

RHODA'S SECRET

By SYLVIA CHESTER

"I wish Rhoda had never come to Dering," Mrs. Dering said, after a moment's pause.

There was a bitterness in the tone that startled Molly. She got up and crossed over to her mother's side.

"Mother, it could never have been. I should never have married Adrian. Don't think that Rhoda has crossed your will in this. I could never have married Adrian."

"She has supplanted you with your aunt," Mrs. Dering went on in the same bitter tone. "I am sure she has made a new will in Rhoda's favor. That money ought to be yours."

"But why? Rhoda is her niece too; and she did leave it to me until I teased her so unkindly. Rhoda has known how to be truthful to her and yet win her love. I shall be very glad if Rhoda has the money!"

"You are a child, a silly child! You know nothing of the value of money! Molly, I wanted you to live here when your father and I are gone; but it is Rhoda who will be mistress here!"

"And what a charming mistress of Dering she will make! You will like it when you are used to the idea, mother, and you would rather I was happy than rich. You want your little Molly to be happy?"

"You do not understand, Molly," was Mrs. Dering's impatient answer. She got up, stumbling over the dog, who had curled himself up in a corner of Molly's gown.

"That dog's right place is in the stables!" she said sharply.

"My Bill in the stables, mother?" cried Molly, with a look of mock distress. "Then I must live in the stables, too; I cannot be parted from him!"

Mrs. Dering could not resist smiling; but the smile instantly gave way to a heavy frown.

"Rhoda will be with her aunt all day, I suppose?"

"Adrian is coming down this afternoon."

"He is sure to spend most of the time in Millicent's room. We are outsiders, now, Molly."

"Well, I am glad to be an outsider, so far as Millicent's room is concerned," said Molly, with a little laugh. "Even Rhoda cannot convert her to the extent of having fresh air in her room. Poor Aunt Millicent! Do you think she is really very ill, mother?"

"I am afraid so. The doctors speak very seriously about her heart. There will be no time for—" Mrs. Dering stopped. She was going to say, "No time for this infatuation for Rhoda to wear out," but she could not go on with Molly's innocent eyes upon her.

"I must go and write my letters," she said, shortly.

Rhoda found her aunt lying on the couch. She was looking very ill now, and her breathing was short and painful. After a little conversation, Miss Dering took up a letter.

"I have heard from Adrian this morning, Rhoda."

"Yes?"

"You know he is coming to-day to stay for a few hours?"

"Molly told me so this morning," said Rhoda, without looking at her aunt.

"He is coming to speak to you again, Rhoda," Mrs. Dering went on. "He would not take your answer last week. You promised me to reconsider that answer. He writes to me to-day to say that he must know his fate now that you have had time enough for consideration, and that he has a right to a final answer."

"That is quite true," said Rhoda, a low tone. "I wanted to give a final answer last week."

"But we were too wise to allow you. Rhoda, I do not understand you. Look at me, child!"

Rhoda turned her eyes upon her aunt and met the eager glance of Miss Dering's haggard dark eyes; then her own eyes drooped. Her aunt laid her hand upon her arm.

"Rhoda, you love him! Ah, do not tell me that you do not, for I have read the truth in your eyes!"

"Aunt, I cannot marry him!" faltered Rhoda.

"Why?"

"Do not ask me why. I cannot marry him!"

Miss Dering looked steadily at her niece for some moments.

"Rhoda, I think I know the reason."

"Ah, no, aunt!"

"Yes, I think I know. You think of your father, and you are unwilling that Adrian should have to be ashamed of your father. But Adrian and I have talked of this."

"You have talked of my father?"

"Yes, that was inevitable. Adrian was very explicit about it. He said that, if you had lived with your father, it would have been different. In that case his duty might have been to put you out of his heart; but you and your father are entirely separated. He will be kind and generous to your father, Rhoda. Adrian is just in all things."

"He is very hard to sinners," said Rhoda, faintly.

"Yes—Adrian is hard in some ways, but he is very just."

Rhoda rose from her seat and walked to the window. Her aunt's

eyes followed her.

"Rhoda, listen to me," she said, steadily. "I have left all my money to you."

Rhoda started and turned round; her aunt raised her hand.

"Do not speak; listen to me. It is easy to destroy a will. You must accept Adrian to-day, or I shall destroy that will. I shall make a new one and leave all my money to Mrs. Dering!"

"You are trying to bribe me!" cried Rhoda, her face flushing and growing deathly pale. She left the window and stood opposite to her aunt.

"I am trying to make you choose your own happiness. I don't pretend to understand you, Rhoda; but I will not let you cast away your life's best chance."

Rhoda stood silent. There was a terrible struggle in her heart. Suddenly she sank down at her aunt's feet and took her hands in hers.

"Aunt Millicent, let me tell you—"

But she stopped. The peculiar paleness which accompanied the heart attacks, which were growing more frequent daily, came over Miss Dering's face.

"Call Stanton!" Miss Dering said hoarsely.

Rhoda hastily called the maid, and together they administered the remedies the doctor had ordered. Slowly the color came back into Miss Dering's face. The danger was over for the time. Stanton went away, and Rhoda sat down and put her hand into her aunt's.

"You will do what I want?" Miss Dering whispered, holding the girl's hand fast. "You will be good to me, Rhoda, and let me die happy in the thought of your future?"

Rhoda bent and kissed her.

"I will give Adrian my answer this afternoon," she said, softly.

"Tell me now what your answer will be."

"Dear aunt, let me tell you this afternoon. I cannot tell you now."

And with this Miss Dering was forced to be content.

Adrian was not coming until late in the afternoon. After luncheon, Miss Dering sent Rhoda for a walk. When the girl came downstairs, she found Mrs. Dering in the hall.

"Where is Molly, Aunt Agnes?" she said, pleasantly.

"Out with her father," was Mrs. Dering's short answer.

Rhoda crossed the hall to the door, but her aunt called her back.

"Come here, Rhoda; I want to speak to you."

Mrs. Dering was sitting in one of great carved oak chairs that stood by the marble hearth. Rhoda came and leaned against the carved mantelpiece. She was looking very pale and grave, and there was indications of recently shed tears. Mrs. Dering looked at her with a hard cold glance.

"Look round this hall, Rhoda, and tell me how it strikes you."

Rhoda glanced round the stately hall. The paneled walls were covered with old armor, and there were one or two of the finest portraits there. In the glorious arched roof were stained glass windows, and the colored light fell upon the marble floor and illumined the beautiful tapestry hanging before the doors and the oak cabinets filled with costly china.

"It is very beautiful," Rhoda said gravely.

"The Derings have held this house for more than five centuries," said Mrs. Dering, in a cold tone. "The annals of our race are filled with noble deeds of noble men and women. Do you think that you are worthy to be mistress here?"

Rhoda's dark face flushed at the cruel words.

"Do you mean to insult me, Aunt Agnes?"

"I mean to tell you the truth. Since you have entered these doors, you have been spoiled by adulation and flattery; but I will speak the truth to you."

"Go on," said Rhoda. She clenched her hands, and her very lips grew pale with the effort to be calm.

"Your father is a disgrace to his name," said Mrs. Dering, in slow measured tones. "You were educated by charity in the convent. You were asked here out of pity because your uncle did not wish you to live with your father or to become a governess. And how have you rewarded his kindness? You have schemed to get your aunt's fortune. You have schemed to get Adrian's love. You think you are successful in both, but be not too sure. Your aunt is still living and Adrian has not proposed to you yet."

Mrs. Dering stopped. The pale set look on Rhoda's face checked her violent words.

"Have you finished?" said Rhoda slowly.

"Yes—I have finished. Think over what I have said. Ask yourself if you are fit mistress for Dering before you try any more to win that position."

"Then listen to me for one moment, Aunt Agnes. I have not schemed; Aunt Millicent's love was freely given to me. But you are wrong in one point. Adrian asked me to be his wife last week."

"And you refused him? I do not believe it."

"He will ask me again to-day," said Rhoda, with a passionate thrill in her voice. "To-day I shall accept him."

Mrs. Dering rose and was about to speak, when Molly's voice sounded without; she was making some laughing remark to her father. The next moment they entered.

"Oh, you foolish, foolish people!" cried Molly. "It is so lovely out-

doors! Go out at once, Rhoda; I will go with you."

"No, dear, no!" said Rhoda hurriedly. She hastily passed Molly and went out into the afternoon sunshine.

"What is the matter with Rhoda?" said Molly wondering. "I am afraid aunt Millicent must be worse."

Mrs. Dering made some slight remark and left the hall. Molly turned to her father and raised her pretty eyebrows.

"Quarreling, dad?"

"I am afraid so," he said, shaking his head.

Molly danced up to him and put her arms within his.

"Mother will become resigned to it when Jack comes home; Jack always makes her see things in the right light. And it is all so very lucky; I should not like Adrian to marry out of the family."

"You little puss, why didn't you fall in love with him and please your mother?"

"Because Adrian didn't fall in love with me," returned Molly promptly. "If he had, there would have been no chance for any one else."

"Not for Jack?" said her father teasingly.

Molly shook her head.

"Not even for Jack! Adrian you see, would have insisted on my marrying him, and I should have had to do it! How thankful we all ought to be!"

Molly was standing on the terrace steps with her dog in her arms when Adrian drove up from the station. He handed the reins to the groom and ran up the steps to her. She nodded brightly to him.

"Father is in the library," she said, with a teasing look. "He wants to consult you about the new Act in relation to trespassers."

"I cannot stay very long," said Adrian hesitatingly; "I must be back in the House for a division tonight."

"Oh, it won't take long to discuss the matter—only an hour or two! You can stay as long as that, I am sure!"

"Yes, but—"

Molly looked at him with the ready laughter in her eyes.

"I won't tease you any more," she said. "You will find Rhoda in the lime walk, Adrian. Now, what will you give me for that bit of information?"

He took her hand and raised it to his lips.

"Wish me good luck, my little cousin," he said gently.

Molly looked at him with a very tender expression in her eyes.

"I will do better than that—I will promise it to you," she said; "you shall have your heart's desire."

Adrian's face became bright with happiness.

"Are you sure, Molly?" he said, with a tremor in his strong voice.

"Go and ask Rhoda," was all the answer Molly would give him. She ran away from him down the steps, and he hurried towards the lime walk.

The grave, stern, cold man had never loved before. Absorbed in intellectual pursuits and in his parliamentary work, he had left love out of his life, and a few months before had looked forward to a quiet happy marriage with his cousin Molly, for whom he felt a calm affection. Now he had learned to love Rhoda with all the passionate adoration, the intense reverence of a man's first love. His face flushed as he caught sight of her in the lime walk. She was sitting on one of the low seats under the trees, absorbed in thought. He approached very gently, and it was not until he said, "Rhoda" that she knew he was near. She started up and moved as if to leave him; but he stepped forward and caught her hand.

"You must listen to me," he said. "Come, sit down again, and let me speak quietly to you."

Rhoda looked at him with a strange wild expression on her face, then sat down. Adrian sat down beside her, holding her hand close clasped in his.

"Dear Rhoda, I would not take your answer last week; give it to me now. I will be satisfied with so very little. Only tell me that you will try to love me, and that will make me quite happy."

The girl did not speak for a moment; then she turned and looked at her cousin.

"You should have taken my answer last week, Adrian. It would have been happier for you."

"There is no happiness for me but the happiness of your love," he said gravely. "If you refuse me, Rhoda, life will have ended for me, as far as happiness is concerned." He took both her hands in his strong clasp and looked longingly, entreatingly at her. "You will not refuse me this time? Rhoda, I feel so sure that I can make you love me, even if you do not love me already. Promise to try to love me."

She allowed her hands to rest in his clasp and raised her eyes to meet his adoring glance.

"I will try," she said faintly.

Adrian put his arm quickly around her and bent and kissed her.

"You love me now," he whispered; "I know you love me, Rhoda."

He kissed her lips again and drew her closer to him; but she grew so pale and trembled so much that he was frightened at her look.

"I have been too hasty," he said remorsefully. "I have startled you."

"Let us go back to the house," she said, getting up. He rose and drew her hand within his arm.

"You are not angry with me, Rhoda?" he said humbly.

She shook her head.

"I love you so dearly," he whispered; "I had to tell you so. Give me a kind look, Rhoda."

The girl tried to smile at him, but the smile died on her lips.

"Adrian, be patient with me," she said.

"Come to Aunt Millicent," was his answer. "You know she has set her heart on this; and we must tell Aunt Agnes and Uncle George. Molly knows already. She sent me to you, Rhoda, with a prophecy of my good fortune."

Talking thus, he led her into the house. Mr. Dering was still in the hall. Adrian took Rhoda proudly up to him.

"Uncle George, Rhoda has promised to be my wife," he said.

Mr. Dering looked at them very kindly.

"You make a handsome pair," he said, with a smile. "I am very glad of it, Adrian, my boy."

Rhoda drew her hand from Adrian's and slipped away to go to her own room; but Molly, who was waiting for her in the corridor, drew her into her own little sitting-room.

"Well, Rhoda," she said, with an arch look.

"Well, Molly?"

"It's all right, isn't it, Rhoda?"—wondering at her cousin's haggard face.

"Quite right!" replied Rhoda, with a mirthless laugh. "I am engaged to Adrian."

"I am so glad," Molly said, with a warm kiss. But the look on Rhoda's startled her.

"You are happy, are you not, Rhoda?" she said anxiously. "You love Adrian?"

"Yes, I love him," answered Rhoda. She paused a moment and then added, "It would be easier if I did not."

Molly drew back.

"What do you mean, Rhoda?"

"Never mind, little Molly," said Rhoda, recovering her self-possession by a violent effort. "I shall be a good wife to Adrian. I shall devote my life to him."

Molly still looked at her wonderingly.

"I want you to be happy, Rhoda. But you look so sad still."

"I must learn to smile like you, Molly. But I have never been happy before, you know, and it is difficult to learn what happiness looks like."

She hurried away to the door.

"I must go to Aunt Millicent," she said.

She went to her aunt's room. Adrian was there.

"I was going to send Stanton for you, you naughty girl," said Aunt Millicent gaily. "Come here, my darling, and let me kiss you."

She put her arms round Rhoda and kissed her fondly. Then she put her gently back and smoothed her hair.

"You must teach her to laugh, Adrian—show her how to look happy. I think you will be an excellent teacher; you have learned the lesson so well yourself."

Adrian looked radiantly happy as he stood looking down at Rhoda.

"Do you know what Adrian has been saying to me, Rhoda?" her aunt went on. "He wants what I want so much, dear—an early marriage."

"Don't let us talk about that to-day," said Rhoda, quickly.

"I must," replied Miss Dering. "Rhoda, I have not long to live; you know that as well as I do. Let me have this bit of happiness before I go; let me see you Adrian's wife!"

"Rhoda, I would not hurry you," said Adrian quickly; "but you must know how I want you! Let Aunt Millicent talk to you. Do not refuse to listen to her."


"I will listen to her," Rhoda answered gently; "but not now. Do not let us talk about it now."

"Have you seen Agnes?" said Miss Dering, with a look of malicious triumph. "Does she seem pleased, Adrian?"

Adrian did not return Miss Dering's smile.

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