said, 'out of England,'" the girl returned.

"You do not fear any enemy?"

"I fear no one."

Lefroy bowed and crossed the room to open the door for Rhoda. As she passed, she looked straight at him.

"I fear no one, Monsieur Lefroy," she repeated steadily.

CHAPTER II.

That February morning, so bright and sunny in Paris, was bitterly cold in England. The woods round Dering were white with snow, and large icicles hung from the tracery of the windows of the beautiful old house. It had a great marble terrace, with iron steps descending to the lawn. From this terrace the snow had been carefully swept, and some hardy shrubs, gay with berries, had been placed in groups on each side of the great windows.

Mrs. Dering's morning room was at the end of the terrace. It had two windows, one looking out upon the terrace, the other upon a rose garden enclosed by high box hedges, with a fountain in the middle. The upper part of each window was embellished with the Dering arms and crest. The same arms and crests were stamped upon the backs of the high leather-covered chairs and carved on the high oak chimney-piece. It was a severe-looking room; but a spirit of disorder had entered there that morning. The large armchair, which generally stood against the wall, had been dragged before the fire; a book lay open face downwards on the floor; some knitting was on the table, and the ball of wool had fallen upon the floor; where a white kitten was playing with it; a bunch of flowers had been thrown upon Mrs. Dering's writing-table and lay in a heap across the blotting book.

Mrs. Dering, entering from her daily interview with the housekeeper, raised her fine eyebrows as she caught sight of all these things. With a little indignant smile on her stern face, which wonderfully softened it, she proceeded to put the room in order. Her task was still unfulfilled when there came a clatter of high heels on the stone terrace, a merry voice singing, "Two Lovely Black Eyes," in a high key, and Mrs. Dering turned to the window, trying to frown as she met the laughing glance of her daughter's blue eyes.

"Open the window, mother!" cried the clear voice. "I am half frozen with cold! Quick!"

"My dear Mary, how often am I to say that I do not like that song?" said Mrs. Dering, as she unfastened the window and admitted her daughter.

"That song—which song? Oh, I forgot! I heard Jack singing it just now, and I caught it up. Where is my knitting, mother?"

"I found it on the table and the wool in Kitty's ditches. You untidy child, what kind of a home will you have of your own? I wonder!"

"Jack has brought me a puppy," said Mary, sitting down upon the hearth rug and picking up the kitten. "One of Bruno's—such a little beauty!"

"Is Jack here, then?"

"Yes; he is with father in the stables. He is going to stay till luncheon."

"Adrian is coming."

"Well, there will be enough for both," said the girl carelessly. She was a pretty girl, small and slender, with soft brown hair curling round her temples and with the merriest, sweetest blue eyes, which were sparkling with fun now as she glanced up at her mother; I wanted him to amuse me."

"My dear Mary!"

"Adrian does not like Jack, does he, mother?"

"Adrian naturally disapproves of him," returned Mrs. Dering, drily.

Mary pulled her kitten's ears.

"Poor old Jack! We approve of him, don't we, Kitty? Even if he did get pinched at Oxford and get into debt and into disgrace with his fa-

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ter. If I had gone to Oxford, mother, I should have been pinched too and got into debt and into disgrace with my tutor."

"I do not like to hear you talk so lightly," said Mrs. Dering gravely. "I should not like Adrian to hear you say such things."

Mary's eyes twinkled.

"Let me see—Adrian got a Treble first, didn't he? But that must have been centuries ago!"

"Adrian is just thirty years of age," was Mrs. Dering's grave answer—"you know that as well as I do!"

"Thirty years younger than father! Mother, dear, confess now—shouldn't you believe that he was thirty years older?"

"You know how it pains me to hear you speak like this of Adrian, Mary," said Mrs. Dering with a little tremor in her voice. "It has pleased Heaven to give me no son of my own, and Dering must be Adrian's after your father's death. Your father and I are very proud of our heir."

"Oh, as heir to Dering I am proud of him too; but, as a companion, I prefer Jack!"

"You will have a companion in Rhoda now," said Mrs. Dering, smoothing back the curls from the white brow with a little sigh. "That is why we want Rhoda."

"Poor Rhoda—only wanted because of me! But I am going to be so fond of her! I wonder what she will be like, mother?"

"Millicent saw her mother once. I hope she will be like her mother, she was a very pretty, fair, gentle little thing."

Mary looked up with a serious expression of her face.

"Is Uncle Arthur very wicked?" she asked, in a low tone.

"Do not speak of him," said Mrs. Dering sharply. "Never mention him to Rhoda; I wish her to forget that she has a father living."

"She has not seen him for years, has she?"

"She has not lived with him. Do not speak about your uncle, Mary; he is the first Dering who has disgraced the name, and we wish to forget him." Mrs. Dering sat down at the writing table and gathered up

the flowers. "Take away your flowers, Mary."

"Oh, I forgot my pretty roses! They are for the luncheon table; I will go and arrange them." Mary rose and picked up the flowers. I will run away and leave you in peace, mother."

"Do not go into the stables, Mary." "I am going to change my frock and tidy my hair to do honor to the heir of Dering," the girl answered, with a gay laugh.

Mrs. Dering sat at her writing-table for a short time with a sheet of note paper before her; but she wrote nothing. Presently she got up and went out into the great hall and up the low wide stone stairs. She stopped at the first door in the west corridor, and, after a low knock, opened it. A thick curtain was drawn over the door inside, and, raising this, she entered a little ante-room, where a pleasant-faced woman sat sewing, by the fire.

"Is your mistress up, Stanton?"

"Yes, ma'am; she will be glad to see you."

Mrs. Dering went into the inner room; it was a beautiful room, with a bedroom beyond it. On a low couch by the fire lay Millicent Dering. A rose-colored curtain was drawn over the window behind her, and the softened light fell upon the rich exquisitely tinted draperies of her morning dress and set off the handsome outline of her pale cold face. She looked about twenty-eight or thirty in that light.

"Well, Millicent, I hope you are better," said Mrs. Dering abruptly, as she crossed the room.

Mrs. Dering raised her beautiful slender hand with a gesture of appeal.

"Will you speak more softly, Agnes?" she said in a low weary tone. "My head is still very bad."

Mrs. Dering sat down opposite to her, surveying her with a cool critical glance.

"Are you coming down to luncheon? We expect Adrian."

"Jack is here. I may as well prepare you; you know what it is when he and Molly and father are together."

Mrs. Dering raised her hands

That boy here again! Agnes I wonder at you!"

Mrs. Dering frowned.

"I do not know what to do. I cannot forbid him the house; his father is George's oldest friend."

"And his son is Mary's dearest friend."

"That is why I want Rhoda here," Mrs. Dering went on. "You know how opposed I was at first when George proposed it. George cannot forget that she is a Dering; but I do not look at it like that. I want her because she will be useful as companion to Mary."

"Will she be as amusing as Jack?" said Miss Dering, in a meditative tone.

Mrs. Dering frowned again.

"I shall make Rhoda responsible for Molly's French and music. And George must talk to Jack; I will not have him here so often."

"I should like to make somebody else responsible altogether for Mary," Miss Dering said gently. "It is quite time that Adrian proposed to her."

"Molly is a child—a perfect child! She laughs at Adrian and hasn't a thought for the future."

"But Adrian should have. He quite understands what is expected of him, doesn't he?"

"Really, Millicent, one would think that we had threatened Adrian with disinheritance if he did not marry our Molly."

"The estate is entailed, isn't it?" said Miss Dering. "But I am sure Adrian means to marry Mary."

"You know how much I wish it—not because he will have Dering, but because he is what he is."

"Of course."

"Come down to luncheon, Millicent. They are always quieter when you are there."

"Won't Adrian be enough? He is sufficient to awe Jack, I am sure."

"But not Molly; Molly loves to defy him."

(To Be Continued.)