RHODA'S SECRET

A Story of Love and Intrigue

By Sylvia Chester

SYNOPSIS.

CHAPTER I.—Rhoda Dering daughter of the black sheep of a good English family, goes to England to be her cousin's governess.

II.

Mary is expected to marry Adrian, the heir of Wering, but she is in love with Jack Maitland. Miss Millicent Wering is going to leave her money to Mary.

III.

Mary and Rhoda become good friends. Rhoda is forbidden to mention her father.

"Well, most of her life—it's the same thing. And she will be such a companion to Molly! You should have heard her chattering French to those nuns."

Mrs. Dering's brow relaxed, and she smiled.

"Well, George, I am going to be good to the girl. And it will be just what Molly wants, a companion to amuse her. If she and Rhoda can get on, I shall be quite content."

Rhoda's rooms were next to Molly's, in the east corridor. There was a door leading from one into the other. They were furnished very simply and prettily, and in both rooms fires were blazing brightly. Before the sitting room fire a little table was drawn up, with an easy chair close by. Tea was on the table, in the middle of which stood a large bowl of roses.

"This is my idea," said Molly, as the two girls entered. "I mean you to have tea up here, and not go down again till dinner time."

"What lovely roses!" said Rhoda, bending to look at them.

"Adrian brought me those for you. I asked him to bring them down from London yesterday. They have so many flowers in France, haven't they?"

"Not many as beautiful as these at this time of the year. You are going to spoil me, Molly."

"So Adrian said. He read me a little lecture about it. He seemed to think that, if we made a great deal of you to begin with, we should neglect you afterwards. But you don't think I am like that, do you, Rhoda? We are to be like sisters, father said." And Molly put her arms round Rhoda, and looked up at her with such sweet, loving blue eyes that Rhoda loved her from that moment.

"Molly, you dear little Molly!" she said returning her embrace. Then she suddenly loosed her arms. "I will have some tea," she said, sitting down in the pretty low chair by the fire and taking off her hat. "Pour it out for me, Molly; and tell me who Adrian is."

"Adrian is—do you take sugar?—Adrian is the heir of Dering. He is the handsomest, wisest, best person in the world! And Jack and I do not like him at all."

"Jack? May I know who Jack is?"

Molly looked intently at the pattern of the cup she was holding, and a tender little smile played round her lips.

"Jack and I grew up together," she said. "His father is the rector of the parish and father's oldest friend. Wait a moment, Rhoda. I want to show you my Bill."

Molly jumped up and ran out of the room. A moment later she was back with her black puppy in her arms.

"Look at the darling! Pat his dear head, Rhoda! Had you any dogs at the convent?"

"No, dear."

"Father shall give you one tomorrow. Jack gave me Bill."

She hugged the puppy in a close embrace and sat down upon the hearth rug at Rhoda's feet.

"Jack and I are going to marry each other some day," she said gravely.

Rhoda softly smoothed the girl's brown hair, but did not speak.

"Not for a long, long time. He has to get his degree; he was plucked, dear boy, last term. But I never never, never could marry anybody but Jack!"

"You are too young to marry any one, little Molly," said her cousin, with a very gentle look in her gray eyes.

Molly hugged the puppy still closer.

"Jack isn't coming back for three months, and we are not to write to each other. We have always written to each other every week, but mother won't let me write to him now. Mother is very fond of Jack, you know, but she wants me to marry Adrian."

The girl's frankness touched Rhoda; but there was bitterness in her thoughts as she listened. How different Molly's life had been from her own! Molly so guarded, so sheltered by love! Her own only protection had been a father who had been unable to shield her from insult and humiliation.

Molly went on with her confidences.

"I had a little talk with Adrian about it yesterday," she said. "He was very kind; I never liked him so much before. He thinks it our duty to marry, but he said it was natural that I should prefer Jack."

"And does your mother know?"

"Adrian thinks I ought not to decide yet; I am too young to know my own mind, so he says. But I do know it, don't I, my Bill?" She kissed the puppy and put it down upon the rug. "Come, Rhoda, and let me help you to change your dress! I feel ashamed of talking about myself so much; but I wanted you to know all about me. Now you must tell me about yourself."

"There is nothing to tell," said Rhoda, with a faint smile. "Suppose you run away now, Molly, and leave me to myself. Come back when it is time for me to go down."

Molly jumped up.

"You must be so tired! Would you rather not come down to dinner? Let me tell mother you are tired."

"No, dear; I will come down."

"Polly—that's my maid, you know—will help you to unpack. Let me stay too."

"I think you had better not, dear. Shall I see Aunt Millicent at dinner?"

A roguish smile broke over Molly's face.

"Oh, dear no! You are to be taken this evening to see Aunt Millicent in her own room. Now, Rhoda, I will tell you what to say. Start back with intense surprise and cry out, 'This cannot be my aunt; this is a young lady of twenty-five!' Say something like that, and you will be Aunt Millicent's forever.

"Does she look so young?"

"She is a haggard old lady," returned Molly, with some asperity. "I have no patience with her! But she was a beauty in her youth, and she thinks she is a beauty still. But I want her to like you, Rhoda; I want her to leave you all her money. She is immensely rich—her godfather left her a great fortune—and she is constantly making new wills. She left it all to me once, but I offended her beyond recall when I teased her about her complexion; it was too bad of me! Try to look as if were all real, Rhoda—hair and teeth and complexion and all! It will be difficult, but I should like you to be Aunt Millicent's heiress."

"Molly, you must please go away," Rhoda said, ignoring all the last speech; "I shall never dress while you are here."

"Put on a pretty dress," was Molly's answer, as she took up her puppy, "and don't forget what I told you about Aunt Millicent. There—you will say I am incorrigible! But Jack and I planned it all; we intend you to marry Adrian and have Aunt Millicent's money!"

"How very kind of you and Jack to plan my future!" said Rhoda, with a strange laugh.

Molly did not understand the look of bitterness on her cousin's face. She turned back and held up her face to be kissed.

"You are not vexed with me, Rhoda?" she said. "I am such a chatter-box, but I would not vex you for the world!"

"My dear, you did not vex me; you are a dear little girl!"

"You look so sad," said Molly, with a tender look in her blue eyes. "Were you very sorry to leave the convent, Rhoda?"

"Very sorry."

"You had been there so many years, it must have been like home to you. But this is to be your home now, dear Rhoda!"

Rhoda's eyes were full of hot tears as she bent and kissed Molly gently.

"My dear little cousin, you are very good to me!" she said.

Molly's answer was an energetic hug and a long warm kiss. Then she caught up her puppy and ran away.

Rhoda had changed her dress for a black silk and was sitting by the fire, when there was a tap at the door and Mrs. Dering entered.

"Are you ready, Rhoda? Are you sure you would rather come down to dinner?"

"I am quite rested, thank you!" said Rhoda briefly.

Mrs. Dering went and stood opposite to her on the hearth rug, playing absently with her fan, while she looked steadily at Rhoda. It was not exactly an unkindly glance, but it was cool and critical. Rhoda's cheeks flushed. She rose and pushed forward a chair.

"Will you not sit down, aunt?" she said.

"No, thank you, my dear. You are tall, Rhoda—as tall as I am!"

"Yes," said Rhoda, briefly.

"You remember your mother, of course?"

A strange passionate look came over the girl's face, her eyes drooped and her lips quivered.

"I was a child when she died," she said; "but I remember her well."

"I hoped you would have been like her."

"I am like my father," said Rhoda. Mrs. Dering frowned.

"We must understand each other, Rhoda. You must forget, within these walls, that you are your father's child; that is the condition on which I have consented to have you here. Never mention his name again!"

Rhoda was silent. Mrs. Dering went on.

"I do not wish to speak of him to you; I wish to forget that he is your father. I shall remember only that you are my husband's niece. I wish to be very kind to you, Rhoda."

"Thank you!" said the girl with pale set lips.

"If you had lived with your father even for a few months after your mother died, we could not have had you here. I want you for a companion to my Molly." The mother's voice grew tender as she uttered the name. She went on without looking at Rhoda. "I hope that Molly has a great future before her. Her Aunt Millicent intends to make her her heiress, and we expect her to marry our heir. He has a career before him in Parliament; he is even now a rising statesman and will be a peer some day, and one of the great men of the land. We are proud of him."

"You mean Molly's cousin, Adrian?" said Rhoda very quietly.

"He is your cousin, too, my dear," said Mrs. Dering, with kind intent; but the condescending words brought the color to Rhoda's cheeks.

"Thank you!" she said.

The tone made Mrs. Dering turn quickly to her; but Rhoda's glance was fixed upon the fire, and her face was coldly impassive.

"I shall want your help in many ways," Mrs. Dering went on, after a pause. "Molly is a child; she does not value things aright. I tell you what we have planned for her future, so that you may help us."

"My cousin Adrian—does he know of these plans for the future?" asked Rhoda.

"My dear, of course he does. I wonder at your question. It is his dearest hope to marry Molly. But let us come down stairs; you must tell us about your convent life tonight, Rhoda, and I want to hear you play duets with Molly."

Mrs. Dering went to the door and Rhoda accompanied her. There was a cold determined look on her face as she followed her stately aunt down the wide stairs; it was a strange sad look for that beautiful face.

CHAPTER IV.

Rhoda did not see her Aunt Millicent until the next morning. Her aunt sent down to say that her head was aching, and that she could not see Rhoda that evening.

"I gave her a fancy picture of you, Rhoda, yesterday," said Molly, when the message came. "You were to be short and pale and very frightened looking. Aunt Millicent is prepared to find you very dull and tiresome."

"Rhoda will not see much of her aunt," said Mrs. Dering, who was sitting knitting by the fire. "She will have plenty of occupation with your French and music, and I shall want her help in many ways."

"Don't be sorry, Rhoda," laughed Molly; "I am a nicer companion than Aunt Millicent."

When Rhoda accompanied Stanton, who had been sent to fetch her, to Aunt Millicent's room, Miss Dering was dressed and sitting by the fire.

"Sit down here, Rhoda, and let me look at you!" she said, after kissing her.

Rhoda sat down opposite to her aunt and submitted herself to the close scrutiny of Miss Dering's keen dark eyes.

"Do you know that you are very beautiful?" said Miss Dering after a moment or two.

"I have never thought about it at all," answered Rhoda indifferently.

"I was like you once," said Miss Dering. "You are like the ghost of my dead youth, Rhoda. Look at me now!"

Her aunt's words were so utterly different from what Molly's description had led her to expect that Rhoda could not speak.

"A painted, hideous, haggard old woman!" Miss Dering went on. "Look at me!" She got up and pushed back the curtain, letting the cold clear light fall upon her haggard face. "You do not speak, Rhoda. You have heard that I am vain—a foolish old woman. I know how they talk of me downstairs!"

Rhoda rose and drew forward the curtain again with a firm hand.

"Aunt Millicent, I am not going to answer you while you talk like this. Sit down again by the fire."

Miss Dering looked at her niece with those haggard dark eyes that were so like her father's.

"You are as I was," she said. "Come here, Rhoda."

She drew the girl quickly to the other side of the room. A curtain hung there, and she drew it back, showing a full length portrait of a girl in a riding habit. Rhoda could not but see that this radiant beautiful girl bore an extraordinary likeness to herself.

"I was like that once," said her aunt, with a miserable laugh. "I was loved and courted. I was Miss Dering of Dering, with a father and brothers who worshipped me and a lover who would have died for me. But they are all gone—all gone except George, and he thinks only of his wife."

Rhoda laid her hand gently upon her aunt's shoulder. She had entered the room with selfish schemes in her heart; there was nothing but deep pity now as she looked at the worn miserable face of the desolate woman. Miss Dering let the curtain fall and took Rhoda's hand in hers.

"You are alone too," she said. "They won't love you any more than they love me. Molly and Mrs. Dering have all the love George has still to give; and your aunt— Do you like your aunt, Rhoda?"

"I have seen so little of her."

"Ah, you are cautious! Come, sit down again and forget all my foolish words. But it was like seeing a ghost to look at you, Rhoda. Only you are pale and grave. That was not like me; I was the life of the house. Did your father ever talk of me?"

Rhoda paused before she answered and Miss Dering went on.

"But, of course, you have not seen him for years. You are like him, Rhoda. We were very much alike, Arthur and I. He would not know me now."

"You saw my mother once?" said Rhoda.

"I went to see them at Lucerne. That was before you were born. Your mother was not a lady, Rhoda, and we were all very angry with Arthur for marrying her. That was his first offense. My father was a proud man, he struck Arthur's name out of his will. I went secretly to Lucerne to see your father; but we quarreled. He had a very bitter tongue; and he did not spare me. But I saw your mother—a sweet fair little girl; I can see her now."

"You never saw her again?"

"Never. We lost sight of them for years. I had my own troubles to live through. I have had great troubles, Rhoda. I was to have married Lord Woburn's oldest son; but he died. And I had other troubles after that. And now I am desolate and only borne with for my money. You know I am very rich, don't you?"

"Molly told me so."

"Mrs. Dering thinks that I shall leave it all to Molly. Perhaps I shall!" She gave Rhoda an odd look and settled her draperies round her with trembling fingers.

"Do I look very haggard and old?" she said, with a piteous look. "Tell me frankly, Rhoda."

"Yes, Aunt Millicent, you do look very haggard. You look older than you ought to look because you dress so youthfully."

Rhoda had meant to speak very differently—to please; to flatter; but the words came despite herself.

Miss Dering went to the glass and looked at herself. Then she turned to Rhoda.

"How would you like me to dress?" she said sharply.

"You ought to wear a pretty cap and a different dress, and let more light into your room. You would look beautiful still, Aunt Millicent—as beautiful as you did when you were young, only with a different kind of beauty."

Miss Dering dropped the curtain and sat down again.

"You are a very extraordinary young woman, Rhoda," she said. "So you do not like my room or my dress? You would like me to dress as your nuns dressed, I suppose?"

"You would not like that," replied Rhoda, with a faint smile.

"They have dressed you very prettily, Rhoda, what would I give for your youth and your quiet untroubled past!"

Rhoda did not answer, and Miss Dering went on in a lighter tone.

"The nuns have taught you how to dress and taught you the virtue of plain speaking. You will have to forget the latter lesson, Rhoda."

"You asked my opinion," said Rhoda gently.

"Oh, I like your frankness! I was just like that; you are what I was Rhoda. If you had been like your mother, Mrs. Dering would have liked you better, but you would not have been the same to me."

"You ought to be angry with me for my rudeness," said Rhoda,

"No, I am not angry. I know I am a frightful old woman. Don't shake your head and spoil your truthfulness. I shall tell Mrs. Dering what you have said to me." She leaned back, still looking steadily at Rhoda.

"You must come to see me every day," she said, "and say to me exactly what you think. Perhaps you will get me to wear caps and leave off powder. Now call Stanton and go away. Tell Mrs. Dering I shall come down to luncheon."

The days passed, and the intense longing to tell the truth which Rhoda had at first felt gradually wore off. Her relatives so completely took her past for granted, they showed so little curiosity about it that it was easy to go on. Molly was too full of her own experiences to care much to listen to Rhoda's stories of the quiet convent days. The two girls spent many happy mornings in Molly's little room. When work was over, Molly was the chief talker. Rhoda heard all about the escapades with Jack that had made Molly's childhood such an exciting time.

Rhoda's afternoons were devoted to Miss Dering. This occasioned a severe struggle between Mrs. Dering and her niece-in-law. Rhoda was not present at the stormy interview between them; but though Mrs. Dering gave way, she was bitterly cold to Rhoda after that.

"I wish Rhoda had never come to Dering," she said angrily to her husband; "she is taking Molly's place with her aunt."

"Well, well, Molly will have enough and to spare," George Dering replied soothingly. "I wish the girl looked happier, Agnes; she never never smiles. Have you noticed that? She looks as if she had some great burden to bear."

"What can a girl want more?" said Mrs. Dering, with a touch of bitterness in her tone. "Molly is devoted to her. It is ridiculous for her to have such tragedy airs; I have no patience with her!"

It was a day or two after this that Miss Dering one morning announced her intention of going to London for a week. She wished, she said, to consult a new doctor. Rhoda was to go with her, and Rhoda only. There was another sharp struggle with Mrs. Dering, who at first declared that Rhoda should not go; but she gave way after a time, and one bright frosty morning Rhoda and her aunt proceeded by train to Waterloo. They drove to the Langham, where Miss Dering had engaged rooms.

"I will go and see the doctor tomorrow," said Miss Dering, who looked wonderfully bright and well. "Now we will have lunch, and then I want to pay a call."

She left Rhoda in the sitting-room and went to her own room. Rhoda walked to the window and stood looking absently into the street.

After a while she heard the door open behind her and turned to speak to her aunt. She started violently, for the lady who entered was very unlike the Millicent Dering whom she had learned to know. All the false complexion was gone; her hair was plainly fastened up under a pretty cap; her dress was of sober make and fashion.

"You hardly knew me, Rhoda," said Miss Dering with a smile. "See I have followed your advice!" She walked up to the girl and patted her on the cheek. "I do not know what you have done to me, Rhoda. You have made me want to be good."

Rhoda burst into passionate tears. Miss Dering put her arms round her.

"I must have frightened you, and I wanted to please you! Come, Rhoda, let us have our luncheon and then go out; I am anxious to see how people will look at me. How do you think I look?"

But Rhoda's tears would not stop. She sank down upon the chair beside her aunt and hid her face. There was a wild longing in her heart to tell her aunt all; but the words would not come, and the good moment passed. She grew calmer after a time and was able to talk lightly about Miss Dering's new mode of dressing. She was pale and tremulous however when they went out and drove down Regent Street and towards the Park. Miss Dering looked critically at Rhoda as they drove on.

"I like your dress, my dear," she said, "and being pale suits you. We are going to steal a march on Mrs. Dering, Rhoda."

Rhoda looked for an explanation.

"We are going to call upon "our heir," said Miss Dering, with an exact imitation of Mrs. Dering's impressive tone. "You have not seen Adrian Dering yet; I want to introduce him to you."

The carriage stopped at a house in Brook Street. Mr. Dering was at home, and the two ladies were taken upstairs into a large front room, the walls of which were lined with books. A tall, handsome, dark eyed man came to meet them.

"Aunt Millicent, this is a great and unexpected pleasure." He looked at her in some amazement and she said with a nervous laugh—

"You scarcely knew me in this new style of dress; this is Rhoda's work. Let me introduce you to Rhoda."

Adrian held out his hand with a grave smile.

"Let us shake hands, Cousin Rhoda, as cousins should." He took her hand in a firm and friendly clasp. "I should have made your acquaintance at Dering next week," he said; "I have been so busy that I have not been able to run down lately."

Adrian Dering was a remarkably handsome man. He was a true Dering, tall and dark and slenderly built. He reminded Rhoda a little of her father; but there was a look of intellectual power on Adrian's face that was wanting in Mr. Dering's. Yet it was a cold face; there was no tenderness or softness in its lines, no gentleness in the brilliant dark eyes. He was very cordial however to the two ladies, got tea for them and accepted with evident pleasure Miss Dering's invitation to dinner that evening.

"This is for your black silk dress, Rhoda, it is too plain for you. Put this lace on and wear some flowers to-night. I don't want Adrian to think us dingy and old-fashioned."

Rhoda saw Adrian Dering nearly every day that week—often more than once a day. Once or twice Miss Dering sent them out together. One long walk they had in the early morning of the last day through Hyde Park into Kensington Gardens. Rhoda exclaimed at the beauty of the old trees in the Gardens.

"They remind me of the trees in our convent garden," she said involuntarily.

Adrian looked at her with one of his rare smiles.

"There is a strange fascination for me in the thought of that convent life of yours," he said. "How shut off from the world it must have been! It is the right sort of education for a girl."

Rhoda looked straight before her without speaking.

"When I saw you first," Adrian went on, "it seemed to me as if the quiet spirit of the convent life was still resting on you; you were very pale, and your solemn gray eyes seemed to reproach the world for being so gay and flippant. I wondered then if you had ever laughed."

"You have heard me laugh since," said Rhoda, with a bitter little smile.

"Once or twice; and I have seen you smile as you are smiling now, as if you were amused to mirth. How different you are from little Molly!"

"Very different!"

"Molly has always lived in the sunshine, and she does not know what seriousness is. You, Rhoda, have learned much from those grave, quiet convent years."

"You think you understand me after a week's friendship?" said Rhoda, trying to speak lightly.

"I do understand you; I look at your face and read your nature there—tender and strong and true. No wonder you have made Aunt Millicent a different being! I thank you for that, Rhoda; your influence over her is wonderful."

"You are unjust to Molly," she answered; "you do not appreciate her."

"We do not suit each other," said Adrian, briefly. He glanced at Rhoda, and then said, "Aunt Agnes may have told you of her wishes, Rhoda."

"She told me it was her wish that Molly should marry you."

"It will be a trial for her to know the truth," he answered. "Molly could never care for me. I once wished to marry Molly; I thought it would be right. But I do not wish that any longer, Rhoda."

Rhoda was about to answer, when a girl, who had been walking at a little distance, turned and approached them. Rhoda recognized her Paris servant Sarah.

"That girl seems to know you," said Adrian, glancing at her.

"I must speak to her," said Rhoda, hurriedly. She went quickly forward.

"How strange to meet you here, Sarah!" she said in a low tone.

To her surprise, the girl burst into tears. She caught hold of Rhoda's hand and held it.

"What is the matter?" said Rhoda faintly. Terror that Adrian might overhear made her heart beat fast. He must know the truth one day, but not by a chance discovery like this.

"Miss Dering, I saw you by chance in the street yesterday, and I have been waiting about. I followed you to-day; I want to speak to you."

"What do you want to say?" said Rhoda.

"To tell you that I won't do it," whispered the girl.

"Do what?"

"What the Frenchman wanted of me; I will send the money back to him. My sister is in good service, and she will help me. I will not have his money."

"Monsieur Lefroy gave you money? What did he give it to you for?"

To be Continued

Pigeons as Postmen.

A Paris contemporary half in jest, observes that in the event of a postal strike recourse may be had to pigeons. It seems that there is a regular pigeon postal service in New Zealand between Auckland and the island Great Barrier, some sixty miles distant. The place is difficult of access, hence the employment of the winged messengers. They accomplish their service in less time and with a regularity that puts railways and steam packets to shame. In sixty-three minutes the distance of sixty miles is accomplished. The dispatches are written on an extremely thin paper and fastened to the bird's foot. When the pigeon reaches his destination he pushes the trapdoor of the pigeon house. The door automatically rings a bell, and an official receives the message.—London Globe.

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