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.

CHAPTER II.

That February morning, so bright and sunny in Paris, was bitterly cold in England. The woods round Dering were white with snow, and large icicles hung from the tracery of the windows of the beautiful old house. It had a great marble terrace, with iron steps descending to the lawn. From this terrace the snow had been carefully swept, and some hardy shrubs, gay with berries, had been placed in groups on each side of the great windows.

Mrs. Dering's morning room was at the end of the terrace. It had two windows, one looking out upon the terrace, the other upon a rose garden enclosed by high box hedges, with a fountain in the middle. The upper part of each window was emblazoned with the Dering arms and crest. The same arms and crests were stamped upon the backs of the high leather-covered chairs and carved on the high oak chimney-piece. It was a severe looking room; but a spirit of disorder had entered there that morning. The large armchair which generally stood against the wall, had been dragged before the fire; a book lay open face downwards on the floor; some knitting was on the table, and the ball of wool had fallen upon the floor; where a white kitten was playing with it; a bunch of flowers had been thrown upon Mrs. Dering's writing-table and lay in a heap across the blotting book.

Mrs. Dering, entering from her daily interview with the housekeeper, raised her fine eyebrows as she caught sight of all these things. With a little indulgent smile on her stern face, which wonderfully softened it, she proceeded to put the room in order. Her task was still unfinished when there came a clatter of high heels on the stone terrace, a merry voice singing, "Two Lovely Black Eyes," in a high key, and Mrs. Dering turned to the window, trying to frown as she met the laughing glance of her daughter's blue eyes.

"Open the window, mother!" cried the clear voice. "I am half frozen, with cold! Quick!"

"My dear Mary, how often am I to say that I do not like that song?" said Mrs. Dering, as she unfastened the window and admitted her daughter.

"That song—which song? Oh, I forgot! I heard Jack singing it just now, and I caught it up. Where is my knitting, mother?"

"I found it on the table and the wool in Kitty's clutches. You untidy child, what kind of a home will you have of your own I wonder?"

"Jack has brought me a puppy," said Mary, sitting down upon the hearth rug and picking up the kitten. "One of Bruna's—such a little beauty!"

"Is Jack here, then?"

"Yes; he is with father in the stables. He is going to stay till luncheon."

"Adrian is coming."

"Well, there will be enough for both," said the girl carelessly. She was a pretty girl, small and slender, with soft brown hair curling round her temples and with the merriest, sweetest blue eyes, which were sparkling with fun now as she glanced up at her mother; I wanted him to amuse me."

"My dear Mary!"

"Adrian does not like Jack, does he, mother?"

"Adrian naturally disapproves of him," returned Mrs. Dering, drily.

Mary pulled her kitten's ears.

"Poor old Jack! We approve of him don't we, Kitty? Even if he did get plucked at Oxford and get into debt and into disgrace with his tutor. If I had gone to Oxford, mother, I should have been plucked too and got into debt and into disgrace with my tutor."

"I do not like to hear you talk so lightly," said Mrs. Dering gravely. "I should not like Adrian to hear you say such things."

Mary's eyes twinkled.

"Let me see—Adrian got a Treble first, didn't he? But that must have been centuries ago!"

"Adrian is just thirty years of age," was Mrs. Dering's grave answer—" you know that as well as I do!"

"Thirty years younger than father! Mother, dear, confess now—shouldn't you believe that he was thirty years older?"

"You know how it pains me to hear you speak like this of Adrian, Mary," said Mrs. Dering with a little tremor in her voice. "It has pleased Heaven to give me no son of my own, and Dering must be Adrian's after your father's death. Your father and I are very proud of our heir."

"Oh, as heir to Dering I am proud of him too; but, as a companion, I prefer Jack!"

"You will have a companion in Rhoda now," said Mrs. Dering, smoothing back the curls from the white brow with a little sigh. "That is why we want Rhoda."

"Poor Rhoda—only wanted because of me! But I am going to be so fond of her! I wonder what she will be like, mother?"

"Millicent saw her, mother once. I hope she will be like her mother, she was a very pretty, fair, gentle little thing."

Mary looked up with a serious expression of her face.

"Is Uncle Arthur very wicked?" she asked, in a low tone.

"Do not speak of him," said Mrs. Dering sharply. "Never mention him to Rhoda; I wish her to forget that she has a father living."

"She has not seen him for years, has she?"

"She has not lived with him. Do not speak about your uncle, Mary; he is the first Dering who has disgraced the name, and we wish to forget him." Mrs. Dering sat down at the writing table and gathered up the flowers. "Take away your flowers, Mary."

"Oh, I forgot my pretty roses! They are for the luncheon table; I will go and arrange them." Mary rose and picked up the flowers. I will run away and leave you in peace, mother."

"Do not go into the stables, Mary."

"I am going to change my frock and tidy my hair to do honor to the heir of Dering," the girl answered, with a gay laugh.

Mrs. Dering sat at her writing-table for a short time with a sheet of note paper before her; but she wrote nothing. Presently she got up and went out into the great hall and up the low wide stone stairs. She stopped at the first door in the west corridor, and, after a low knock, opened it. A thick curtain was drawn over the door inside, and, raising this, she entered a little ante-room, where a pleasant-faced woman sat sewing, by the fire.

"Is your raistress up, Stanton?"

"Yes, ma'am; she will be glad to see you."

Mrs. Dering went into the inner room; it was a beautiful room, with a bedroom beyond it. On a low couch by the fire lay Millicent Dering. A rose-colored curtain was drawn over the window behind her, and the softened light fell upon the rich exquisitely tinted draperies of her morning dress and set off the handsome outline of her pale cold face. She looked about twenty-eight or thirty in that light.

"Well, Millicent, I hope you are better," said Mrs. Dering abruptly, as she crossed the room.

Miss Dering raised her beautiful slender hand with a gesture of appeal.

"Will you speak more softly, Agnes?" she said in a low weary tone. "My head is still very bad."

Mrs. Dering sat down opposite to her, surveying her with a cool critical glance.

"Are you coming down to luncheon? We expect Adrian."

"Jack is here. I may as well prepare you; you know what it is when he and Molly and father are together."

Miss Dering raised her hands.

"That boy here again! Agnes I wonder at you!"

Mrs. Dering frowned.

"I do no know what to do. I cannot forbid him the house; his father is George's eldest friend."

"And his son is Mary's dearest friend."

"That is why I want Rhoda here," Mrs. Dering went on. "You know how opposed I was at first when George proposed it. George cannot forget that she is a Dering; but I do not look at it like that. I want her because she will be useful as companion to Mary."

"Will she be as amusing as Jack?" said Miss Dering, in a mediative tone.

Mrs. Dering forwned again.

"I shall make Rhoda responsible for Molly's French and music. And George must talk to Jack; I will not have him here so often."

"I should like to make somebody else responsible altogether for Mary," Miss Dering said gently. "It is quite time that Adrian proposed to her."

"Molly is a child—a perfect child! She laughs at Adrian and hasn't a thought for the future."

"But Adrian should have. He quite understands what is expected of him, doesn't he?"

"Really, Millicent, one would think that we had threatened Adrian with disinheritance if he did not marry our Molly."

"The estate is entailed, isn't it?" said Miss Dering. "But I am sure Adrian means to marry Mary."

"You know how much I wish it—not because he will have Dering, but because he is what he is."

"Of course."

"Come down to luncheon, Millicent. They are always quieter when you are there."

"Won't Adrian be enough? He is sufficient to awe Jack, I am sure."

"But not Molly; Molly loves to defy him."

"They say that you ought to begin with a little aversion," said Miss Dering. "I will come down to luncheon. Let us hope that Rhoda will captivate Jack. That will be a simple way out of the difficulty."

"Rhoda and Mary will work hard together, and Jack will go back to Oxford, let us hope, and get his degree."

"I hope so. Molly won't care half so much for him when he is respectable."

"Boy and girl friends are such a mistake!" said Mrs. Dering, with a look of vexation. "Jack was such a bonny boy too! We were all so fond of him.'

"You see Molly had no brother," said Miss Dering.

The remark brought a look of pain to the mother's face. It was the great trouble of her life that Molly had no brother.

"If Adrian and Mary would marry I should be satisfied," she said, gravely.

"And we should live happy ever after," returned Miss Dering, with a little sneer. "Go away now, Agnes, and leave me to get a little rest. I will come down to luncheon."

Mrs. Dering heard sounds of gay laughter and talk coming from the dining-room as she went downstairs. She walked quickly across the hall and opened the door sharply.

Molly's roses lay on the table beside the glass bowl she had brought to arrange them in, and Molly herself, with a black puppy in her arms, was standing on the hearthrug and talking to Jack. Jack's broad shoulders were leaning against the oak mantelshelf, and he was looking down with laughing eyes at the little figure beside him.

"Don't I remember?" he was saying, when the door opened to admit Mrs. Dering. Both started, and Jack's face grew red.

"Don't scold me, Mrs. Dering," he said, with a smile that made Mrs. Dering's frown disappear despite herself. "I am going to a tutor tomorrow. This is my last day of laziness."

"I am glad to hear it," replied Mrs. Dering, trying to speak severely. "Molly, I thought you were going to arrange these roses."

"So I am. Look at my puppy, mother. Isn't he a pet? We are going to call him 'Bill.'"

Mrs. Dering glanced coldly at the puppy.

"Arrange your roses, Mary; then I want you in my room. Mr. Maitland will be able to find your father, I dare say."

She left the room, and Molly and the young man looked at each other with conscious faces.

"Mr. Maitland!" repeated Molly, under her breath.

"Mr. Maitland!" echoed Jack, with a rueful look. "Oh, Molly!"

Mary picked up her roses with one hand, hugging the puppy to her with the other. She pushed the flowers all into the bowl, which she placed in the middle of the table.

"Mr. Maitland," she repeated again. Then she met Jack's glance, and the faces of both turned scarlet.

"Molly, what shall I do?"

"Go away to your tutor's, my dear boy; get your degree, and then—then you will be Jack again."

"There's that Adrian—your mother adores him!"—"Yes, she does."

"She hates me."—"That seems plain to an average intellect."

"Molly!"

She looked up at him and then kissed the puppy again. He came close to her, and his hand touched the soft hair about her brow.

"You don't hate me?" he said pleadingly.

"Isn't he a darling?" the girl said, holding up the puppy to him. "Kiss him, Jack, the darling pet!"

"Molly, just one word. I am going away to-morrow."

"Mr. Maitland, I think you are very cruel to my pet!"

"You are very cruel to me!"

Molly looked up into the young man's face, and her own changed and softened as a warm wave of color passed over it.

"Not cruel, Jack; don't say that of your little Molly!"

"Are you my little Molly!" he said eagerly, bending down to her. But she drew away and went quickly to the door.

"I must go to mother," she said; "and you—you, Jack, must go and get your degree!"

The girl did not go straight to her mother's room; she went into her own little sanctum and sat down before the fire, then she put the puppy carefully into the softest chair and covered him with her prettiest antimacassar.

"Dear Jack!" she whispered to herself, as she patted her puppy's sleek head.

Left to himself, Jack stood some moments in silent contemplation; then with a look of decision that gave a new character to his face, he went out towards the stables. He found Mr. Dering still busy with the head groom and waited very patiently until he had finished and then walked with him towards the house. When they had entered the broad walk that led from the stables to the house, Jack stopped.

"Mr. Dering, I want to tell you—"

"Well, Jack?"

"You will be angry—I know you will be angry; but I cannot go away without telling you."

Mr. Dering looked wonderingly at the young man's pale face.

"Jack," you have got into debt again—broken your promise to your father."

"No—it's not that—I won't break that promise—it's nothing like that. But I will make a clean breast of it, and you may forbid me the house if you will!"

"Go on; lets hear what it is."

"I love Molly, sir!"

Mr. Dering stepped back to the other side of the path; he did not speak, and Jack went on.

"I love her, sir, with all my heart and soul! I can't help it! Who could help loving Molly?"

"Does she know?" asked Mr. Dering, after a moment's pause.

"I don't know; yes, I do know. She must have guessed; but I never said anything till this morning."

"Well?"

"I didn't say anything plain, and she put me off. She said I must take my degree. Of course I must. But, when that's over and I come back, I must speak to her!"

Mr. Dering shook his head.

"It won't do, Jack!"

"Why not, sir? I know I shall never be rich; but my father has enough, and I am his only child."

"It won't do, Jack." Mr. Dering repeated; "Molly is going to marry her cousin!"

Jack turned pale.

"It can't be true?"

"It has been arranged with Adrian for years," returned Mr. Dering.

"Molly laughs at him. He is too old, too grave for her."

"Not at all. You and Molly are two children, Jack, and you must forget all this. Go away, my boy, and learn to forget it!"

"I am going away," Jack returned with a dreary smile; "but I shall not forget it, and, when I come back, I shall do my best to win Molly, sir!"

"She and Adrian are meant for each other. Mrs. Dering will be shocked at this, Jack; she trusted you so!"

The young man drew himself up with a look of pride.

"I love Molly," he repeated firmly; "I have no reason to feel ashamed! You have let us be friends together, and I love her. I mean to tell her so when I come back!"

"It won't do, Jack," repeated Mr. Dering, shaking his head; "Molly must marry Adrian! You were right to tell me; but you will see that it will not do. It would break Mrs. Dering's heart."

"I thought it right to tell you," Jack said, ignoring the last remark. "I want say anything to Molly now, I will promise you that, and I won't come in to luncheon. Make my excuses to Mrs. Dering."

The young man shook hands and strode away. Dering looked after him with a fond look.

"But it won't do!" he repeated, as he turned toward the house.

He went straight to his wife's room and found her speaking gravely to Molly, who was standing on the hearth rug, listening very demurely to her mother's speech.

"Run away, Molly," said Mr. Dering, sitting down upon one of the great oak armchairs by the fireplace. "I want to speak to your mother."

"Go and change your dress, Mary," said Mrs. Dering, "and get your hair done afresh."

"I shall look so neat that Adrian will ask to be introduced," the girl answered lightly. "Don't be cross any more, mother dear."

"I am not cross," replied Mrs. Dering—"only anxious that you should remember that you are no longer a child."

"I will be so good that you won't know me!" Molly went lightly to the door and then turned round. "I may invite 'Bill' to luncheon, mayn't I?"

"Bill—who is that?" said Mr. Dering, who had been watching his daughter's every movement with admiring eyes.

"My darling puppy—may he come?"

Mr. Dering laughed.

"Go away; and bring Bill if you like."

Molly shut the door and her father turned to Mrs. Dering.

"She's a perfect child still, isn't she?"

"I have been speaking to her about her childish ways. I am glad that Rhoda is coming. She wants a companion."

Mr. Dering moved uneasily in his chair.

"I have been talking to Jack," he said, with a troubled glance.

"To Jack? What have you been saying?"

"He has been speaking to me. He says he is in love with Molly."

Mr. Dering did not meet his wife's glance, but bent over the fire to arrange the logs. Mrs. Dering got up and crossed over to him.

"George, the boy must be mad! You told him it was out of the question, of course!"

"Yes, Agnes—I told him so."

"Well?"

"Well, the boy is in earnest. He has gone to his tutor's, but he intends to speak to Molly when he comes back."

"You must forbid it! Write to his father, George, and forbid it absolutely. Mary must marry Adrian. This must be put a stop to at once!" And Mrs. Dering looked towards her writing table as if she would then and there write a final letter.

"My dear, you are not quite just about this. I do not want Molly to marry Jack, but what are we to do? I told him that it was out of the question. I told him it wouldn't do."

"I shall write to him!"

"No, Agnes." Mr. Dering spoke firmly. "He has gone to Oxford, and he will be away for three months or so. If in that time Adrian can win Molly, well, then, that will be all right!"

Mrs. Dering stood looking into the fire with a frowning brow and compressed lips. She completely ruled her husband in small matters, but she knew she must yield in this.

"Mary must marry Adrian," she said again with emphasis.

"That is what I want. But I will not have her forced into it, Agnes!"

"Jack is a boy. Molly cannot care for him. Adrian will find it easy to win her!"

Mr. Dering said nothing, but shook his head as his wife turned away.

CHAPTER III.

At Mr. Dering's request, Mere Amelie had sent two lay sisters with Rhoda as far as Calais. At Calais she was met by her uncle. As the train drew up at the platform she was looking out, expecting to see some tall dark man like her father. It was a great surprise when a somewhat short, burly, cheery little gentleman bustled up to her and held out his hands.

"I should have known you anywhere, my dear," he said warmly. "You are a thorough Dering. We have ever so many good likenesses of you at home in our picture gallery."

They had only just time to catch the boat, and Mr. Dering hurried his niece away, only giving her a few moments for a hasty farewell to her two companions.

"Very kind, good women they looked too," he said, referring to them when he and Rhoda were safe on the boat. "And they must be so fond of you, Rhoda. I'll bound you shed a good many tears last night. How many years have you been there."

"Ever since my mother died," Rhoda answered steadily.

"I wish you had come to us before, but there were circumstances which I do not care to mention—" He looked at the girl uneasily. "Your father and I are not friends, Rhoda. You must not talk about him at Dering."

"I understand," she replied, and turned to hide the quiver of her lips.

Her uncle patted her shoulder gently.

"I wouldn't say it to you if you knew him better, my dear. But he has not been a good man. Now you are coming home, my dear, and you will have a father and mother and a dear little sister, Heaven bless her!"

Rhoda's heart was swelling with wounded feelings, but she kept her voice steady as she asked:

"How old is your daughter?"

"Just eighteen. Three years younger than you are! But you look older than you are, Rhoda. That is because you are dark!"

"And she is fair?"

"Blue eyes and light brown hair—a regular English beauty. You will see her this evening. She is prepared to love you dearly, and I want you to love her very much, Rhoda—to love us all. You are going home, remember. It will be as much your home as it is Molly's. You are my daughter now. You understand that, don't you, my dear?"

"Thank you," the girl said faintly.

The warm tones the kindly looks only served to increase the feeling of misery at her heart. As she stood there watching the coast of France disappear in the cloudy distance, it was with difficulty that she prevented herself from telling her uncle all the truth. But her father's words were in her ears—"If they knew the truth, the doors of Dering will be shut to you for ever." And these words kept her silent.

It was quite dark when they reached Dering. The carriage was waiting for them at the station, and they drove quickly through long avenues of stately elms and limes that led to the house. Rhoda's uncle half lifted her out and led her up the steps.

"Welcome home, my dear!" he said, kissing her, as they reached the door. Then he led her in.

Rhoda had one glance at the great hall, with its glorious arched roof and panelled walls, and then two loving arms were clasped close round her, and Molly's sweet voice repeated her father's "Welcome home!"

Mrs. Dering waited at the drawing room to greet Rhoda.

"We are very glad to see you, Rhoda," she said in her kind firm tones.

The calmness of this greeting restored Rhoda's self-possession, which had nearly given away. She answered questions about the journey with perfect calmness, conscious that Mrs. Dering's eyes were surveying her with critical surprise.

Mrs. Dering turned to her husband when Molly had taken Rhoda away to her room.

"I had no idea that Rhoda would be like this," she said. "I expected a girl, a shy young girl."

"She is a perfect Dering!" returned Mr. Dering heartily. "She is exactly like that beautiful portrait of Prudence Dering in the hall."

"I do not see much likeness. Rhoda's eyes are gray."

"How quick you are to see that, Agnes!" said Mr. Dering admiringly. "I thought they were dark at first. She is beautiful and exactly like my poor brother Arthur."

"Do not mention his name!" Mrs. Dering returned sharply. "I hope we may never regret having Rhoda here."

"My dear Agnes, don't say such things! She is such a sweet girl. It is easy to see that she has never been out of a convent in her life."

"She has only been there since her mother's death."

(To be continued.)

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