

A Knight-Errant of Rhodesia.

IN TWO INSTALLMENTS—PART II.

'Changes, changes,' he muttered with a quick sigh. 'I wonder what others there are. I wonder—'

But he did not finish, for there came to his ear the sound of horses' hoofs on the road in front of him, and he raised his head and looked to see who was coming.

A young girl and a man, the latter bending towards his companion, who was smiling and looking happy, her care-free laugh ringing out on the evening air.

She was very beautiful; no detail escaped the eyes of the man who watched her—watched her with Heaven knows what complex feelings in his heart.

The two went by—they were going at a fast trot—and, as they passed, the girl glanced at the grey-clad figure on the raised pathway at the roadside.

When they had gone by, she turned in her saddle and looked back, immediately glancing away again.

Then a turn in the road hid the girl and her companion, and the man in grey stood there alone: a solitary figure in the midst of a soft English landscape, rounded English hills, tipped with golden haze, rising behind him, and lying like an amphitheatre around the English village nesting below, where the white road took a dip towards the valley.

He had his teeth set hard, and all the country round was a mist before his eyes. Then he brushed his hand over them, and lifted his head, with a half laugh that would have made a woman's heart ache to hear.

'Eight thousand miles!' he said, under his breath, and then he strode on, not looking to right or left. 'A long way to come! Is it to be an Enoch Arden affair, I wonder?'

He walked on to the village and entered the inn, where he engaged rooms and ordered refreshment to be brought.

The landlord took him, from his air and a certain manner he had, for a 'swell' of some kind, and hastened to call up the resources of his house to do honor to the guest.

The latter asked a few questions about the neighborhood and its inhabitants, and the landlord informed him that the great people of the place were the Rooksnest Bertrams.

'And Mr. Leonard—that is, Mr. Bertram,' said mine host, 'he's the nicest young gentleman you ever did see, sir. A good landlord too; and his mother do just worship him.'

'An only son, I take it?' the guest said lighting up a fragrant cigar.

'Yes, sir. But there's his cousin—least ways, she ain't exactly related, only they took her up, because as how she was married in some sort of fashion to Mr. Carew what went to furrin parts a many years ago. He didn't live here, but used to visit his aunt, Mrs. Bertram. I remember him as a little chap, sir; as handsome a boy as ever you see, a wild 'un, too, they said—couldn't never do anything with him.'

'Well, but what do you mean by this 'cousin'—a young lady, I suppose—being married in some sort of fashion to Carew?' said the stranger, bringing back the wandering landlord to his bearings.

The latter laughed.

'Lor, sir, didn't you never read that there case in the papers some six year ago? No? Well, I'll tell you,' which he proceeded to do with much circumlocution and many irrelevant details, to which the guest listened attentively, smoking quietly the while.

'And now we're all agog for a wedding, sir,' the landlord pursued. 'Miss Vimera, she's all but engaged to Mr. Leonard, an handsome couple they'll make, too. She rode by some half-hour ago, sir, as pretty a picture as you'd wish to see in a day's walk.'

'I think I saw them,' remarked the stranger. 'A very beautiful girl. The young man, too, was good-looking.'

'That's them, sir. She do ride beautiful. The engagement ain't announced yet, but we all know it'll be a match. In fact, I happen to know—from a party up at the house—that it's settled, only Miss Vimera prefers a bit of hanging back, like young gals does, you know, sir.'

'But the black woman, what was her nurse, she told me they'd be wed pretty soon. Mrs. Bertram's so set on them two getting married. And Mr. Leonard's over head an' ears, as the saying is—'

'And Miss—Miss Leslie?' said the guest with a smile.

'It's a grand match for her, sir, an' she's fond of Mr. Leonard; they've bin like brother and sister. But it do seem odd don't it, sir, that there young thing is a widder, after all? I can't help larfin.'

The guest smiled, too.

'Yes,' he said, a little dryly, 'it has its humorous side. certainly. Thanks, land lord, I think I'll stroll around a bit, while you're getting dinner.'

And the landlord, taking this as a dismissal, hurried away, while the guest went out and strolled through the village, attracting much attention from the folk who gossiped at doors, loafed about the green, or dispersed themselves at cricket therson.

'A sort of Rip van Winkle,' he said to himself, with a kind of grim humour. 'I wonder is she really in love with this young fellow? I like his looks. Would it be right? What's to be done—the best for her? After all, that's got to be thought of, and it's that which has brought me eight thousand miles. If she had been

free—bah! I'm a fool. I'll go back and think it out.'

CHAPTER VI.

'I'm going to ride this afternoon, auntie,' said Vimera, at luncheon the next day but one after the arrival of the strange guest in the village.

His advent had been reported to the whole village, of course, and Vimera had heard from Ria all that was to be known about him, and a great deal more besides, for gossips never allow ignorance of facts to interrupt the flow of imagination.

Vimera had not seen him, and she laughed at the gossip which had grown up around his personality.

A man can't come into the neighborhood to paint, or to fish, or to vegetate, but what he is credited with being a mysterious claimant to some thing or other,' she said. 'Poor man! probably he's an artist, as he wears a soft felt hat!'

'You are going to ride without Leonard, dear?' Mrs. Bertram said, for Leonard had once more gone away for a few days. 'Dear auntie, how often have I ridden alone, when Len was away!' Vimera answered. 'I'm all right.'

'So you are, child. Very well,' replied Mrs. Bertram indulgently, 'take the dogs with you.'

So the girl rode off, looking the loveliest picture imaginable, riding her bay mare as if she were a part of the animal, her two great dogs friking about her, wild with delight.

They knew they were in for a long afternoon, and enjoyed nothing more than a 'rampage' with their young mistress.

Riding late in the afternoon through some woods, many miles from Rooksnest, Vimera called her dogs up to follow close heel.

'Because you know,' she said, addressing the big staghound, who rushed up to her, and quite comprehended all she said, 'the woods are strictly preserved, and the keepers hide cunning traps in the grass that may catch your unwary toes and hurt you.'

Whereat Chieftain pricked his ears, gave a short bark, and looked knowing, at the same time turning his head to see that his companion, a beautiful collie, was there to hear the instructions.

'Where's Laird?' Vimera said, quickly noticing this.

And turning in her saddle, she was about to give a long whistle, when a cry of pain from some distance off smote on her ear.

'Chieftain! she cried out, and was off her horse in a second.

Bidding the mare stand quiet where she was Vimera ran lightly up a footpath which led into the depth of the woods, calling aloud to Laird who answered with distressful cries of pain.

'Oh, it's cruel—cruel!' Vimera said with a half sob as she sped on. 'My poor Laird! he's so heedless! Keep close Chieftain; you mustn't go in the grass. Stay here! I'm going across; but you can't avoid those cruel traps as I can.'

Chieftain stood still, wagging his tail and looking anxious, watching his mistress intently as she went on among the greenery, treading, herself, carefully.

Poor Laird!

He had paid a heavy penalty for his indiscretion in rushing among the long grass of a strictly preserved wood.

His unwary foot had been caught in a steel trap, which, however, through some fault in the spring had not completely closed its sharp teeth together, otherwise his foot would probably have been in a very bad plight indeed.

As it was, he howled with pain, making matters worse by struggling to free himself, and his struggles increased as he saw his mistress.

She was down on her knees beside him in a moment, and ordered the poor brute to be still; an order which he obeyed, though quivering with pain, and whining in the most piteous manner.

Vimera tried to force the trap open, but in vain.

Her hand were strong, but so was the spring, and the very defect which had caused the trap not to shut thoroughly increased the difficulty of releasing her pet.

'Laird! Laird! the poor girl said in despair. 'I must go for help. Poor old boy! Keep quite still, I'll find somebody.' It was heart-breaking to leave him, and no true dog lover will think it strange or foolish that Vimera's eyes were full of tears as she retraced her steps to where Chieftain stood on guard.

But he was not alone now.

A tall, slight man was with him, whom Vimera at once, with a strange kind of shock, recognized as the stranger she and Leonard had passed on the station road a day or two before.

But her most prominent feeling was certainly delight at seeing a man at all, and her eager face and the manifest distress she was in, showed him that something had occurred in which help was required.

He lifted his hat and stepped forward as she approached, putting strong control on himself, lest by look or word he should reveal to her the deep emotion this chance meeting roused in him.

'I beg your pardon,' he said. 'You seem in some trouble. Can I help you?'

face. 'My poor dog has got caught in a trap, and I can't wrench it open. You are stronger perhaps you could do it?'

'I daresay I can manage,' answered the stranger, glancing at her pretty hands with a half-smile. 'Where is the dog?'

Vimera led the way thanking her companion earnestly.

'This wood is preserved,' she said in explanation. Step carefully off the pathway. The owner allows his keepers to set these traps for vermin. Don't you think it very cruel? For many helpless creatures besides get caught. But perhaps you don't know these traps?' she added a little doubtfully, with a glance at the man.

'Oh, yes; I re—I know them, he answered. 'You think I am not English bred?'

'I beg your pardon,' Vimera said quickly, with heightened color. 'Only you seem more like a man who is used to freer woods than ours—where such horrors as traps are unknown.'

He half laughed.

His very step as he swung along at her side, spoke the same language as his whole personality.

'I've been in wilds enough,' he said. 'Ah there's your dog. Poor fellow! he's in a bad fix.'

He knelt down, and with one strong wrench, released the animal.

But he looked rather grave as Laird, with a pitiful cry, held up his wounded paw, which hung limp and bleeding.

'I'm afraid there's a fracture there,' the stranger said.

He spoke to the dog caressing him the while, in the way that showed Vimera he was not only a lover of animals, but comprehended them.

Laird knew this also, for he responded gratefully, and looked up in the man's face with speaking eyes still holding up his paw.

He made no protest when his new friend gently and with the skill of one used to 'first aid,' examined the extent of the injury.

Vimera stood by watching with bated breath.

There was a curious sort of feeling at her heart as she looked at the strong, supple hands that were deftly manipulating the dog's foot and foreleg, a kind of reaching out to span the endless plains of memory.

'I'm going to put the leg in splints, he said, after a few moments, 'and bind it up. There's a slight fracture, but I've straightened it all right. It must be kept so. Do you mind getting me two straight sticks? I daren't leave the dog lest he move.'

'I'll soon get them,' Vimera answered and indeed, sticks were not difficult to come by in a wood.

So she speedily returned, bringing what her companion wanted, and watched him bind up her pet's injured limb.

Laird recognized with grateful licks of his preserver's hand all that had been done for him, and the man as he rose to his feet glanced covertly at the face of the girl beside him.

To him there was a certain grim if pathetic humor in the situation.

It was not the uppermost feeling in his mind, certainly, but was there nevertheless.

'I don't know how to thank you,' Vimera said earnestly and with tears in her soft eyes. 'My poor Laird would have died I believe but for you.'

There was just a second's pause before her companion answered turning a little aside to brush some dust from his sleeve.

'Please don't thank me; it's nothing. I happen to come from a part of the world where one has to be a jack-of-all-trades.'

'You have been in the colonies?' Vimera said, almost involuntarily.

The words came out before she recollected that they might sound curious.

But colonials are apt to consider questions from quite a different point of view, and this colonial answered, without the least change of countenance—

'I am just from Rhodesia, where I've been for years. I was in the Rhodesian Horse.'

'In Rhodesia!'

The girl caught her breath, the colour leapt to her cheek.

If she had never realized it before, she realized now, with a shock, how very much the mere name of Rhodesia had power to move her.

It brought into the foreground all that was ever in the more secret recesses of her mind.

The man's dark grey eyes looked into hers with a curious, searching gaze.

'You know someone there?' he said.

The blood rushed to her forehead; she half turned away.

'Not now,' she faltered.

Then, pulling herself together, she added, almost abruptly—

'What shall I do with Laird? He can't walk, can he?'

'I saw a horse down there,' the colonial said, with a wave of the hand towards the pathway, 'that is yours?'

'Yes.'

Without a word he stooped and took the collie up in his arm.

Laird was not light, but what was that to the superb strength of manhood in his prime?

Vimera remonstrated.

'He's quite light,' remarked her new friend easily. 'Your mare will carry him to the village down yonder. I've just come through, and there's an inn where we can take him until something better can be managed. You come from Rooksnest, don't you?'

'Yes. How did you know? My name is Leslie.'

'So I was told.'

He did not disclose his own name in return for her information, but walked on with Laird, who made no objection to this sort of ambulance.

On the contrary, he licked his preserver's face with great expressment.

Arrived at the place where Vimera's mare patiently waited, the colonial established the collie comfortably on back, and steadying him with one hand, took the bridle with the other, the mare making

no objection, but apparently taking much interest in the procedure.

'You seem able to do everything,' the girl said, smiling, as they walked towards the high road.

But her companion shook his head and then looked away over the hills and fields.

'I don't know—God knows!' he said, half under his breath, and immediately began to talk of what should be done with Laird when they reached the village.

CHAPTER VII.

On the walk through the lanes to the village, the girl and the man were both somewhat silent at first.

Vimera's mind was still running on her companion's words, her heart was throbbing heavily.

Now she knew why his appearance had struck that chord silent in the recesses of her memory.

He had something of the look and bearing of the man to whom she had been married when a child; he had the same free step, the same easy and supple movements so unlike those of the home-bred Englishman; the same unmistakable stamp of breeding which marks the gentleman under whatever circumstances he may appear.

She caught her breath at the idea which suggested itself to her.

Was it possible that he had come across Wilnot Carew?

They both belonged to the same body of irregular horse—might have fought side by side in the Matebar war.

She glanced at her companion.

He looked grave, even to sombreness, his eyes bent on the ground, for to him the position was a strange blending of most exquisite sweetness and bitterest pain.

To be walking beside this girl, this creature of grace and beauty, to know that what he lost was to be another's gain that not for him were the joy and the sunshine to which he yet had the right, but which right it was his plain duty to put out of his power to claim.

She must have forgotten all about that episode of her childhood he told himself; it was not likely that she could have retained more than gratitude for a service done to her father.

She must even, in a way, be glad that death had claimed the husband of an hour so that in later life no complications could arise.

It was 'all for the best,' doubtless.

She loved this bright young 'cousin' of hers, and would be very happy as his wife. But that flash, that eager look, at the mere name of 'Rhodesia!'

'Well, of course, the manner of her preserver's death had been very sad.

The child had cried bitterly at leaving the dying man—naturally; but still, what did that argue for her feelings now?

'Here we are at the inn. I suppose you know this village well, though?' he said at last, rousing himself from his thoughts.

'Oh, yes!' answered Vimera. 'But you yourself have been quick in making acquaintance with the neighborhood.'

'I am an inveterate wanderer, by day and night. Habit—that's all!' rejoined her companion, with a smile that did not reach his eyes: they had a strained and troubled look. 'Here comes the landlady. You must have some tea, Miss Leslie. I'll look after the cattle—I mean—with another fleeting smile—the horse and dog.'

'But you must join me,' said Vimera. 'If you are not above tea.'

'I? By no means. You are very good to ask me. I'll not keep you long,' he replied, and, leaving her to the hostess, he turned away, and led horse and dog round to the stables.

He was not long gone, and when he came back to the old fashioned inn parlor, he found Vimera awaiting him, and the tea equipage ready.

It gave him a curiously home-like feeling—a feeling dashed, too, with bitterest pain—but yet sweet to the man who had wandered homeless for so many years.

His rough life and long absence from the 'world' had not succeeded in taking off the polish of the high bred gentleman.

The girl recognized that in the very way he was waited on her, and yet with it all was that charm of unconventionality which belongs to people who pass their lives in a society freer and less 'groovy' than our own.

'I saw you,' he said, bending to play with Chieftain's ears, as the dog lay at his feet, 'the very day I came into this neighborhood. You were riding.'

'I noticed you,' the girl answered quite frankly. 'Of course, one knows all the newcomers in a small place like ours.'

'And I suppose I look very different from the generality of folk,' said the colonial, smiling. 'They all seem to stare at me a good deal. Your companion was young Bertram. Ah! forgive me. You must make allowance for Rhodesian manners.'

'It isn't necessary,' returned Vimera, laughing. 'Yes—my Cousin Leonard; at least—well, I call him my cousin.'

'I was told,' the man said rather slowly, and not looking at her, 'that you were engaged to him. Is that so?'

For just a second she caught her breath; a look, a little haughty, flashed into her eyes.

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The question started her more than it offended, though she could not have told why it should do so.

She answered, a trifle coldly—

'No one who told you could have spoken from knowledge.'

'Oh, no; I was informed it was not officially announced. Will you be very offended if I ask whether it is, nevertheless, true?'

He lifted his eyes as he spoke, and met her; and under that look the girl felt all surprise, offence, haughtiness melt away.

It was so clear, so direct, so absolutely devoid of any intention to be impertinent, or curious, or intrusive.

'I am not actually engaged,' she answered. That was all.

That was all. She did not colour; her eyes did not droop; but there was a little indrawing of the breath.

She had the air of one admitting some fact which one would rather did not exist; at least, that was the impression the man received.

Possibly he wanted to receive it. He got up and went over to the window, bowed in roses, through which one viewed an old-world garden.

There was a mist before his eyes, a something in his heart which choked his utterance, and made him cling on desperately to that word 'duty'—the watchword of a soldier's life.

'Do you,' he said, after a minute, speaking in a level voice, 'do you—care for him—very much? Ah! forgive me again—quickly, as he felt rather than heard the sound of her movement. 'I don't ask from curiosity—from anything that could anger you—only, tell me!'

He had turned to Vimera, who had risen to her feet, startled now beyond measure, bewildered by a hundred vague suggestions—inclined to resent the freedom of a total stranger in thus daring to lay rude hands on the veil of her heart, yet somehow unable to be really angry.

'It is a strange question!' she said falteringly, her eyes meeting his with a curious searching. 'Why do you ask it?'

It came into her soul like the slash of a knife.

How should she answer his questions, if she spoke the absolute truth?

'I know it's strange. I know I outrage all laws of propriety in asking it; but—he paused, and drew in his breath—'I want to know if you'll be happy? and if it would break your heart if you had to part from this man whom you are expected to marry?'

With a kind of terror in her face, the girl made a step forward, her eyes searching his with wide, wild gaze.

'Why, I repeat, do you ask?' came in a strained whisper from her lips. 'You—'

The man folded his arms. 'I am Wilnot Carew!' he said. She started back dizzy—bewildered.

In the first minute of that shock, she could not think or realize his words.

'Wilnot Carew! Wilnot Carew!' she half whispered in a dazed way, and she crept to a chair like a blind woman, and sat down.

And to Wilnot Carew's lips there came an ineffably bitter smile—to his eyes a shadow that dimmed all their brightness.

What could he do but mistake the girl's aspect?

She loved this 'cousin.'

It would break her heart to part her from him.

Well, she should not suffer through the man who had grown to love a memory.

'You mustn't think,' he said quietly, 'that I expect you to take my word for the fact that I am the man you have believed dead. I have brought proofs with me, and my aunt, Mrs. Bertram, would recognize me without fail. Nor have I come to spoil your life, or to make any sort of claim on you. I wouldn't have made myself known but for the fact that, when I heard you were engaged, it seemed right that there should be no possibility of after trouble for you. I see it was a mistake for me to stay away so long. And now I've come at the wrong moment.'

'No, no, no!' the girl said vehemently, stung to the quick by this pathetic self-abnegation. 'Oh, you don't know how glad I am that you live!'

She stopped. In truth, the gladness of this knowledge frightened her.

Every womanly instinct warned her to hide its expression; every instinct of gratitude prompted her to pour out her joy.

But the memory of that marriage service between them shut her lips.

Carew started a little, and his lips parted as if he would say something; but he crushed down the impulse.

She was glad he lived, that he had escaped a cruel death, of course. She was sweet and good, but she knew all the time that that ceremony could be annulled; at least he thought so.

'That is very good of you,' he said

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