

RHODA'S SECRET

By SYLVIA CHESTER

CHAPTER VI.

"Well, Molly?"
"Well, Jack?"
"Are things any better now?"
Molly shook her pretty head.
"Rather worse. Mother and Rhoda never speak to each other, Aunt Millicent is very ill, and Rhoda is looking more unhappy than ever. Jack, if I were engaged to you, and all the aunts in the world were ill, I should not look like that!"
"If you were engaged? You are engaged to me, you faithless young person!"
"I mean properly, legally engaged," said Molly. "I don't call it a proper engagement when one's mother doesn't countenance it. I wonder how long it will be before we shall convince her, Jack?"
"Oh, it will be all right!" said the young man cheerfully. "She smiled at me last night. Molly—actually smiled. Isn't that a triumph?"
"Poor Aunt Millicent!" said Molly. "I am afraid she is going to die. Do you know that she wants Rhoda and Adrian to be married by special license in her room, Jack?"
"Does she? Do they agree to that?"
"I don't know. Mother said something to father about it this morning, and I overheard her. There—mother is calling me!"
Molly ran away along the terrace, turning with a bright smile to her lover at the corner.
"I was talking to Jack, mother," she said, with a half pleading, half audacious look at Mrs. Dering.
"Jack here again!" exclaimed Mrs. Dering.
"Yes; but he is not coming to luncheon," said Molly hurriedly. "Did you want me, mother?"
"I want you to take this telegram down to the post office. It is from your aunt to Adrian; I do not wish the servants to see it!"
Molly took the telegram. It ran—
From Millicent Dering to Adrian Dering: Bring down the license with you.
Molly read it and looked at her mother.
"Is Rhoda really going to be married by special license?"
"Yes—at once!" replied Mrs. Dering briefly. "Go with the telegram and lose no time, Molly!"
Molly hastened away on her errand. She was coming out of the post office and turned up the village road when she caught sight of a girl standing at the corner of the foot-path, evidently at a loss as to which road to take. She was a stranger, and Molly crossed the road to speak to her.
"Have you lost your way?" she said pleasantly.
The girl's heavy face brightened. "I want to go to Dering," she said. "It's a house near this village."
"Those are the woods of Dering!" said Molly, with a smile. "I am going there if you will walk with me!" The girl looked at her doubtfully.
"Do you live at Dering, miss?"
"Yes; I am Miss Dering!" Molly returned. "Can I do anything for you?"
"Miss Rhoda Dering lives with you, then?" said the girl in a hesitating tone. "Would you take her a letter from me, miss?"
"Certainly! Give me the letter. Do you know Miss Rhoda?"
"I lived with her in Paris," the girl answered, taking a somewhat soiled and crumpled note from her pocket. "Please give her this, miss. And tell Miss Rhoda I have gone back to London!"
"Won't you come to Dering and see Miss Rhoda?"
"No; give her the note. It doesn't want any answer!"
Molly took the note. She was a little puzzled, but concluded that the girl had been a servant in the convent.
"Do you know your way to the house?" she asked, as the girl walked away.
"Yes, miss, it's straight on! You for taking the note."
Molly took the note back with her and read it at luncheon when she returned.
"Here is a mysterious missive for you, Rhoda!" she said, producing the crumpled envelope. "It does not require any answer."
Rhoda took the note. She glanced at the writing and put it down by her plate.
"Open it, open it!" cried Mrs. Dering briskly. "Let us share the mystery, Rhoda. Where did you get it from, Molly?"
"A stranger in the village—a rather lugubrious stupid damsel, with a heavy face. She lived with you in Paris, she said, Rhoda!"
"Yes; it was a servant I knew there!" said Rhoda calmly. She opened the note with steady fingers. It was short.
Dere Miss Dering.—The French gentleman is in London, and he is going to see you. He does not mean you any good, and Irite to warn you.
Your Respectful servant,
SARAH MOUNT.
Rhoda crumpled the note and put it into her pocket.
"It is only about a Paris friend," she said carelessly. But her hand

trembled as she raised her glass to her lips, and she could not meet Mrs. Dering's scrutinizing glance.
When Adrian arrived that evening, Miss Dering was much worse. Late in the evening she called Rhoda to her.
"I shall not live through another day, Rhoda," she said feebly. "Now you must do what you promised. Let me see you and Adrian married; let me be in this room to-morrow morning."
And Rhoda promised.
No time was allowed her for thought that night. She spent it in constant attendance on her aunt. When morning came, Miss Dering was somewhat better. She insisted on being dressed and wheeled into her sitting room, which Molly had adorned with flowers for the marriage ceremony. Then Miss Dering sent Rhoda away.
"Go and change your dress and go out into the fresh air," she said, "there is plenty of time yet. You shall be fetched when the hour comes."
Rhoda obeyed. She went down the terrace and across the lawn into the lime walk. It was a lovely, fresh, Spring morning; the limes were budding, and the sun shone brightly upon the opening leaves. Rhoda sauntered slowly up and down the quiet walk. The house was hidden by a great group of beeches, and the place was very still and solitary. The further end of the walk joined the great avenue of elms leading from the village to the house. Rhoda had reached this end just as a man came up the avenue. It was M. Lefroy. He saw her instantly and advanced, taking off his hat with a very low bow.
"This is unexpected good fortune, mademoiselle," he said. "I was going to see you, and behold, here you are!"
Rhoda bowed. M. Lefroy left the avenue and turned by her side into the lime walk. They walked a few yards in silence; then Rhoda stopped.
"You say you were coming to see me, Monsieur Lefroy. May I know why you wish to see me?"
"Ah, mademoiselle Dering," he said, bowing again, "you know why I long to see you always—because I love you!"
Rhoda's cheeks flushed.
"I beg of you to be silent!" she said coldly. "I have no desire to quarrel with you, Monsieur Lefroy, but I will not hear such words from you!"
"Ah, you prefer to hear them from Monsieur Dering, the heir of the family estates?" returned the Frenchman, flashing a look of hate at Rhoda. "But I have come to tell you this cannot be; I have come from Monte Carlo to tell you so!"
"Indeed!" said Rhoda, with her old bitter scornful smile. "And by what right do you interfere with my life, Monsieur Lefroy?"
"The right of knowledge!" he hissed out, seizing her arm. "I have seen a letter you wrote to your father, mademoiselle, he has an unfortunate habit of leaving his letters about. They do not know, these English relatives of yours, of those happy days you spent with your honorable father; I will tell them!"
"Do as you please," said Rhoda, releasing her arm and stepping back. "I have many things to tell them!"
He went on, raising his voice in his anger at her coolness. Your servant Sarah is in my pay. You had better listen to me, mademoiselle! Those—"
"He was interrupted by a strong hand being placed upon his shoulder, and he turned round to confront the tall figure of Adrian Dering.
"Who are you, sir?" said Adrian, in a low harsh tone.
The Frenchman recovered his calmness in a moment; he took off his hat.
"Mademoiselle will kindly introduce me," he said blandly; "I am an old friend of hers."
"Any friend of my future wife's is welcome at Dering," returned Adrian. "Rhoda, is this a friend of yours?"
"Then I have the honor of addressing Monsieur Adrian Dering, mademoiselle?" The Frenchman turned to Rhoda, who stood apart, an icy calmness on her face. "Direct me what to say."
"Do not speak, Rhoda," Adrian broke in. "Sir, I heard you addressing this lady in language I cannot allow. I wish to hear nothing from you!"
He crossed to Rhoda and took her hand.
"Go back to the house, Rhoda," he said quickly, "and leave us alone."
"You had better hear me," said the Frenchman slowly. "If Mademoiselle Rhoda is your fiancée, you should know in what manner she spent the last two years. You think she spent them in the convent. It is untrue; she spent them with her father in his gambling saloon."
Adrian did not release Rhoda's hand. Not a muscle of his face moved; he turned pale, but that was the only sign that the Frenchman's words were a surprise to him.
"I am in Miss Dering's confidence," he said calmly; "she has told me all I wish to know about her life. Silence, sir!" he went on as the Frenchman was about to speak. "Not a word more!"
M. Lefroy took off his hat with a smile.
"If you are satisfied, monsieur," he said, "who need say a word?"
Adrian let go Rhoda's hand and made a step toward him.
M. Lefroy turned abruptly away.
"I have the honor to bid you both 'Good morning,'" he said, and disappeared in the avenue.
Adrian walked back to where Rhoda stood.

"Tell me what that man meant," he said sternly.
"He told you plainly. I did not spend the last two years of my life in the convent; I spent them with my father; I shared my father's life."
She raised her eyes slowly to the stern face of the man before her. He looked down at her silently. All the hope and the happiness had died out of his face; he looked ten years older.
"I deceived you of set purpose," Rhoda went on slowly. "My father knew that they would never receive me here if they were told the truth."
"Tell me all the truth," Adrian said hoarsely. "What was that man to you?"
"To me, nothing. He was my father's confederate; he paid my servant to support him in false accusations against me. The servant is faithful to me, though he does not know it; but that will not prevent people from believing him."
"The falsehoods of a man like that are nothing," returned Adrian. "But what has he to say that is true? Tell me exactly!"
"I left the convent two years ago," Rhoda answered; "I went to my father. He was kind to me, and I was very happy. Then I learned what his life was, and I did not leave him. That is all I have to tell you."
Adrian did not answer; he stood looking at her silently. Rhoda could not meet that look. As they stood there beside each other, each waiting for calmness to speak, Molly came tripping into the lime walk.
"Come, dear people!" she cried. "The rector has come, and we are all ready."
Adrian advanced a step towards her.
"Go back to the house, dear child," he said; "we will be there in a moment."
Molly ran away, and Adrian turned back to Rhoda.
"Come!" he said sternly.
Rhoda looked at him.
"I cannot!" she said.
"You must!" he returned firmly.
"Nothing shall be altered now. You have deceived us; but it is now too late to go back. Come, they are waiting!"
"I cannot!" cried Rhoda, shrinking back from him. "Be angry—be harsh to me! Do not look at me like that—do not speak to me like that!"
"You must bear the consequences of your own actions," he answered, with no softening in his glance. "You have had the courage to play a part for months; you must have courage to go through with the matter. Your aunt's dying moments shall not be tortured by the knowledge of our curse yet. I will not allow you to draw back now."
"I cannot be your wife!" she said with a shudder.
"You must go through the marriage ceremony with me," he returned sternly. "What we do afterwards we need not think of now. But my wife in the eyes of the law you must be." He took her hand in his strong clasp. "Come!" he said.
But Rhoda still drew back.
"Have pity on me? If you ever loved me, have pity on me now!"
"I have no thought for you," was Adrian's stern answer. "I think only of the poor woman lying yonder, whose last moments you wish to darken. I think only of your good name, which you leave at the mercy of that man. Come!"
At that moment Jack appeared at the end of the walk.
"Come, come!" he called. "We are getting impatient."
Adrian went forward, still holding Rhoda's hand, and she went on in hopeless submission to his will.
The little sitting room looked very gay with flowers. The curtains were all drawn back, and Miss Dering lay on a sofa by the window, her rich draperies arranged around her. She was looking at the door eagerly when Adrian entered leading Rhoda. The rector stepped forward; but Miss Dering's faint voice stopped him.
"One moment," she said. "Rhoda come and kiss me first."
Rhoda with a deathly pale face, knelt down by the sofa. Miss Dering put one arm gently round her.
"I want to tell you all what this dear girl has been to me," she said, laying her other hand upon Rhoda's bent head. "I was a vain, selfish, careless woman when Heaven sent her to me. She has taught me to live a better life; she has taught me how to die." She paused.
A low sob from Rhoda broke the stillness.
"Adrian, come here," said Miss Dering.
Adrian came close, his eyes bent on the kneeling figure with the bowed head.
"Take her, Adrian—the sweetest, noblest woman man ever had for a wife! Rhoda, darling, the rector is waiting."
Rhoda did not move. Adrian placed his hand upon her shoulder.
"Come," he said.
Rhoda got up, and her aunt half rose to embrace her once more; but she fell back, and an ashy pallor came over her face.
"My heart!" she cried.
Rhoda turned to Adrian.
"Call Stanton—quick!"
But even as she spoke, as she put her arms round Miss Dering, the end came. Her aunt's head fell back upon her shoulder, and she drew a deep breath—her last breath.
The rector gently drew Rhoda away.
"She is at peace," he said.
Rhoda looked down at the white face, and her own grew pale and deathlike. But she did not faint. She allowed Mrs. Dering to lead her gently away, and Molly to come to

her room to comfort her.
"I am glad! I am glad!" she was saying to herself with passionate iteration. "She never knew! And Adrian is still free!"
CHAPTER VII.
M. Lefroy turned back from Dering in some discomfiture. No suspicion had occurred to him that Adrian learned the truth for the first time that morning. His mind was full of dark schemes against Rhoda's peace as he strode down the avenue. He stopped at the gate to speak to the rosy cheeked woman who had admitted him.
He walked on through the gate and along the high road.
He had nearly reached the village and was within sight of the houses, when a man, who had been watching him for some distance unseen by him, came forward from the side of the road. M. Lefroy stepped back.
"Dering, you here?"
"Yes, I am here!" the other said fiercely. His face was pale and worn with hard traveling, his clothes were travel stained. "I have followed on your track. At last I have found you. What are doing here?"
"What are you doing here?" the Frenchman asked blandly. "Have you come to pay a visit to your dear relations, mon ami? I do not envy you your welcome."
"You have come to spy on my daughter!" Arthur Dering returned, his chest heaving with passion. "You have come—"
"Be calm—be calm, mon ami!" the Frenchman said softly. "I came to give your friends a little information about the life of mademoiselle. Yes, certainly I came to do that. 'Ah,' he went on, altering his tone and with all the hatred he felt in his face, "you thought to hide your little plot from me! But I found you out! I will tell you the story of your daughter's life in my own fashion unless—"
But the words were checked by a strong hand on his throat. There was a short, sharp struggle, and the Frenchman, agile as he was and though by far the younger man, was thrown to the ground. But he was up in a moment, with something shining in his hand. As some villagers who had seen the struggle came running up, Mr. Dering fell back upon the road, stabbed in the breast.
(To Be Continued.)


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