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Burroughs Verne
Curtis Tocqueville Gogol Busch
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The Hoyden

Duchess

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THE HOYDEN.

CHAPTER I.

HOW DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND, AND HOW THE SPARKS FLEW.

The windows are all wide open, and through them the warm, lazy summer wind is stealing languidly. The perfume of the seringas from the shrubbery beyond, mingled with all the lesser but more delicate delights of the garden beneath, comes with the wind, and fills the drawing-room of The Place with a vague, almost drowsy sense of sweetness.

Mrs. Bethune, with a face that smiles always, though now her very soul is in revolt, leans back against the cushions of her lounging chair, her fine red hair making a rich contrast with the pale-blue satin behind it.

"You think he will marry her, then?"

"Think, think!" says Lady Rylton pettishly. "I can't afford to *think* about it. I tell you he *must* marry her. It has come to the very last ebb with us now, and unless Maurice consents to this arrangement — —"

She spreads her beautiful little hands abroad, as if in eloquent description of an end to her sentence.

Mrs. Bethune bursts out laughing. She can always laugh at pleasure.

"It sounds like the old Bible story," says she; "you have an only son, and you must sacrifice him!"

"Don't study to be absurd!" says Lady Rylton, with a click of her fan that always means mischief.

She throws herself back in her chair, and a tiny frown settles upon her brow. She is such a small creation of Nature's that only a frown of the slightest dimensions *could* settle itself comfortably between her eyes. Still, as a frown, it is worth a good deal! It has cowed a good many people in its day, and had, indeed, helped to make her a widow at an early age. Very few people stood up against Lady Rylton's tempers, and those who did never came off quite unscathed.

"Absurd! Have I been absurd?" asks Mrs. Bethune. "My dear Tessie"—she is Lady Rylton's niece, but Lady Rylton objects to being called aunt—"such a sin has seldom been laid to my charge."

"Well, *I* lay it," says Lady Rylton with some emphasis.

She leans back in her chair, and, once again unfurling the huge black fan she carries, waves it to and fro.

Marian Bethune leans back in her chair too, and regards her aunt with a gaze that never wavers. The two poses are in their way perfect, but it must be confessed that the palm goes to the younger woman.

It might well have been otherwise, as Lady Rylton is still, even at forty-six, a very graceful woman. Small—very small—a sort of pocket Venus as it were, but so carefully preserved that at forty-six she might easily be called thirty-five. If it were not for her one child, the present Sir Maurice Rylton, this fallacy might have been carried through. But, unfortunately, Sir Maurice is now twenty-eight by the church register. Lady Rylton hates church registers; they tell so much; and truth is always so rude!

She is very fair. Her blue eyes have still retained their azure tint—a strange thing at her age. Her little hands and feet are as tiny now as when years ago they called all London town to look at them on her presentation to her Majesty. She has indeed a charming face, a slight figure, and a temper that would shame the devil.

It isn't a quick temper—one can forgive that. It is a temper that remembers—remembers always, and that in a mild, ladylike sort of way destroys the one it fastens upon. Yet she is a dainty creature; fragile, fair, and pretty, even now. It is generally in these dainty, pretty, soulless creatures that the bitterest venom of all is to be found.

Her companion is different. Marian Bethune is a tall woman, with a face not perhaps strictly handsome, but yet full of a beautiful *dialerie* that raises it above mere comeliness. Her hair is red—a rich red—magnificent red hair that coils itself round her shapely head, and adds another lustre to the exquisite purity of her skin. Her eyes have a good deal of red in them, too, mixed with a warm brown—wonderful eyes that hold you when they catch you, and are difficult to forget. Some women are born with strange charms; Marian Bethune is one of them. To go through the world with such charms is a risk, for it must mean ruin or salvation, joy or desolation to many. Most of all is it a risk to the possessor of those charms.

There have been some who have denied the right of Marian to the title beautiful. But for the most part they have been women, and with regard to those others—the male minority—well, Mrs. Bethune could sometimes prove unkind, and there are men who do not readily forgive. Her mouth is curious, large and full, but not easily to be understood. Her eyes may speak, but her mouth is a sphinx. Yet it is a lovely mouth, and the little teeth behind it shine like pearls. For the rest, she is a widow. She married very badly; went abroad with her husband; buried him in Montreal; and came home again. Her purse is as slender as her figure, and not half so well worth possessing. She says she is twenty-eight, and to her praise be it acknowledged that she speaks the truth. Even *good* women sometimes stammer over this question!

"My sin, my sin?" demands she now gaily, smiling at Lady Rylton.

She flings up her lovely arms, and fastens them behind her head. Her smile is full of mockery.

"Of course, my dear Marian, you cannot suppose that I have been blind to the fact that you and Maurice have—for the past year—been—er—"

"Philandering?" suggests Mrs. Bethune lightly.

She leans a little forward, her soft curved chin coming in recognition.

"I beg, Marian, you won't be vulgar," says Lady Rylton, fanning herself petulantly. "It's worse than being immoral."

"Far, *far* worse!" Mrs. Bethune leans back in her chair, and laughs aloud. "Well, I'm not immoral," says she.

Her laughter rings through the room. The hot sun behind her is lighting the splendid masses of her red hair, and the disdainful gleam that dwells in her handsome eyes.

"Of course not," says Lady Rylton, a little stiffly; "even to *mention* such a thing seems to be—er—a little—"

"*Only* a little?" says Mrs. Bethune, arching her brows. "Oh, Tessie!" She pauses, and then with an eloquent gesture goes on again. "After all, why shouldn't I be immoral?" says she. Once again she flings her arms above her head so that her fingers grow clasped behind it. "It pays! It certainly pays. It is only the goody-goodies who go to the wall."

"My *dear* Marian!" says Lady Rylton, with a delicate pretence at horror; she puts up her hands, but after a second or so bursts out laughing. "I always say you are the one creature who amuses me," cries she, leaning back, and giving full play to her mirth. "I never get *at* you, somehow. I am never *quite* sure whether you are very good or very—well, very much the other thing. That is your charm."

The stupid, pretty little woman has reached a truth in spite of herself—that *is* Mrs. Bethune's charm.

A quick change passes over the latter's face. There is extreme hatred in it. It is gone, however, as soon as born, and remains for ever a secret to her companion.

"Does that amuse you?" says she airily. "I dare say a perpetual riddle *is* interesting. One can never guess it."

"As for that, I can read you easily enough," says Lady Rylton, with a superior air. "You are original, but—yes—I can read you." She could as easily have read a page of Sanscrit. "It is your originali-

ty I like. I have never, in spite of many things, been in the least sorry that I gave you a home on the death of your—er—rather disreputable husband."

Mrs. Bethune looks sweetly at her.

"And *such* a home!" says she.

"Not a word, not a word," entreats Lady Rylton graciously. "But to return to Maurice. I shall expect you to help me in this matter, Marian."

"Naturally."

"I have quite understood your relations with Maurice during the past year. One, as a matter of course," with a shrug of her dainty shoulders, "lets the nearest man make love to one— — But Maurice must marry for money, and so must you."

"You are all wisdom," says Marian, showing her lovely teeth. "And this girl? She has been here a week now, but as yet you have told me nothing about her."

"I picked her up!" says Lady Rylton. She lays down her fan—looks round her in a little mysterious fashion, as though to make doubly sure of the apparent fact that there is no one in the room but her niece and herself. "It was the most providential thing," she says; "I was staying at the Warburtons' last month, and one day when driving their abominable ponies along the road, suddenly the little beasts took fright and bolted. You know the Warburtons, don't you? They haven't an ounce of manners between them—themselves, or their ponies, or anything else belonging to them. Well! They tore along as if possessed— —"

"The Warburtons?"

"No, the ponies; don't be silly?"

"*Such* a relief!"

"And I really think they would have taken me over a precipice. You can see"—holding out her exquisite little hands—"how inadequate these would be to deal with the Warburton ponies. But for the timely help of an elderly gentleman and a young girl—she looked a mere child— —"

"This Miss Bolton?"

"Yes. The old gentleman caught the ponies' heads—so did the girl. You know my slender wrists—they were almost powerless from the strain, but that *girl!* her wrists seemed made of iron. She held and held, until the little wretches gave way and returned to a sense of decency."

"Perhaps they *are* made of iron. Her people are in trade, you say? It is iron, or buttons, or what?"

"I don't know, I'm sure, but at all events she is an heiress to quite a tremendous extent. Two hundred thousand pounds, the Warburtons told me afterwards; even allowing for exaggeration, still, she must be worth a good deal, and poor dear Maurice, what is *he* worth?"

"Is it another riddle?" asks Mrs. Bethune.

"No, no, indeed! The answer is plain to all the world. The Warburtons didn't know these people, these Boltons (so silly of them, with a third son still unmarried), but when I heard of her money I made inquiries. It appeared that she lived with her uncle. Her father had died early, when she was quite young. Her mother was dead too; this last was a *great* comfort. And the uncle had kept her in seclusion all her life. They are nobodies, dear Marian! Nobodies at all, but that girl has two hundred thousand pounds, and can redeem the property of all its mortgages—if only Maurice will let her do it."

"But how did you ask her here?"

"How? What is simpler? The moment the Warburtons told me of the wealth that would be that girl's on her marriage (I was careful to make sure of the marriage point), I felt that an overpowering sense of gratitude compelled me to go and call on her. She and her uncle were new-comers in that county, and—it is very exclusive—so that when I *did* arrive, I was received with open arms. I was charming to the old uncle, a frosty sort of person, but not objectionable in any way, and I at once asked the niece to pay me a visit. They were flattered, the uncle especially so; I expect he had been wanting to get into Society—and as for the girl, she seemed overcome with delight! A very second-class little creature I thought her. No style! No sup-