

THE VIXEN

To and from N. I. L. B. W.

PATRICIA FLEMING threw the reins to a groom, and ran up the steps into the great house, her thin lips white with rage.

Lord Eyre followed her heavily. "I'll be down in half an hour," she laughed merrily, "tell Dawson to bring you a drink!" Then she went straight through the house, her girlish eyes the incarnation of a curse.

For the third time she had failed to bring Geoffrey Eyre to her feet. She looked into her hat; there in the lining was the talisman that she had tested—and it had tricked her.

What do I need? she thought. Must it be blood?

She was a maiden of the pure English strain; brave, gay, honest, shrewd—and there was not one that guessed the inmost fire that burnt her. For she was but a child when the Visitor came.

The first of the Visits was in a dream. She woke choking; the air—clear, sweet, and wholesome as it blew through the open window from the Chilterns—was fouled with a musty stench. And she woke her governess with a tale of a tiger.

The second Visit was again at night. She had been hunting, was alone at the death, had beaten off the hounds. That night she heard a fox bark in her room. She spent a

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sleepless night of terror; in the morning she found the red hairs of a fox upon her pillow.

The third Visit was nor in sleep nor waking.

But she tightened her lips, and would have veiled the hateful gleam in her eyes.

It was that day, though, that she struck a servant with her riding-whip.

She was so sane that she knew exactly wherein her madness lay; and she set all her strength not to conquer but to conceal it.

Two years later, and Patricia Fleming, the orphan heiress of Carthwell Abbey, was the county toast, Diana of the Chilterns.

Yet Geoffrey Eyre evaded her. His dog's fidelity and honesty kept him true to the little north-country girl that three months earlier had seduced his simplicity. He did not even love her; but she had made him think so for an hour; and his pledged word held him.

Patricia's open favour only made him hate her because of its very seduction. It was really his own weakness that he hated.

Patricia ran, tense and angry, through the house. The servants noticed it. The mistress has been crossed, they thought, she will go to the chapel and get ease. Praising her.

True, to the chapel she went; locked the door, dived behind the altar, struck a secret panel, came suddenly into a priest's hiding-hole, a room large enough to hold a score of men if need be.

At the end of the room was a great scarlet cross, and on it, her face to the wood, her wrists and ankles swollen over the whip lashes that bound her, hung a naked girl, big-boned, voluptuous. Red hair streamed over her back.

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What, Margaret! so blue? laughed Patricia.

I am cold, said the girl upon the cross, in an indifferent voice.

Nonsense, dear! answered Patricia, rapidly divesting herself of her riding-habit. There is no hint of frost; we had a splendid run, and a grand kill. You shall be warm yet, for all that.

This time the girl writhed and moaned a little.

Patricia took from an old wardrobe a close-fitting suit of fox fur, and slipped it on her slim white body.

Did I make you wait, dear? she said, with a curious leer. I am the keener for the sport, be sure!

She took the faithless talisman from her hat. It was a little square of vellum, written upon in black. She took a hairpin from her head, pierced the talisman, and drove the pin into the girl's thigh.

They must have blood, said she. Now see how I will turn the blue to red! Come! don't wince: you haven't had it for a month.

Then her ivory arm slid like a serpent from the furs, and with the cutting whip she struck young Margaret between the shoulders.

A shriek rang out: its only echo was Patricia's laugh, childlike, icy, devilish.

She struck again and again. Great weals of purple stood on the girl's back; froth tinged with blood came from her mouth, for she had bitten her lips and tongue in agony.

Patricia grew warm and rosy—exquisitely beautiful. Her babe-breasts heaved; her lips parted; her whole body and soul seemed lapped in ecstasy.

I wish you were Geoffrey, girlie! she panted.

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Then the skin burst. Raw flesh oozed blood that dribbled down Margaret's back.

Still the fair maid struck and struck in the silence, until the tiny rivulets met and waxed great and touched the talisman. She threw the bloody whalebone into a corner, and went upon her knees. She kissed her friend; she kissed the talisman; and again kissed the girl, the warm blood staining her pure lips.

She took the talisman, and hid it in her bosom. Last of all she loosened the cords, and Margaret sank in a heap to the floor. Patricia threw furs over her and rolled her up in them; brought wine, and poured it down her throat. She smiled, kindly, like a sister.

"Sleep now awhile, sweetheart!" she whispered, and kissed her forehead.

It was a very demure and self-possessed little maiden that made dinner lively for poor Geoffrey, who was thinking over his mistake.

Patricia's old aunt, who kept house for her, smiled on the flirtation. It was not by accident that she left them alone sitting over the great fire. "Poor Margaret has her rheumatism again," she explained innocently; "I must go and see how she is." Loyal Margaret!

So it happened that Geoffrey lost his head. "The ivy is strong enough" (she had whispered, ere their first kiss had hardly died). "Before the moon is up, be sure!" and glided off just as the aunt returned.

Eyre excused himself; half a mile from the house he left his horse to his man to lead home, and ten minutes later was groping for Patricia in the dark.

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White as a lily in body and soul, she took him in her arms.

Awaking as from death, he suddenly cried out, "Oh God! What is it? Oh my God! my God! Patricia! Your body! Your body!"

"Yours!" she cooed.

"Why, you're all hairy!" he cried. "And the scent! the scent!"

From without came sharp and resonant the yap of a hound as the moon rose.

Patricia put her hands to her body. He was telling the truth. "The Visitor!" she screamed once with fright, and was silent. He switched the light on, and she screamed again.

There was a savage lust upon his face.

"This afternoon," he cried, "you called me a dog. I looked like a dog and thought like a dog; and, by God! I am a dog. I'll act like a dog then!"

Obedient to some strange instinct, she dived from the bed for the window.

But he was on her; his teeth met in her throat.

In the morning they found the dead bodies of both hound and fox—but how did that explain the wonderful Elopement of Lord Eyre and Miss Fleming? For neither of them were ever seen again.

I think Margaret understands; in the Convent which she rules to-day there hangs beside a blood-stained cutting-whip the silver model of a fox, with the inscription:

"Patricia Margaritæ vulpis vulpem dedit."

FRANCIS BENDICK.

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