

# RHODA'S SECRET

Continued From Last Issue

was standing on the terrace with her dog in her arms. The man drove up from the stable, handed the reins to the boy and ran up the steps to her. She looked brightly at him. "He is in the library," she said with a teasing look. "He wants to talk to you about the new Act in regard to trespassers."

"I won't stay very long," said Mr. Dering hesitatingly; "I must be going to the House for a division to-morrow."

"I won't take long to discuss the matter—only an hour or two. I will stay as long as that, I am sure."

"But—"

He looked at him with the light in her eyes. "I won't tease you any more," she said, "I will find Rhoda in the library. Now, what will you do for that bit of information?"

She took her hand, and raised it to her forehead. "I wish you good luck, my little girl," he said gently.

He looked at him with a very sad expression in her eyes. "I do better than that—I will tell you," she said; "you have your heart's desire."

His face became bright with joy. "You are sure, Molly?" he said, "I am sure."

"I must ask Rhoda," she said. "Molly would give him. She will come from him down the steps, and she will hurry towards the time."

"A grave, stern, cold man had looked before. Absorbed in his duties and in his parliamentary work, he had left love out of his life, and a few months before he had turned forward to a quiet happy life with his cousin Molly, for he felt a calm affection. Now he had learned to love Rhoda with a passionate adoration, the infatuation of a man's first love. He flushed as he caught sight of her in the lime walk. She was seated on one of the low seats under the trees, absorbed in thought. He approached very gently, and it was until he said, "Rhoda" that she knew he was near. She started and moved as if to leave him; but he stepped forward and caught her hand.

"I must listen to me," he said. "I will sit down again, and let me hear what you have to say."

She looked at him with a wild expression on her face, and she sat down. Adrian sat down beside her, holding her hand close to his.

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

"I will not speak for a month," she said, "I will wait until you have changed your mind."

"You should have taken my answer last week; give it to me. I will be satisfied with so very little. Only tell me that you will try to love me, and that will make me happy."

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Rhoda, with a prophesy 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 today," 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.

## 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, 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.

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"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 station?" she asked, as the girl turned away.

"Oh, yes, miss, it's straight on! Thank you for taking the note."

Molly took the note back with her. They were 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 know 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 I rite 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 it 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?"

(To Be Continued.)